

## The Turn of the Screw: A True Fantastic Tale

*The Turn of the Screw*, written by James Henry and published in 1898, is a novella with a variety of implications due to its ambiguity. Writers such as Edmund Wilson have turned to Freud's psychological theories in order to support his argument that the governess is, in fact, delusional and insane. However, Tzvetan Todorov has interpreted *The Turn of the Screw* as a fantastic literature due to its ambiguity and the continuous hesitation from the reader as the story unfolds. If one is to review the aspects of *The Turn of the Screw* that make it a fantastic literature, as Todorov argues, limitations of a psychoanalytic interpretation will come to light. Our never-ending hesitation about the reality of the narrative creates an overall feeling of suspense that intrigues the reader even further into the story. Through the use of literary techniques of frame narrativity, unreliable narrator, and lack of closure, the reader tries to develop their own interpretation of *The Turn of The Screw* to create meaning.

In Tzvetan Todorov's "The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre," we see him define the fantastic as a world where the reader's ambiguity and hesitation are pivotal aspects in defining the sequence of events (Todorov). When one reads the *Turn of the Screw*, two interpretations of the story can be concluded: that the governess is indeed insane, and the ghosts are not real; or that the ghosts are, in fact, real, and she is trying to protect the children. Depending on what interpretation the reader decides to act upon, the novella can be seen as supernatural or a psychological thriller. However, it is the constant hesitation and the ambiguous ending that might influence the reader into believing that the story is actually a great literary fantastic masterpiece. These debates have then led critics and readers to develop a variety of interpretations about the true nature of *The Turn of the Screw*. Through our constate hesitation as

the story unfolds, this condition is then the first aspect of further emphasizing *The Turn of the Screw* as a fantastic literature.

*The Turn of the Screw* perfectly fits into Tzvetan Todorov's definition of a fantastic literature. In "The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre," Tzvetan Todorov states how "The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated... The reader's hesitation is therefore the first condition of the fantastic" (Todorov). In *The Turn of the Screw*, the reader experiences a lot of hesitation as one tries to decide what to believe and what is the true meaning behind the narrative. Is the governess psychotic and trying to dominate the children instead of actually protecting them? Or are the ghosts real, and she is the heroic figure she is depicting herself to be? Our ambiguity of the narrative's ending is what makes us hesitant as to what is the true nature of the governess, the ghosts (if they actually exist), the children, and Mrs. Grose. Our hesitation and the never-ending ambiguity of the story make us question the real nature of each character and their motives.

Another very imperative aspect of a fantastic literature, as defined by Todorov, is "A hesitation in the characters and the reader over the interpretation of events" (Todorov). Something that could make the reader hesitant, whether to believe the sequence of events or not, is the fact that they were written after all the events had occurred and strongly rely on the governess's memory. At the beginning of the story, we discover that the story is a manuscript, as Douglass states how. "Is in old, faded ink, and in the most beautiful hand. A woman's. She has been dead these twenty years. She sent me the pages in question before she died" (James). The narrative of the governess is written down and based on firsthand experience. However, the reader is hesitant to believe the events that are told as one second guesses the governess's mental

state of mind. The governess might have written the tale in a manner to make herself look like a heroic figure who was trying to protect the children when in reality, she could have been hallucinating. She also might have forgotten certain parts of the story since it was written many years after the events took place. This then makes the governess an unreliable character because it was written many years later, and the manuscript could have been altered a variety of times.

Now, if the story had been written as the events took place, as journal entries, the narrative of the governess could have been more reliable. There clearly are gaps in the tale as the story unfolds. Are the ghosts real or not? Is the governess in her right mind, or is she insane? Douglass also seems to be biased as he initially describes the governess as "The most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever" (James). However, there are certain parts in the story that contradict Douglass's statement about the governess, such as the fact that she kills Miles in the end. Therefore, the reader becomes hesitant as to who and what to believe.

Although Edmond Wilson develops the idea that the governess is, in fact, insane by incorporating Freud's psychological theories into his interpretation, there is still some hesitation on what to believe. Wilson states how:

"The whole thing has been primarily and completely a characterization of the governess: her visions and the way she behaves about them become as soon as we look at them the observe side... her inability to admit to herself her sexual impulses and the relentless English authority which enables her to put over on inferiors even purposes which are totally mistaken and not at all to the other people's best interests" (Wilson 172).

Wilson creates allegations that the apparitions were an outcome of the governess's emotions due to her repressed sexual desires because she was sexually attracted to the master. This could have

led to her insane behavior, ending in Miles' death. When Wilson creates these ideas, he seems to disregard textual evidence that contradicts his theory. For instance, if the ghosts did not exist, how was the governess able to describe the first apparition to which Mrs. Grose identified as Quint when "She faltered but a second. "Quint!" she cried (James V). Here we see how Mrs. Grose becomes aware that the apparition in the window that the governess encountered was Quint. How was the governess able to describe Quint without having met him? However, this statement still does not fulfill any evidence of the ghosts being real in the fact that no one else except the governess claimed to have seen them. Yet again, we go back to the fantastic aspects of the story, our hesitation, and the ambiguity as we struggle to determine what to believe in.

We seem to have a total of three narrators in *The Turn of the Screw*, which also affects the way we interpret the narrative of the story. Frame narrativity plays a pivotal role in the story due to how we see a variety of embedded narratives throughout the story. As initially stated, Douglass is a biased narrator as he describes the governess as "The most agreeable woman I've ever known" (James). The third and most important narrator is the governess, the main character. She tells the story in first person voice and is a homodiegetic narrator. Abbott states in "Cambridge Introduction to Narrative" that "Distance refers to the narrator's degree of involvement in the story she tells" (Abbott 74). If the narrator is too close or too distant from the narrative, it can lead to questioning the reliability of the narrator; there must be a balance. She tells the story through her eyes, which is the central aspect of the story; we only ever get her perspective of the events. She is an unreliable narrator as she seems to become an unstable character. She becomes obsessed with the thought that the ghosts are real and want to harm the children even though there is no real evidence of their existence. She can't seem to grasp reality and comprehend between what is real and what is not. The lack of no perspective from the other

characters thoughts prevents us from deciding whether the ghosts are real or not. We only ever get the story from the governess's point of view. Therefore, we are unable to know if the other characters can see the ghosts and are deceiving the governess or if they actually believe the governess to be mad. We are yet again left hesitant about what to believe due to the lack of information and the ambiguous narrative.

Tzvetan Todorov states that one of the elements of the fantastic is that "The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (Todorov) which is exactly what Henry James constantly does throughout *The Turn of the Screw*. The perfect example is the scene where Flora disappears from the governess's sight after being distracted by Miles' piano performance and is later found across the lake. Here, we read how the governess insists that Miss Jessel is across the lake. She grabs Mrs. Grose by the arm and says, "She's there, you little unhappy thing – there, there, there and you see her as well as you see me!" (James XX). However, Mrs. Grose claims not to see anything and replies to the governess, "What a dreadful turn, to be sure, miss! Where on earth do you see anything" (James XX). In this scene, the reader hesitates between understanding the strange occurrence through the explanation of something natural or supernatural. This event gives an unexpected turn as one believes that the governess can now finally prove that the ghosts are real, but no one except her seems to see Miss Jessel. This then makes one hesitate and believe that this is all in the governess' mind. However, one then questions, what was little Flora doing down by the lake in the first place? Depending on what perspective the reader decides to accept, one might believe the ghosts are real, and the children, along with Mrs. Grose, are deceiving the governess and pretending not to see the ghosts; or that the ghosts are not real, and the governess is insane. The ambiguity and the many

questions left unanswered throughout the story constantly leave the character hesitant when deciding what to believe.

The ending of *The Turn of the Screw* is definitely the most pivotal part of the story. We expected to get our questions answered and our expectations to be either met or broken, but the ambiguity of the ending makes us even more hesitant about what to believe. In the last scene of the story, we read how Miles screams, "Peter Quint - you devil!" (James XXIV). This scream from Miles is dubious because it does not confirm if the ghost was actually there or if he was calling the governess devil for choking him. The governess states, "We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (James XXIV). The ending is equivocal because we never actually discover the true reason for Miles's death. He might have been subjected to her persistence to admit something that isn't real, which led to the governess killing him, or was something supernatural the cause of his death? The story, therefore, does not end as one expected. Our answers are not fully answered, and depending on whether one believes the governess was insane or trying to protect the children, the narrative's meaning can have many implications.

*The Turn of the Screw* is a never-ending train of suspense, mystery, and hesitation. The mystery and suspense of the story raise many questions that often go unanswered and leave the reader unsatisfied. The vague ending makes one hesitant as to what exactly to believe and what interpretation of the story to take in. We are left with two concluded interpretations of the story: Everything is a hallucination from the governess, and she is the real danger to the children, or the ghosts exist, and she is trying to save the children from the danger they impose. Depending on what interpretation the reader decides to take, *The Turn of the Screw* can either be seen as a true ghost story or a psychological thriller. However, the hesitation of the reader and the ambiguity of

the story is what supports Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic as he defines it, "The reader's hesitation is therefore the first condition of the fantastic" (Todorov).

## Works Cited

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