

Fall 2014

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### Recommended Citation

Begley, A. (2014). The Return of the Screwed Up: An Analysis of *The Turn of the Screw*. *First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition*, 2015 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/first-class/vol2015/iss1/9>

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# Spring 2015 Second Prize Essay

## THE RETURN OF THE SCREWED UP: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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Henry James' novel *The Turn of the Screw* is a psychological thriller that centers around a sexually repressed governess yearning for the affection of a male of a higher social class than she. It is likely that the main narrator of the story – the governess herself – is unreliable, as she tells the story years later and her memory is potentially clouded by her experiences and desires. She apparently begins to see ghosts, which manifest themselves just as she is having inappropriate sexual thoughts or when she is thinking about her intense affection for the children. Although these thoughts are seemingly about her master – the uncle of her two charges – the appearance of the ghosts may represent something far more sinister, namely her hidden sexual desires for the young boy that she is meant to care for.

Harold C. Goddard was one of the first critics to believe that the governess was hallucinating due to “unconfessed love and unformulated fear” (163). Although his criticism is fairly old and sexist, he still brings up a good point. The governess comes from a background that involved a “psychically unbalanced” father, so her hallucinations would make even more sense because psychosis tends to run in families (Goddard 161). Goddard points out that the reader cannot necessarily trust the governess because there is no other point of view in the novel. The reader only gets the governess's side of the story, so there should be an element of doubt, but the governess “cannot see her own insanity” and the only other people around are children or people who are incredibly superstitious (Goddard 167). The governess's insanity affects those around her, and Goddard makes the point that her insanity is caused by sexual repression.

Critic Robert B. Heilman makes it very clear that the governess is not plagued by the return of repressed feelings for her master – he states that “the governess's feelings for the master are never repressed: they are wholly in the open and joyously talked about,” and this is entirely true – the governess never hides her feelings for the children's uncle (178). However, that does not mean that she is not hiding feelings for someone else, as Heilman fails to note. It is obvious that the governess is somehow mesmerized by the boy, Miles, even though he is only ten years old. The first narrator, a tool that James used to give the story context, also insinuates that the governess “was in love,” and the narrator easily could have been speaking about the governess being in love with Miles, as he does not state who she was in love with (James 3). The governess clearly states that Miles “was incredibly beautiful, and... everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence” (James 13). She could not hold any of his wrongdoings against him – when he was kicked out of school, she states that “he was only too fine and fair for the little horrid unclean school-world” (James 18). She is completely “under [his] spell,” even when he was behaving badly in the home (James 19).

Miles's hold over her grows ever stronger during the course of the novel, and although she is not consciously aware of her feelings for him, it may have eventually driven her mad with primal desire. The governess states at the beginning of the novel that she is “rather easily carried away,” which may suggest that she is prone to falling in love easily, or perhaps that she is vulnerable to psychosis or hysteria (James

8). This vulnerability could lead the governess to experience hallucinations, perhaps ones in which she is projecting her unconscious thoughts onto the world. Henry Sussman – a proponent for the Freudian reading of *The Turn of the Screw* – has argued that the governess “forces interpretations upon both the phenomena she observes and the words she hears,” which he then explains is due to the governess’s inferential hysteria (231). She sees these apparitions whenever she has some thought related to the children or someone of a higher class that could be considered inappropriate. For example, the first time the governess sees the old groundskeeper, Peter Quint, on the tower, she is in the middle of “giving pleasure... to the person to whose pressure I had yielded,” which means that she was having a sexual fantasy about the children’s uncle (James 15).

It is no coincidence that the governess sees the apparitions when she has inappropriate thoughts – these apparitions are a representation of her repressed unconscious sexual desires, projected onto more appropriate actors. The governess is originally afraid of Quint’s figure – and the implications about Miles that coincide with it – stating “I’m afraid of *him*” (James 22). The second time the governess sees Quint’s image, he is in the window just as she praises the children after having been “dazzled by their loveliness” (James 19). They had also just sat down to Sunday tea in the “grown up’ dining room,” which suggests that the governess sees the children as more adult than they truly are (James 19). The third and final time the governess sees Quint, he is ascending the staircase on a dark night. She had just finished a speech about how she intended to rededicate herself to the children because Miles was “too clever for a bad governess” (James 37). She then checks on Flora, who is fast asleep in bed, before going to the staircase where the encounter occurred. It is important to note that the governess is no longer afraid of Quint’s figure here, despite the fact that he has crept closer to her with each experience – she reacts to his appearance by saying “I had, thank God, no terror” (James 39). This is the turning point in the story at which the governess begins to give into her desire for Miles, as their relationship after this begins to blur the line between what is appropriate and what is not. Miles himself also seems to become fascinated with the governess at this point; acting out in order to make her “think [him] – for a change – bad,” so that she would believe that he would go along with whatever crude business she expected of him (James 45). The relationship merely escalates from here: he “bent forward and kissed [her]” and she had to make an effort not to cry with joy (James 45).

Shortly after seeing Quint’s third and final manifestation on the stairs, the governess begins to see Miss Jessel, who was her predecessor, and who was purportedly involved in a relationship with Quint. Jessel first appears when the governess is with Flora at the lake. While at the lake, Flora is depicted as playing with two sticks, one of which “happened to have in it a little hole” that Flora stuck another stick into (James 29). These sticks were thought to be symbolic of sexual by critics such as Edmund Wilson, which makes Miss Jessel’s appearance more interesting because it is related to a sexual interpretation of the child’s actions.

When seeing Quint and Jessel, the governess was not seeing ghosts. This is made explicitly clear by Henry James himself – in his Preface to the New York Edition of the novel, he states that “Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not ‘ghosts’ at all” (127). He suggests that they are both some other type of being, and although most of his examples are supernatural in nature, the reader could still technically consider the pair as projections of the governess’s mind. Some certainly argued this point, as James had a tendency to be incredibly evasive in correspondence. However, any supposed paranormal elements can be explained away by the governess’s psychological state. The pinnacle of a supernatural argument about the text is based on the idea that the governess would not have been able to describe Quint had he not appeared. Heilman touches on this in his critique by pointing out that “Mrs. Grose always comes into agreement with the governess” (181). He believes that she is forced to agree, but she simply agrees out

of fear. Mrs. Grose is a superstitious woman who believes in ghosts. Had the governess simply described an average man, Mrs. Grose most likely would have come to the eventual conclusion that the figure had been a ghost. The governess never had to say that she was being haunted by Quint's ghost because her psyche was just projecting an image onto the world that was misinterpreted by an easily-manipulated, religious old woman. However, Mrs. Grose was not the one to identify Jessel; the governess was able to figure out who the woman was on her own. The fact that Jessel appeared not long after Quint serves to further reinforce the idea that the governess was displacing her inappropriate sexual desires – Mrs. Grose insinuated from the beginning that the former governess had been involved in some scandal at the estate.

### **Eventually, the children's happiness with the governess begins to fade, as they begin to fear her.**

The illicit relationship between Peter Quint and Miss Jessel is important to the governess's hallucinations. Their relationship was inappropriate as Jessel was of a higher class than Quint, which is the same situation that the governess finds herself in with Miles. It is clear that Miss Jessel is a lady, but it is also insinuated that Quint was an adulterer and often had affairs with ladies or other servants of the household (James 32). Mrs. Grose adds that "Quint was much too free," meaning that he was inappropriate with everyone, but particularly with Miles (James 25). One can infer from this statement that Quint was, in some way, sexually explicit with Miles, although whether he spoke in a vulgar manner about ladies or he was physically involved with Miles is not immediately known. The fact that the governess sees Quint and Jessel simply adds to the notion that she wants "an erotic transgression of class," as critic Bruce Robbins states (239). Miles is of a higher social class than she, and she is driven mad with unrequited, unconsciously-driven love for the boy. Robbins also notes the governess's "resemblance to the servant-ghosts," which further reiterates the idea that the governess is projecting her situation outward onto others (240).

As the sexual symbols and innuendo throughout the novel continues, so does the relationship between caretaker and older child. The governess portrays Miles as having an interest in her, stating that "his 'my dear' was constantly on his lips for [her]" (James 53). Miles speaks about how her presence affects him as "a fellow who's getting on," probably meaning that he is taking an interest in becoming a man (James 53). Miles then goes on to call her child rearing technique "queer business," because of her unconventional, hands-on approach to teaching him. She objects to his questioning, saying that "the whole world of reality was perhaps at that moment so fabulous as [their] actual relation" (James 60). She was blissful at that moment, which would change when she begins to question Miles about school.

Eventually, the children's happiness with the governess begins to fade, as they begin to fear her. Edmund Wilson makes it abundantly clear that the children are desperate to escape the estate because "they begin to resent the governess" (171). She has spiraled out of control, so the children want to get away from her because they are afraid. In his Preface, James broaches the idea that "she has 'authority,' which is a good deal to have given her," but she abused that authority when she molested one of her charges and terrified the other ("Preface" 126). The governess tries to scare Flora away by telling her about the ghosts so she could spend more of her time focused on Miles. Flora's initial fear of the governess is demonstrated in an outburst – she screams at the governess, "I see nobody. I see nothing. I never *have*" (James 70). After this incident, Flora "demands to be sent away" in order to escape the governess's growing madness (Wilson 171).

With Flora gone, the governess would be able to spend more of her time with Miles. However, her plan to instill fear in the heart of the little girl also scared her young love. Miles began to "[beg] to be sent to another school," prompting the governess to change her tactics (Wilson 171). She becomes more

erratic, pestering him to explain exactly why he was dismissed from school. When he finally gives in and tells her that he had “said things” to the boys he liked, she admits to feeling “detached and almost helpless,” lost in the “desolation of his surrender” (James 83). At first, she was “blind with victory,” but then the weight of his admission sets in. It was at this point that the governess shed her beliefs about the boy – she realized that “the obtrusion of the idea of grossness and guilt on a small helpless creature” was wrong (James 80-81). She could never have the lover she wanted, so she reacted. As Robert Heilman expected, the reader experienced “a progressive deterioration [of the governess’s mental health]” (183). However, her decline stopped after Miles died because his charms died with him. She was able to move on after her experiences, and she got another job as a governess. But the reader may never stop wondering. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, while she was holding him, “his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (James 85). Perhaps his heart stopped because she had murdered him.

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