

Psychoanalytic Reading

The Turn of the Screw

(*Luís Zanforlin*)

The Turn of the Screw opens with Douglas an unnamed narrator, friends and family gathered on Christmas Eve sharing haunted tales. In the course of the conversation, Douglas reveals he is in possession of the manuscript of the governess's story. This narrative framing serves a number of functions and interpretations: It helps the reader to immerse himself in the narrative. The frame also creates the illusion of a master text that contains the "real" story, allowing the reader to disregard the prologue once the manuscript arrives. The manuscript and the anticipation of its arrival distract the reader from the narrative frame. Another narrative layer produced by the unnamed narrator's rendition suggests the governess's story is subject to the copyist's projection. The frame, much like the unconscious, has big influences on the governess's personality however she has no control over it for she lives on the novel's deeper layer, her conscious. Assuming the governess' tale is structured through the unnamed narrator's projection we are able to justify a number of curious behaviors the governess has such as her unexplained affection towards the children's uncle, her admiration towards Miles, and her "logical" attempts to justify the ghosts existence.

The first curious behavior is the governess's love and devotion for the children's uncle. If we accept the possibility one of the conditions for her employment was the surrender of her virginity (or innocence) it becomes possible that her devotion for him is a projection created by the unnamed narrator's limited male perspective, covering up her possible hatred or even fear of the uncle "*The moral of which was of*

course the seduction exercised by the splendid young man. She succumbed to it". If the governess was sexually assaulted, it is possible she is no longer trying to protect the children's innocence of being "sexually corrupted" like she was but instead she attempts to protect them from becoming corrupted like their uncle, a person able to take sexual advantage of others for their own pleasure.

The governess's second curious behavior is her complete admiration of Miles. "*What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child—his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love*". This unworldly admiration might also be the result of the unnamed narrator's male perspective, for the governess's impression of Miles was curiously much greater than her impression of Flora, Miles's sister. This love becomes even more unreasonable considering Miles, unlike his sister, has a reason to have his purity scrutinized due to the fact he was expelled from school for bad behavior suggesting he is not as perfect as the governess sees. In the novel's narrative frame Douglas mentions the governess was his own sister's governess who was ten years older than he was and who he might have been in love with. This information suggests Douglas might be Miles himself amplifying reasons why he would project such love for Miles on the governess words.

Another possible form of projection from the unnamed narrator is the governess's unreasonable explanations to why the children were aware of the spirits existence "*He looked round at me now, as if in recognition of my understanding him*". It is possible the unnamed narrator's narrow perspective on the already altered manuscript makes it impossible to guess whether the ghosts were real or the governess had a loose screw. Perhaps if we had the story from the perspective of Mrs.

Grose it would be clear the governess lost grip of reality but since it is beneficial for Douglas for the ghosts to be real he projects rationality making it look like the apparitions were real.

Considering it is more likely the governess imagined the ghosts than the laws of physics were broken, allowing the dead to return, we come to ask the reasons her mind would produce such vivid and coherent characters. It is possible her subconscious generated phantasies in order to cope with two of her traumas, sexual frustration and self shame, one a consequence of the other.

The first trauma might be a sexual frustration resultant of her desire for the children's uncle with denied contact. Whether the uncle's condition for hiring the governess included her virginity or not, her sexual desires towards him could possibly have produced a phantasy of lust in the shape of a masculine character whose manners resemble the ones of corrupted rustic virile men. The mental creation of the ghost of Peter Quint could serve the governess as a mechanism to prevent her from directing her sexual frustration towards Miles, making her responsible for his innocence.

The second trauma might be a consequence of her first phantasy, once she is able to see the personification of her sexual frustration (in the form of Peter Quint), the governess becomes aware and perhaps ashamed of her own corruption. This self-disgust produces a character that represents herself free from the restraints of her own consciousness, someone young and beautiful, who's aware and active about her sexual desires towards Peter Quint, the ghost of Miss Jessel.

This theory allows us to make a connection between the governess and the children where Miles (a member of the opposite sex) represents a symbol of her

external sexual desires and Flora (a member of the same sex) represents the image of herself. Both Miles and Flora have their own ghost that threatens their incense. It is interesting the governess's first resolution happens with the ghost of Miss Jessel before she moves on to Peter Quint. According to Freud's *5 Lectures about Psychoanalysis*, the order in which you become aware of your traumas is significant,

“It was necessary to repeat the whole series of pathogenic memories in chronological sequence, and of course in reverse order, the last first and the first last. It was quite impossible to reach the first and often most essential trauma directly, without first clearing away those coming later”.

Another facet of the theory that the governess's ghosts are a creation of her own imagination is their curiously quiet behavior. According to Freud the imaginary function happens at the visual sense, which explains why in all of the ghosts appearances they remained deprived from interaction and speech.

Perhaps the most significant clue suggesting each phantom's mental functions are the locations where they appear. Quint, as a symbol of the governess's external sexual desires, first appears in the tower, a phallic shaped structure representative of power and dominance. Miss Jessel on the other hand, appears outside of the house on the pond, inside the common area and the classroom, all places where the governess is expected to be and to interact with the children.

This analysis lead me to interpret the house as a metaphor for the governess's conscious, therefore making the outside a symbol for her unconscious. The appearance of Miss Jessel on the inside of the house relates to the awareness of the governess's sexual desire through the ghost of Peter Quint. As the story evolves that awareness becomes more obvious and her self-shame grows, bringing the ghost to

more intimate places of the house. The house is also the only place where the governess is in control of the children's behavior, in the same way we can only control our conscious thoughts. The use of the word "free" is used to describe a feared notion of the loss of control when Miles is granted the freedom to wander on the unconscious outside, "*He had at any rate his freedom now; I was never to touch it again*", meaning a surrender of her sexual desires to her unconscious which could be the reason why in the end Miles loses his innocence. This metaphor is similar to the novel's narrative frame, where the inside of the house functions as the deeper layer of the governess's story, where the governess experiences reality with control over her surrounding as opposed to the narrative frame which like the outside, is where she is a victim of her own subconscious, projections and phantasies.

The book is purposefully ambiguous and suspenseful, instigating the reader to interpret plot, frame and characters as well as theorizing the meaning of Miles's death. I was greatly entertained and left with a satisfactory psychoanalytic diagnose of the fictional characters granted by Henry James, making me question whether I am indeed in need of another turn of my screw.

Citation:

James, Henry, and David Bromwich. *The Turn of the Screw*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. "5 Lectures About Psychoanalysis." *Sigmund Freud: 5 Lectures about Psychoanalysis*. Franz Deuticke, 1912. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.