

**BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND REALITY:  
UNRAVELING THE GOTHIC PSYCHE IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW***

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the complex narrative and psychological depth of Henry James's **The Turn of the Screw**, exploring its critical aspects not only through the classical interpretation of its setting, character development, and thematic richness, but also through the prism of intertextuality, psychology, and social context, in a story steeped in ambiguity and delusion. The setting of Bly Manor, with its quintessentially Gothic atmosphere, becomes a fertile ground for the unravelling of the governess's psyche. Isolated, both socially and physically, her increasing turmoil is analysed in relation to her environment and the peculiarities of her employment, combined with her emotional and psychological descent. The isolation, her background and upbringing, society's expectations and the unreciprocated infatuation with the children's uncle, set the stage for the climaxes of her confrontations with what she perceives as malevolent forces. An interesting aspect in the novella is the governess's complex relationship with the children, Flora and Miles, and how this evolves from watchful affection to suspicious protectiveness and finally to the children's rejection of her visions. The story reaches a climax with the governess's second encounter with Peter Quint's ghost, interpreted through the prism of the novel she was reading prior to the encounter, Henry Fielding's **Amelia**. This choice of literature not only hints to the governess's state of mind but also offers insights into her character, suggesting a possible influence on her perception of reality and of her role within Bly Manor in particular and within Victorian society in general. The paper argues that the general frame for understanding the governess's experiences and actions can be interpreted as a classic manifestation of the eternal battle between good and evil, a theme that resonates well within the novella's Gothic framework. This battle is not just external but also internal, reflecting a psychological struggle within the governess, who perceives herself as a knightly figure in a moral crusade to protect the innocent. Through a detailed examination of some aspects in **The Turn of the Screw**, this paper demonstrates that the novella is a prime example of pre-modernist exploration of narrative ambiguity, psychological depth, and the subjective nature of reality. It explores the cultural and social norms and anxieties of the Victorian era, engaging various themes that include the role of women, the concept of innocence, and the repressed tensions surrounding sexuality and morality.*

**Keywords:** *Gothic, supernatural, psychology, perception, reality*

*The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is an evergreen that continues to fascinate readers and critics alike more than a century after it was first published. The extraordinary ambiguity of the novella has turned it into a battleground of literary criticism where bold ideas and interpretations seem to emerge continuously and the battleground that carries the fight between the different supporters of the various ideas seems to be constantly shifting and reshaping. Almost 90 years after its first issue author Peter G. Beidler found

no less that 26 different, possible interpretations of just one part of James' story, the final part relating on the death of Miles, written by critics and writers from 1934 to 1994<sup>1</sup>.

From the plethora of possible interpretations there are some who succeed in gathering the most support from fans and critics alike. Five of them could be the most convincing:

**1. Supernatural Interpretation:** One of the primary readings is that the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are real, and the governess is a true and fearless protector of the children against malevolent spirits.

**2. Psychological Interpretation:** A more down-to-earth interpretation is that the ghosts are hallucinations produced by the governess's vivid imagination, a result of her mental instability, caused by external and internal factors like her isolation, stress, and repressed desires.

**3. Feminist Interpretation:** Some scholars interpret the novella in a feminist key, arguing that the governess's experiences reflect the oppressive social frame and the limited options available to women in the 19th century.

**4. Freudian Interpretation:** Freudian analysis suggests that the novella's events symbolize the governess's unconscious sexual desires and fears, particularly her feelings towards the uncle and the children.

**5. Socio-cultural Interpretation:** This perspective examines the novella as a critique of Victorian social hierarchies and the tensions between different social classes, particularly the governess's ambiguous social status.

Due to the physical limitations of this paper, we shall discuss in this research three of the above-mentioned theories: the psychological, the Freudian (although it would be better called Jamesian), and the socio-cultural ones. By analysing and interpreting these three theories, we shall come up with some new conclusions as to the interpretation of James' extraordinary novella.

The themes that we propose for analysis are:

- Henry James was influenced by his brother William and the groundbreaking psychological achievements and theories he proposed. This way, instead of following a Freudian or pre-Freudian psychological interpretation, as suggested by some scholars, we would like to follow a William Jamesian approach when investigating the psychological dimension of the novella.
- The socio-cultural theme shall focus on the condition of women in Victorian England and society's expectations of them. The rigid societal morals of the time and the great expectations were placing a huge pressure on the governess. An important role in the shaping of the governess' own expectations from herself (and an additional element of pressure on herself) is her lecture of Henry Fielding's novel *Amelia*.
- The Freudian or pre-Freudian interpretation as related to the governesses romantic fantasies, but also connected to William James's psychological observations.

Nevertheless, elements from the other two above mentioned, the supernatural and the feminist interpretations, will be remembered in connection to the other three.

The method we chose for our study is that of approaching each of these themes and presenting our own vision on them, supported by numerous secondary sources from

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<sup>1</sup> Peter G. Beidler, *Ghosts, Demons and Henry James. The Turn of the Screw at the Turn of the Century*. University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1989, p. 143-144.

prominent authors and literary critics. The conclusion will bring together elements from all these interpretations to illustrate an understanding of the novella that focuses on analysis and theories that have been less followed and could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the work and the author's intentions for this most ambiguous piece of literature.

### Context

Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* in a complicated general and personal context. Late Victorianism was already perceived by many writers and scholars as an obsolete era, and the search for novel forms of expression, able to better reflect the rapid changes in society were already heralding the age of modernism. Amongst many preoccupations of the literary scene of the time, Henry James had already started to express his views for a different kind of literature fourteen years prior to the publication of *The Turn of the Screw*. He published his theoretical literary essay *The Art of Fiction* in 1884, pledging for realism in literature and combating thus the ideas of Sir Walter Bessant on novel writing, who was arguing for the predominance of plot over characterization and for the necessity of moral instruction in a novel. In his essay James deploras also the popular taste and demand for sentimental and pessimistic novels. It introduced what James called "the era of discussions" about the form, role and purpose of the novel.

On a more personal note, Henry James was recovering from a public failure with his play *Guy Fawkes*, when he was booed by part of the audience at the premiere of the play, and with prior personal drama, like the loss of a very close friend. It was a difficult period for the writer, a period called "the treacherous years" by literary critic and biographer Leon Edel, considered to be "the foremost 20th-century authority on the life and works of Henry James" by Encyclopaedia Britannica<sup>2</sup>. In his study *The Treacherous Years. 1895-1901*, Edel highlights the fact that those years were particularly difficult for James. Therefore, after retreating to the country to meditate and rebuild his strength, the proposal from *Collier's* magazine to write a ghost story came unexpected and was most welcomed by the author. Picking up on an idea he had had for two years, after hearing a ghost story from his friend, the Archbishop of Canterbury, he begun writing on what he later called one of his "hack-works"<sup>3</sup>, writing it for money. It turned out to become a masterpiece.

This is how *The Turn of the Screw* took shape. Written from September-December 1897, the novella was published, according to the customs of the time in a serialized form in *Collier's* magazine, over the span of several weeks, from January to April 1898. James had had the intention though to publish it in the form of a book from the beginning, so later that year, in November, the book issue was also printed (*The Two Magics*) containing two short stories/novellas. *The Turn of the Screw* was an instant success, repairing James's reputation as a writer, and his hurt ego after the flop produced by *Guy Fawkes*.

But beyond the need for a comeback and the order for a ghost story by a publisher, the novella means much more in terms of understanding James and his writing. The story and especially the characters – a much-emphasized element of the story in the literary

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leon-Edel>.

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1937, p. 202.

theory of Henry James ever since his 1884 essay *The Art of Fiction*, reflect a deep preoccupation of the author with human nature, cultural context, and psychological insight. Building on another concept expressed in the previously mentioned essay, the idea that imagination is the most important tool of a novelist, surpassing by far observation and experience as his opponent in the debate, Sir Walter Bessant had expressed, James let his artistry, originality and inventiveness come out at their best in *The Turn of the Screw*, producing a fine piece of literary art that still charms readers and critics alike more than a century after it was written.

The idea and conception did not come out of the blue though. Henry James was extremely aware of all the changes in his society, in literature and in the newly developing sciences, like the one that his brother William was just pioneering – psychology.

### Setting

Gothic stories were very popular at that time with the British readers and Bram Stoker's famous horror gothic novel *Dracula* was published only months before James wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. James also chose a gothic setting for his novella, the famous Bly manor, a secluded place not only physically but also mentally quarantined location. The old, isolated country manor, with its squeaky wooden floors and old high towers seems like the perfect location for the developing horror story, a location that made a strong impression on the young and inexperienced governess in her first day already. Led by the young girl she had to take care of the governess discovers in her first tour of the house:

empty chambers and dull corridors, on crooked staircases that made me pause and even on the summit of an old machicolated square tower that made me dizzy (...). I had the view of a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all color out of storybooks and fairytales. Wasn't it just a storybook over which I had fallen adoze and adream? No; it was a big, ugly, antique, but convenient house, embodying a few features of a building still older, half-replaced and half-utilized, in which I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was, strangely, at the helm!<sup>4</sup>

This setting created in the last lines of the first chapter of the story concludes only too well the opening lines of the chapter, where the author/unnamed narrator introduces us to a typically grim atmosphere of the party that was entertaining itself with ghost stories on Christmas eve: "THE story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as, on Christmas eve in an old house, a strange tale should essentially be"<sup>5</sup>. The carefully chosen words: "breathless", "gruesome", "old house", and "strange tale" introduce the reader from the very beginning with the chilling gothic atmosphere needed to set the story in motion. "Visitation" is the first term to characterize a presumably ghostly apparition, and the atmosphere is further enhanced by word choices like *apparition*,

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<sup>4</sup> Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and other Stories*, Penguin Random House UK, 2007, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

*dreadful, terror, horrible, sheer terror, dreadful darkness*<sup>6</sup>, and all of these on the first page of the novella. The atmosphere being set in the first chapter, James then continues with the psychological exploration of the governess' mind, paralleled and reflected by her supposed encounter and confrontation with supernatural forces.

In doing so, Henry James employs elements of the newly developed science of psychology in which his brother William was a leading pioneer. William James' groundbreaking and pioneering work in psychology and philosophy turned him into one of the most influential thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is often called "the father of American psychology" and was instrumental in the developing of psychology as a science and of pragmatism as a philosophical school of thought. In his fundamental work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) he discusses extensively the human mind and behaviour and focuses explicitly and at length on a series of specific topics related to related human nature like *consciousness, emotion, habit, perception, and the self*. One of the most relevant themes explored by William James in his study on psychology that can be applied to the analysis of his brother Henry's novella *The Turn of the Screw* is that of **perception and reality**. Henry James also analysed how people perceive and at the same time construct their own realities, according to the exterior stimuli they receive: "I should note the extent to which these persons are, so far as their other passions permit, intense *perceivers*, all, of their respective predicaments, (...) even to the small recording governess confronted with the horrors of "The Turn of the Screw".<sup>7</sup>

William James was convinced that reality is not a given, static, fixed and generally accepted fact but a mobile element that is shaped accordingly by people's experiences, by their emotions and thoughts, being thus more of a personal experience than a group or universal experience. This is particularly important for analysing the perception of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. Her perception of reality (including here the ghosts) is different from the perception of the children and Mrs. Grose. It is quite clear in the novel that nobody except for the governess acknowledges of seeing the ghosts. Mrs. Grose clearly states that she does not see the ghost of Ms. Jessel and so does little Flora at the same occasion, when confronted by the governess:

"I don't know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never *have*. I think you're cruel. I don't like you!" Then, after this deliverance, which might have been that of a vulgarly pert little girl in the street, she hugged Mrs. Grose more closely and buried in her skirts the dreadful little face. In this position she produced an almost furious wail.

"Take me away, take me away—oh, take me away from *her*!"

"From *me*?" I panted.

"From you—from you!" she cried.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1937, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and other Stories*, Penguin Random House UK, 2007, p. 110.

As with Miles, confrontation is to be acknowledged in two distinct scenes. First, we have the episode in the churchyard, where Miles seems to be desiring to escape the constant watching of the governess and his all-female environment at Bly. He insists that he is a guy, a “fellow” and that he would be better off together with other boys, in school:

“Turned out for Sunday by his uncle’s tailor, who had had a free hand and a notion of pretty waistcoats and of his grand little air, Miles’s whole title to independence, the rights of his sex and situation, were so stamped upon him that if he had suddenly struck for freedom I should have had nothing to say.” (...) . “Look here, my dear, you know,” he charmingly said, “when in the world, please, am I going back to school?” (...) “You know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady *always*—!” (...) “Ah, of course, she’s a jolly, ‘perfect’ lady; but, after all, I’m a fellow, don’t you see? that’s—well, getting on.”<sup>9</sup>

We remark here Miles’ masculine aspect in a suit made by his uncle’s tailor and his urgent need to be surrounded by masculinity as well as the governess’ lack of understanding for it. All that she sees as masculine influence on Miles is that of Peter Quint, a bad influence that might have gotten Miles expelled from school in the first place. His testimony in the final chapter that the reason for his expelling had been the fact that he “said things” is typically ambiguous, but at a closer look we might find an explanation for it in Henry James’ biography and in his relation to his slightly older brother William. William was the active and masculine of the two elder brothers in the James family, he was hanging with other boys of the same age and doing “guy things”, swearing amongst them<sup>10</sup>. This type of behaviour might have gotten Miles expelled from school, swearing in front of other boys. It was a typical boyish attitude for which Henry’s brother William has been often punished. Just like Miles was punished. There is a tension here that might be explained by reading Henry James’ biography. For being very masculine and active, his brother William got often punished. His behaviour was dangerous and could harm him. On the other side, the more effeminate James would spend his time in the company of women mostly, in a matriarchal but nevertheless much safer environment. Hence the conflict in the case of little Miles, who wanted to be with boys and behave boyishly on the one side and the governess who wanted to keep him safe and protect him at any costs on the other.<sup>11</sup>

In second episode, the final confrontation scene during his interrogation by the governess and the supposed third apparition of the ghost of Peter Quint in front of the window, he is constantly backing that window, therefore he could not have

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> “I play with boys who curse and swear’ William James had said to him once, when Henry was about as old as little Miles. It was William’s way of telling Henry that he didn’t qualify for the company of older boys. The novelist, remembering this in the autobiographies of his old age, looked sadly upon his boyish self and agreed that he simply wasn’t qualified.’ William could ‘say things” Leon Edel, *Henry James. The Treacherous Years 1895-1901*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1969, p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James. The Treacherous Years 1895-1901*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1969, p. 199.

seen the alleged ghost. The only one again to see the apparition is the governess, but in these frantic and dramatic moments not even she is sure any longer of her perception of reality: “It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he *were* innocent, what then on earth was *I?*”<sup>12</sup>. Feeling paralyzed by this uncertainty the governess continues to press Miles, to drive him to the direction and resolution she had in her mind, according to her own personal perception of reality. The little boy’s last words are damning:

“It’s *he?*”

I was so determined to have all my proof that I flashed into ice to challenge him. “Whom do you mean by ‘he’?”

“Peter Quint—you devil!” His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. “*Where?*”<sup>13</sup>.

For a less attentive reader, the boy seems to address the ghost of Peter Quint when he exclaims: “Peter Quint – you devil!”. But if we look closer, we notice that he answers the governess’ question “Whom do you mean by ‘he’?” with the name of the ghost but addressing the governess as he answers the question of his interlocutor and torturer “you devil!”. It is in our understanding that the only possible addressee here is the governess. Just like his sister Flora before, when confronted by the governess to acknowledge the presence of the ghost of Miss Jessel, Miles ends up recognizing the almost devilish obsession of the governess with the presumed ghosts and rejects her. Flora had called her cruel for tormenting her with her visions and cried desperately to Mrs. Grose to take her away from the governess. Miles did not have anybody to come to his rescue, he was delivered helplessly to the tormented visions of the governess, fully exposed to her illusions and hallucinations. These illusions and hallucinations might have been produced by the sensations and perceptions experienced by the governess at Bly, ones that led her to vivid imagery, to creating images and association them with past experiences to combine into a new perception of reality<sup>14</sup>.

This leaves the governess alone in witnessing the apparition, her perception of reality being dramatically different from that of the others. This radically different perception stands at the core of the whole story and influences the entire plot and its dramatic outcome, with Miles’ death in the arms of the governess. It also stands in the centre of the general and continuous debate amongst readers and critics regarding the story in general and the actions of the governess in particular.

<sup>12</sup> Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and other Stories*, Penguin Random House UK, 2007, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> William James was particularly interested in illusions, be them visually or audio, trying to offer scientific psychological explanations for them: “The sensation they say, awakens ‘images’ of other sensations associated with it in the past. These images ‘fuse,’ or are ‘combined’ by the Ego with the present sensation into a new product, the percept, etc., etc. Something so indistinguishable from this in practical outcome is what really occurs, one may seem fastidious in objecting to such a state, specially if have no rival theory of the elementary processes to propose. (...) But if we try to put an exact meaning into it, all we find is that the brain react paths which previous experiences have worn, and make usually perceive the probable thing, i.e., the thing by which on previous occasions the reaction was most frequently aroused.” William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Henry Holt Company, New York, 1890, p. 71.

If we follow William James' theories on perception and reality, then we might assume that the "apparitions" witnessed by the governess constitute her reality, as she is absolutely sure that she encounters the two ghosts, but this reality of hers is not something definitive, absolute and fixed, but rather a construct of her own mind and imagination, a result of her **experiences**, **emotions**, and **thoughts**, which were quite different from the experiences, emotions, and thoughts of the other inhabitants at Bly<sup>15</sup>. In order to have a better understanding of how these elements might have influenced the governess into constructing her own perception of reality that was so different from that of the others we need to analyse each of them.

**Experiences.** The governess' experiences are closely related to her family, upbringing and age. She is the daughter of a poor country clergyman, placing her thus socially in the lower-middle class. Nevertheless, she has a good education and upbringing, allowing her to work as a governess for wealthier families, in a high-class environment. The fact that her father is a parson implies a good upbringing but one that is also imbued with a strong sense of religious and moral fundament. Despite the scarcity of information that James provides us with related to the governess, which is part of his famous desire for ambiguity and for letting the readers use their imagination to connect the dots<sup>16</sup>, we know that the governess is very young, probably in her early twenties and unexperienced as well. With this background she arrives at Bly, where she is to take command of the entire household, as her position of governess was superior to that of servants or housekeepers. Throughout the story she shows us that she is well-aware of her superior social status as compared to that of servants. At the same time, she is also well-aware of her inferior social status compared to the children and especially their uncle, her handsome and wealthy employer for which she develops a personal affection and romantic expectation. Thus, her extreme desire, which might come close to obsession, to please the uncle with her caretaking of the children and to gain thus not his complete approval. This is one of the constant **thoughts** that accompany her during her stay at Bly and we notice that mostly indirectly but also directly, as during her first encounter with the ghost of Peter Quint, when, during her only free hour of the day she was wandering through the garden and thinking about the uncle, desiring to meet him there and then. She constantly thinks that she must prove worth of the task she was charged with by the uncle and protect the children from all possible harm, proving herself this way a heroine worthy of the most intense appreciation. These constant thoughts, together with the new and intense emotions she feels – partly for the uncle and also as a result of her new experiences in a remote, isolated location – lead to her become more and more obsessive with her perceived crucial mission to protect the children at all costs and from any possible harm. This fact leads us to one of the main theories related to what happened at Bly; the governess is so obsessed with her mission that she unconsciously creates the evil she has to protect the children from, creating thus a

<sup>15</sup> "The governess's imagination, we see, discovers "depths" within herself. Fantasy seems to be reality for her. Anything and everything can and does happen, in her mind." Leon Edel in *Bloom's Major Short Story Writers, Henry James*, Chelsea House Publishers, Broomall, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1937, p. 176.



moral and religious mission for her to take on a crusade against the evil that was threatening the children. In this reality that she perceived, as a result of a combined string resulted from her personal experiences, thoughts and emotions, she was a moral crusader against evil and the protector of innocence and righteousness. Readers and critics that have very different experiences, emotions and thoughts, embrace a completely divergent perception of reality. Others might come closer to the character of the governess in regard to their perception of reality. Hence the strong disagreements that have continued since the apparition of the novella.

The **emotions** experienced by the governess at Bly must have been tremendous for the young ingenuous woman. Unexperienced, infatuated, with a rigid moral background and religious upbringing in a Victorian society that had very clear expectations from women and strictly distinct gender roles, the governess is thrown into an isolated environment, a dark gothic setting, cut away from the rest of the world, and left pray to her thoughts and feelings that continued self-fuelling spiralling until they reached the terrible climax in the end of the story. All these experiences, emotions and thoughts led to her perception of a reality where she created for herself the image of a knightly figure of good fighting the dark forces of evil that were threatening the children. In this perceived reality of hers, her determination and devotion, even self-sacrifice to protect the children would ultimately gain her the recognition and possibly affection of the uncle, most importantly his approval, and possibly also an upgrade of her social status. Driven by these thoughts and emotions, she becomes more and more obsessive of her mission and continues to press the only child left exposed to her (as Flora had already changed sides and sided with Mrs. Grose who had taken her under her wing), Miles. The incredible pressure build up in the final pages leads to the dramatic outcome of Miles' death.

Another major interest expressed by William James in his revolutionary study on psychology was in ppsychopathology and the study of mental states. He showed a keen interest for the exploration of mental illness. Psychopathology, or abnormal psychology and mental illness was explored by him in the forms of hysteria and depression, but he also focused on religious experiences treated from a psychological perspective. All of these could be applied in the interpretation of the governess' actions, as he believed that these experiences could lead us to a better understanding of consciousness and the mind. He also stressed the importance of habit in shaping behaviour and personality, explaining that once formed, habits operate independently or automatically. He also believed that habits are crucial to moral and personal development. The habits developed by the governess during her upbringing in her family's house must thus have been crucial for her personal and moral development, influencing thus her actions at Bly. The moral and almost religious crusade she embarks on in her fight against evil can be interpreted as a result of this development that was a result of habits formed at an early stage in her psychological development, one that was caused by her environment.

Another of William James' theories, one that influenced deeply modern concepts in psychology and theories on identity and personality and is related to his

idea of personal perception of reality<sup>17</sup> is that of the multiple selves. According to him, there is not just one “self” that the individual possesses, but rather multiple “selves” that can differ according to different contexts. Following this theory, the governess might also have developed multiple selves according to the new and different environment she was exposed to at Bly. Following her experiences, thoughts, and emotions, she developed a moral self that transformed her into a champion of good in the fight against evil, one that would let nothing stand in the way of victory that must be achieved at all costs. This idea is linked to yet another of William James’ psychological theories. He believed in functionalism, the idea that the way in which human mind functions and the purposes resulted from these functions result in a specific behaviour of the individual which is essential for his adaptation to their environment. Considered in this key, all the thoughts of the governess and her entire behavior and actions are nothing but an adaptation to her new environment, one that was putting a lot of pressure on her. And one last William Jamesian psychological theory that could be applied in the psychological interpretation of the character of the governess is the one he developed together with Danish psychologist Carl Lange. They both proposed the James-Lange theory of emotion, which came with a very innovative approach to human emotions, stating that, contrary to the accepted general view, emotions are actually the result and not the cause of psychological reaction to stimuli. In one of the most concrete examples, the theory stipulates that we do not tremble because we are afraid, just the opposite, we are afraid because we tremble. Following this key of interpretation, the plethora of emotions the governess suddenly has to deal with after her arrival at Bly, the ones that lead to her own altered perception of reality, are nothing but her psychological reaction to the stimuli she received from her new situation and environment. She was a very young and unexperienced woman, with a strong sense of rigid morals and religious upbringing, in her first voyage alone in the big unknown world, living probably her first infatuation and having a very strong sense of her social position, with a desired prospect of bettering it. The social and cultural pressure on her must have been tremendous. Her entire upbringing must have told her that her role as a woman in Victorian society and society’s expectations from her were very clear and quite fix. This idea is enforced by intertextuality in the story. Just before one of the climax moments – the second encounter with Peter Quint, where she decides to stand her ground and confront and defeat the ghost, marking thus a turn in her attitude, turning her into a determined belligerent – she was reading (all night long) Henry Fielding’s *Amelia*.

### **Intertextuality and social-cultural context**

A writer as scrupulous and careful as Henry James left nothing to hazard. Therefore, his intertextual reference to another author and a specific novel can only

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<sup>17</sup> “The sense of our own personal identity, then, is exactly like any one of our other perceptions of sameness among phenomena. It is a conclusion grounded either on the resemblance in a fundamental respect, or on the continuity before the mind, of the phenomena compared.” William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Henry Holt Company, New York, 1890, p. 205.

serve a definite purpose and act as another crumb trail left for us by the author to help us not only use our imagination<sup>18</sup>, as he constantly urges us to

“There is for such a case no eligible absolute of the wrong; it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination these things moreover quite exactly in the light of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience. Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself and that already is a charming job and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him thinly the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications.”<sup>19</sup>

but also work with clues that he gives us. *Amelia* is not just another novel, and its choice is definitely carefully chosen. Although published almost a century before the related events in *The Turn of the Screw*<sup>20</sup>, the novel's portrayal of the female heroine is not much different from British society's expectations for the role of women in society during early Victorianism, when the action in the novella is most probably set. The age's overwhelming emphasis on morality is but an accurate reflection of the morality described in Fielding's fourth and last novel, *Amelia*.

The heroine of Fielding's novel is regarded as an ideal of feminine virtue and endurance, a role model for any respectable woman in England at that time. Amelia endures numerous hardships but remains pure and loyal to her husband, no matter the latter's actions. Her devotion and self-sacrifice, her virtue, patience and steadfastness in the face of adversities make her embody of the ideal woman (and wife) and turn her into a role model for the governess to follow. By putting this novel into the hands of the governess, a lecture that kept her awake throughout the night and therefore a passionate lecture, Henry James tells us that this novel is of great impact, importance, and guidance for the young woman in charge of the (moral) education of the young and innocent children. Reading of Amelia's trials, the governess might perceive herself in a constructed reality at Bly, where she must endure hardships, face adversity, but always preserve her virtue and moral purity. Following on Amelia's model, she constructs a personal reality where she perceives herself as a selfless heroine, one that in fulfilling her duty of protecting the children (actually the good and innocence in this world) has to show the same endurance and moral integrity and to be ready of the same self-sacrifice for others and to be able to carry alone the burden of responsibility for the well-being of the children. Just like Amelia, the governess is struggling with her precarious social

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<sup>18</sup> In his *Prefaces*, James describes the process of writing *The Turn of the Screw* as a true exercise of free imagination: “The thing had for me the immense merit of allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand, of inviting it to act on a perfectly clear field, with no "outside" control involved, no pattern of the usual or the true or the terrible "pleasant" (...) to consort with. This makes in fact the charm of my second reference, that I find here a perfect example of an exercise of the imagination unassisted, unassociated playing the game, making the score, in the phrase of our sporting day, off its own bat. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1937, p. 170-171.

<sup>19</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1937, p. 176.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Edel arithmetically places the action in the 1840s: Leon Edel, *Henry James. The Treacherous Years 1895-1901*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1969, p. 195.

position. Governesses in Victorian England were educated young women who came from respectable but poorer families and had to prove themselves in society. They were often employed by wealthy and respectable families that held higher social position, but their social position was not very clear but rather ambiguous, being above the servants of the house but under the position of the family. The profession of governess was one of very few respectable occupations accepted in Victorian society for women, but did not ensure them with a more respectable position in higher society, nor did it allow them for financial independence and security. Therefore, just like Amelia, although for different reasons<sup>21</sup>, the governess is aware of her precarious and vulnerable social position and is willing to do anything to accomplish her mission – protecting the children – and thus perhaps hope for approval, acceptance and acknowledgement from the uncle, with a possible and prospective wishful thinking at a romantic involvement that would improve and then secure her social position and financial security. Amelia's virtue and moral strength ultimately lead to social redemption, to the restoration of her social position, and the governess might believe, in her constructed and perceived reality, fed by her intense yet turmoiled emotions and thoughts, that by acting in a similar way, in this case fighting the perceived threat of evil and protecting the children's moral integrity and innocence at all costs, she might as well prove her worthiness and secure for herself a better position in society.

Her actions are defined by some deeply rooted general perceptions in the society of the time. One of the strongest social preoccupations during Victorianism was moral absolutism and the fear of moral corruption. The strive for virtue and moral perfection was enhanced and fuelled by the fear of moral corruption. Such corruption could only come from malevolent forces, be they ghosts or actually other forms of supernatural terrors, as James himself explained in his *Prefaces*<sup>22</sup>. They were the representation of evil. It was therefore the governess' moral duty to fight them – in this case the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel – to fight the moral corruption that these apparitions tried to bring upon the innocent and pure children. The fear of moral corruption was so deeply embodied within the society of the time, that fight against it was perceived not only as a necessity but as a true moral duty. While Amelia's moral virtue is threatened by generally perceivable malevolent forces – ill-meaning people – the governess' are probably the creation of her imagination, of the perceived reality that she constructed following her personal experiences, and her newly developing emotions and thoughts in a gothic setting and estranged and estranging secluded environment. *Amelia's* discussion of class distinction and gender roles emphasizes the strong impact these social constructs have on the life of individuals, and especially on the lives of women in society lead by strong and rigid patriarchal moral concepts. The governess' actions should be read also in terms of the social pressure put on her by society's expectations from her, and by her own expectations for herself, that were build following the exact general path dictated by

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<sup>21</sup> Amelia is put into such a position by the reckless actions of her husband, that drive her family to financial insecurity and a loss of social position. Nevertheless, her high virtue and endurance and self-sacrifice for others are not moved.

<sup>22</sup> "This is to say, I recognise again, that Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not "ghosts" at all, as we now know the ghost, but goblins, elves, imps, demons as loosely constructed as those of the old trials for witchcraft; if not, more pleasingly, fairies of the legendary order, wooing their victims forth to see them dance under the moon. Not indeed that I suggest their reducibility to any form of the pleasing pure and simple;" Henry James, *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*. Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1937, p. 175.

what John Stuart Mill called at the middle of the nineteenth century “the tyranny of public opinion”<sup>23</sup>. Under such tremendous social and cultural pressure, doubled by the pressure of her isolation in a remote, unappealing, ugly place, away from her desires and willing to do anything to meet society’s expectations and at the same time to escape her confining environment and fulfil her romantic dreams and social upheaval expectations, the governess transforms reality into a self-constructed perception that comes into collision with all the other actors, leading to a tragic, but for the governess probably relieving outcome:

“It is indeed the governess who has become the devil; and the subtlest twist of the story is that the demon she seeks to exorcize is the demon within herself. She rids herself of her private ghost; and in the process little Miles’s heart is ‘dis possessed,’ and she is left ‘alone with the quiet day,’ with the dead boy in her arms-as in the old medieval tales of possession. The evil spirit has been driven out: but innocence has died.”<sup>24</sup>

In the extremely tensed final pages of the novella, but also throughout the entire story, there is another interesting aspect related to social context and expectations and projected realities. As a young inexperienced woman of poor condition, the governess had no power whatsoever. But suddenly, in a quick turn of fate, she becomes all-powerful at her first job at Bly Manor, ruling absolutely over the destinies of the young innocent souls she was trusted with. Having a very well acknowledged superior social condition to servants and without having to answer to anybody (we remember that the children’s uncle had firmly required not to be disturbed no matter what), the inexperienced governess is placed unexpectedly in a position of absolute power, and, understandably, fails. Overwhelmed by her uncontrolled emotions and doubtful expectations<sup>25</sup> she does not know how to handle power, ending up foreseeably in abusing it, to the fatal outcome in the end<sup>26</sup>.

The sad though simplified conclusion to Miles’ death is that a boy just wanted to live out his boyhood, but this very truth was twisted and perverted by the obsessed governess, which turned the normality of Miles’ natural desires into a tormented perception of evil, one that occupied her entire reality projecting her interior demons outside on the innocent children, and killing thus the innocence she so much wanted to protect. All because she could, she had the power and the will to do so.

## Conclusion

In *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James masterfully combined elements of Gothic horror with psychological depth, leaving readers in an ambiguous fictional world

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<sup>23</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Batoche Books, Kitchener, Ontario, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James. The Treacherous Years 1895-1901*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1969, p. 196.

<sup>25</sup> “The governess rides an emotional roller-coaster of too much certainty and self confidence followed by too much doubt, of romanticizing and idealizing Bly and the children and then seeing the place as cursed and the children as corrupted and evil.” Orr, Leonard, *James’ The Turn of the Screw*, Bloombury Academic, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> As Douglas points out in the frame story, the inexperienced governess, just twenty years old and taking up her first post, goes from having no power to having it absolutely. David Kirby, *The Critics Debate, The Portrait of a Lady and The Turn of the Screw*, MacMillan, London, 1991, p. 85.

populated by visions of supernatural creatures, suspended somewhere in the twilight zone between perception and reality. As shown by this analysis, the governess's experience at Bly Manor can be interpreted from various critical points, but her psychological exposition remains at the core of the story. By examining the novella through a psychological prism offered by William James, we discover to what extent and in which ways the isolation and infatuation of the governess, combined with social pressure she was exposed to drive her to create a subjective reality in which she transforms into the heroic protector of innocence. This personal construction of reality, deeply influenced by her personal experience, emotions and societal expectations, leads her to perceive evil where others see none, ultimately culminating in tragedy.

The governess's behavior, influenced by her ambiguous social position and Victorian society's rigid moral code and expectations of true virtue, reflects the pressures placed on women at the time. James not only critiques these social constructs but also explores the complexities of identity, perception, and moral absolutism. Her struggle with her own demons—manifested as the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel—serves as a commentary on the blurred line between good and evil, innocence and corruption.

Following on William James's psychological theories, particularly those on perception and reality, we regard the governess's experience as a personal construct, shaped by her inner turmoil rather than external supernatural forces. This key of interpretation brings us to the conclusion that the novella's true horror and deception lies not in the existence of malevolent forces, but in the terrible consequences of the governess's inner conflict and distorted reality.

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