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THE GOVERNESS AS A GOTHIC HEROINE IN HENRY JAMES' *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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Abstract

One of the questions perpetually plaguing the critics of Henry James' The Turn of the Screw is whether the ghosts are real or the governess had lost her mind. This paper offers an interpretation of James' novella from the viewpoint of the Gothic novel, and the author draws parallels between the actions and behavior of the young and impressionable governess and those of a heroine from the Gothic genre, taking into account the governess' narrative style, her repressed self, the evil she faces and finally, the overall position of governesses in Victorian society. The result is an aligning of James' protagonist with the generally accepted image of a Gothic heroine, thus working towards the conclusion that, seen from the perspective of the Gothic novel, the ghosts are real and the governess is caught in a battle between good and evil, fighting for the children's souls.

Keywords: Gothic novel, governess, ghosts, narrative style, Victorian

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The Governess as a Gothic Heroine

The sentimental gothic novel places its heroines into an imaginary space where anything can happen. They are pure and chaste damsels in distress, persecuted by the grimy tyrant, locked up in a dilapidated castle or a monastery, where they divulge terrifying secrets from the past, before managing to run off to safety. What the Gothic novel offers its heroines is actually a paradox of liberty. They are forced to become prisoners so that their worth and importance can be proven, so that they would become aware of their contemptible position and free themselves of the shackles of such an existence.

Since most of the reading public was comprised of women, they found it exceptionally easy to identify with female protagonists. For instance, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* owes its enormous popularity to the character of Emily. Emily is the embodiment of sentimentality: passive, melancholic and emotional, she reacts led by her emotions, but simultaneously, she never disregards the obligation to act like a lady, the essence of which is propriety. James' governess in his novella *The Turn of the Screw* reacts identically: she is bewildered, somewhat lost, in love and easily frightened. It is quite possible that some of her actions could have been more thoroughly thought through, but she is what she is: the sentimental heroine of an innovative Gothic novel, imprisoned in a house with a mystery that needs to be solved. She is not like Cinderella - the poor, abused heroine who, though she is abandoned, is never really alone - since she always has someone or something to help her, emanating from the universe that surrounds and protects her. James' governess is not offered this magical protection of the symbolic womb of the universe; she has to fight to prevail.

Her sentimental features, along with the strict religious upbringing of her childhood, her lack of experience, vulnerability, anxieties and fears, make her the Victorian cliché of sexual ambivalence. Like many other sentimental heroines, the governess, too, possesses an idealistic innocence and naïve romantic impulses, which might align her with other unreliable narrators. Though her story might be considered too flimsy and untrustworthy due to an excess of subjectivity, the evidence of her healthy state of mind cannot be denied. The narrator, named Douglas, generously provides his own testimony to her impeccable business conduct after the tragic events at Bly, which might be tainted by his emotions, but the psychotic behavior that she had

apparently shown at Bly could not have been left unmentioned. He claims that 'She was the most agreeable woman [he's] ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever… [He] liked her extremely and [is] glad to this day to think she liked [him] too' (James, 2000, p. 3). If she had shown any indications of any mental instability, she would have been fired on the spot, which is something that never happened. Douglas is very careful in his concern to portray the governess' love for her employer as pure and asexual, due to the fact that 'she saw him only twice,' but that it is exactly where 'the beauty of her passion' lies (James, 2000, p. 7). He does not refer to her feelings as love, but rather passion, and continues in the direction of the asexuality of her emotions, because it was a love that was never consummated. As such, it can forever remain pure and unblemished.

Her Narrative Style and its Origins

In addition, her narration possesses the traits of an epistolary novel; it is reminiscent of a diary of the events that she witnessed while at Bly. For this very reason, it is believed that she succumbed to the impression of all the events that took place, and that her writing the events as they happened, makes her insufficiently reliable in the portrayal of the previously mentioned. It is true that she can be accused of ambiguity and a lack of clarity on numerous occasions, due to the fact that she often presents her own, subjective version of the events, rather than firm facts. In presenting the events, she frequently uses the words 'I felt' instead of a plain and clear 'I saw', with which she gives the following information as a personal impression, and not a factual claim, things between which a hysterical victim of hallucinations would not be able to distinguish. A deranged person would insist on her version as the only plausible one, because other versions would make her seem insane. Her story is not the result of hysteria, but of deep thought and careful examination, because it was written after the events had taken place and not while. This way, she was allowed to understand the events from a realistic perspective, think long and hard about the cause of the tragedy and give the most logical solution possible.

The governess' story is a narration arisen from a structuralized society in which wealthy, aristocratic families hire governesses to take care of their children. It is usually a middle class woman, from a respectable, though impoverished family, who is educated, hardworking and ready to provide the best care possible. This is where James'

governess fits in perfectly. She is the daughter of a country parson, who is adorned with all the characteristics vital for such a position. In Victorian times, there was a predominant belief that governesses could be very effective in providing love and care to children who were either motherless or whose mother did not have the time or the desire for such affairs.

Sensing the danger to come, the governess refers to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre* wondering 'was there a *secret* at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?' (James, 2000, p. 23). What connects these literary works is a dominant, though concealed motif: the wish to save. Jane Eyre becomes a helping hand to the crippled and helpless Rochester, while the ambitions of James' governess do not reach such a happy ending. She perceives herself as a guardian angel, a defender in love, who bravely takes upon herself this duty, empowered by a blind love for the master from Harley Street. Her employer, the uncle of her two protégées is also their legal guardian who categorically refuses to do right by his responsibilities. This man 'all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women' transfers all of his burden to her and leaves her with the words that she is never to 'trouble him – but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all the questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone' (James, 2000, p. 5, 7). He remains as a negative, almost evil influence over the events at Bly, because though physically absent, he is a frequent topic of discussion. The fatal attraction of the first and only encounter and the relentless passion that she feels help her do her duties more diligently and with greater fervor. Even though he appears only for a brief moment, the master symbolizes the Byronic hero whose divine spells no woman can stay immune to. He is mysterious, sophisticated and educated, highly intelligent, with a magnetically charming and charismatic personality. For her, he is the prize of all prizes. Had she been able to be victorious over evil, she would have been given the opportunity to present herself not only as an extraordinary governess, but a capable wife, worthy even of a man in a position such as his. For all of the reasons mentioned, her narrative sets out to capture all the sentimental notes of a heroine in love. She suspects, instructs, tempts and is tempted as she tries to demystify these ghoulish games. Some may choose not to trust her narrative technique, but she is, nonetheless, revealing more than she intends to by saying less than she chooses to.

Evil in Gothic Novels and Fairy Tales

This literary creation possesses all the elements of the gothic novel: the damsel in distress, a young, virtuous, vulnerable heroine in mortal danger, the antagonist in the guise of the two spirits who return from beyond to wreak havoc at Bly, and the darkly romantic Byronic hero who in fairy tale endings saves the heroine. Endowed with a deep sensibility, the governess is the lonely, pensive, subjugated heroine endangered by a dominant male antagonist, in this case one of the two specters, Peter Quint. In these novels, as is the case in fairy tales, evil is omnipresent and its formulation is not put into question. It gives the protagonist an ultimatum: face your fear to save yourself or die.

Additionally, fairy tales do not doubt the plausibility of the protagonist or the heroine, nor their state of mind. Though James' bold psychological analysis brings color into the black and white world of fairy tales, so that the border dividing good and evil is not so clearly visible, it does not mean that he presented his readers with a wolf in sheep's clothing. On the contrary, with a burning desire to reach the deepest layers of the subconscious, he portrays the cavernous complexity of the human mind. His governess is not the sickly sweet, goody-two-shoes fairy tale princess, characterized by a complete lack of action. She is all too human, prone to mistakes and bad judgment, and as such, on some occasions does seem inconsistent as a narrator.

Governesses in Victorian Society

Humans are social beings, though every person is bound by his social standing. Thusly, Victorian society was dependent on faith in the stability and righteousness of the society which did not propose a democratic solution to the existential plights of the working class. The position of a governess in Victorian society was an unenviable one, because they were not considered maids, and nor were they part of the family. Finding themselves in this social limbo, they often ate in isolation. This kind of employment was one of the few legitimate ways in which single women were allowed to sustain themselves in such a society, which looked upon them with pity. The alternatives to this employment were marriage, house work, prostitution or homeless shelters. The only case in which it was considered appropriate for a woman to work was the financial destruction of a family or the death of the head of the household (i.e. the father). Resilience, patience and self-refusal were the characteristics a governess had to have in order to be successful.

But, this was certainly not enough. They were expected to be above their own social status in intellect and manners, so as to be fitting for the job of a governess. James himself praised their 'closed vessel of authority, closed against sloppy leakage' where her rigid prudishness was 'one of the ways in which authority can be conveyed' (Habegger, 2004, p. 235). His governess was to mold little Flora and her behavior, and teach her the skills which would make her an appropriate and attractive bride-to-be. Victorian parents demanded governesses who would teach their daughters sophisticated manners and foreign languages, because that is what the education of girls was based on. The ideal wife was an idle woman of expensive habits, who left her housework to the servants, her children to the governess and whose husband was wealthy enough to support their unproductive habits.

Due to their inability to properly classify their position in society, their status was always problematic. In Victorian society, women were allowed to occupy one of the three possible stations: a mother, a whore or a lunatic (Walton, 1992). As motherly figures, they were considered asexual beings, because all ladies respected in general society were chaste and asexual. Women who openly presented and offered their sexuality were considered whores and lunatics, because as such, they represented a danger to the social structure which condemned female sexuality as dirty, immoral and lacking in common sense. Since governesses represented substitutes for mothers, they held the powerful symbolic function of a chaste motherly figure. On the other hand, their youth, and, not rarely, their beauty, along with the fact that they were unmarried, transformed them into a threat to the balance and structure of the home. Thus, governesses were floating in an undefined area of Victorian society which refused to accept anything outside its strictly set grounds, out of fear of losing control over the female population.

The Female Ghost as the Governess' Other, Repressed Self

The motif of a divided personality or the *doppelganger* represents the realization of the person's other nature, the need to be and act like someone else. It is generally believed that the meeting of these two halves, the vision of one's double, represents an omen of death, as it is the case in Poe's short story "William Wilson," Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* and many others. Numerous versions of the story of twin-selves end tragically: by insanity or suicide, that is, the murder of the other. In James' novella,

this process of identification commences with a simple comparison between the governess and Miss Jessel, expressed by Mrs Grose, who claims that the previous governess was just as beautiful and young as the current one (James, 2000, p. 19). The identification becomes even more prominent when the governess, tired from all the troubles and anxiety, drops down on the final step of the staircase, exactly where, some nights prior, she had seen the specter of her accursed predecessor (James, 2000, p. 83). Their identification reaches its climax when the governess sees the ghostly apparition of Miss Jessel, sitting at her own desk, propping her head with her elbows, apparently in a state of utter shock, disbelief and sorrow (James, 2000, p. 84). Looking at her, the governess has the feeling that she is looking into a fictional mirror and is seeing her own reflection, given the fact that Miss Jessel acted led by her desires, while the governess is not allowed to do so. Thus, the governess needs to be careful where she treads, in order not to be aligned with the likes of her predecessor. So, on one hand, she has the motherly figure of Mrs. Grose and on the other, the condemned, sexualized figure of Miss Jessel, who is actually the governess herself, only having taken one step further. The governess' stoic battle to save the children's souls is actually, on a symbolic level, a desire to overcome the boundaries of the patriarchal society in which she is living.

The battle between the governess and the ghosts is in fact, the fight for possession. She wants to take control over the children, control once had by Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, and guide the children along the right path. Both the governess and Quint wish to control the children's access to knowledge, and as the novella unveils, this knowledge becomes more and more associated with sexuality and experience. What Quint is offering little Miles during their solitary walks, is the world of adult experience, unnatural sexuality and instinctive, animalistic desire. For the governess, the freedom that Quint is offering Miles is the reflection of all that is unknown, dangerous, and risky. She wishes to keep the children in a blissful state of innocence, keeping them sheltered and their souls uncorrupted by the disease of the adults, i.e. experience, for as long as possible. That is why the final surrender of Quint's name by little Miles represents her final victory over their ghoulish presence, which purifies Miles' soul.

Conclusion

The dilemma of every reader is how to maintain the ambiguity of James' novella, and simultaneously find meaning. James himself elucidates on his exorcistic procedures in his novella in his New York preface:

> It is an excursion into chaos while remaining, like Blue-Beard and Cinderella, but an anecdote- though an anecdote amplified and highly emphasized and returning upon itself; as, for that matter, Cinderella and Blue-Beard return. I need scarcely add after this that it is a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught (the "fun" of the capture of the merely witless being ever but small), the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious. (James, 1999, p. 5)

Because, as is the case with true art, *The Turn of the Screw* possesses depth and richness of meaning, which go far beyond anything that can be extracted by the minutest of excavations. It is an open and processed work, a meaningful puzzle, and every second, third, fifth reading only adds to the already existing layers of meaning. It is certainly as Louis Rubin states, 'The whole point about the puzzle is its ultimate insolubility. How skillfully he managed it… The Master indeed' (Rubin, 1964). The conventionally accepted interpretation is that it is, in essence, a fairy tale, with a happy, but, at the same time, sad ending. The ghosts return, their evil influence is more than real and the governess fights with all her might to save the children. A real fairy tale simplifies all life situations, so that no character is ambivalent, they are not both good and evil, as real humans are. Yet, James overcomes this ancient simplification and offers a complex heroine in a deep and stunningly structured work. Though her victory might seem a Pyrrhic one, she does save the children's souls. Flora is removed from the wicked influence of Bly and Miles' little heart stopped beating in the arms of his savior. She did not save his body, but she saved his immortal soul and, as such, humanly fragile, she is resolutely standing at the edge of an abyss out of which she managed to root out evil.

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