

The Mirror of Innocence in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." (1 Cor. 13.12)

It might seem odd to begin a paper on Henry James with a quotation from the Bible, but I do hope that by the conclusion of this essay, the reader will recognise how this passage encapsulates the theme of my analysis. While the mirror appears both literally and figuratively in many literary works—such as Shakespeare's plays, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to name a few—I have chosen to begin with a biblical quotation due to its relevance to the biblical allegories present in *The Turn of the Screw*, which I will discuss later in my paper, and because the passage poses a question that intrigued me upon encountering the novella: the difference between knowing and interpreting.

Paul describes human knowledge of God and His ways as incomplete, likening it to mere reflections. God as an all-knowing entity invites a possible parallel with writers. Henry James's writing, especially his novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, is often praised for the narrative technique he uses and the story's ambiguity. Over the years it has captivated both readers and critics and became one of his most analysed works.

However, despite James's deliberate use of ambiguity, critics often focus on a single interpretation, leaving little room for exploring its alternatives. Katalin G. Kállay calls attention to this tendency. Her close reading of the novella examines its various themes through the motif of the screw. This indicates a need to understand the various perceptions of key themes in criticism and a need for a central motif. In the present paper, I propose to treat the motif of the mirror as one that traverses and interlinks the complex ideas of innocence, corruption, authority, and perception.

As Fred Kaplan writes in the introduction to *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories* by Henry James (Signet Classic edition), the complexity of the first-person narration and the effect of ambiguity allow for different critical approaches. This makes it possible to examine the work through Freudian, psychoanalytic, feminist, and materialist perspectives, among others (Kaplan xi). Since James is a master of what is worth leaving unsaid, the reader is confronted with numerous questions that shape interpretation, such as what is "real" and what is "unreal." Perhaps because it permits multiple interpretations, the novella is widely included in high school and university curricula.

Several multidisciplinary approaches—literary, psychoanalytic, and philosophical—shed light on the diverse ways readers interpret *The Turn of the Screw*. However, these perspectives often appear fragmented, coming across as a collection of disparate assertions rather than unified by a cohesive motif. This fragmentation highlights the need for a more focused in-depth study to bridge these interpretations. For me, the motif of the mirror resolved the confusion caused by the absence of a missing connection.

Even though a mirror as a physical object appears only once in *The Turn of the Screw*, there are references to window glasses and the lake as reflective surfaces. This might seem a minor detail at first glance, however, the mirror's primary purpose is to show a clear reflection, while reflective surfaces might be distorted by their function. For example, through the window glass, the observer can look at the outside world. The reflection shows a fragmented or indirect view. The difference is so important, that the translator of Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's book, titled *The Mirror: A History* included a note stressing the difference between glace and mirror. (Melchior-Bonnet)

By window glasses, I am referring to the part where the governess sees herself in for the first time head to toe, and another time she notices Quint looking at her from the other side of the window. (James 141-43) This scene is vital because it alludes to the fact that the governess and Quint are on opposite sides, which also implies that they may be read as doubles. However, a parallel between the governess and Miss Jessel on the one hand, and Quint and the children's uncle on the other, would be more accurate in my opinion. The lake scene is in chapter twenty, where Flora stands by the lake, seemingly alone; however, the governess believes Flora is with Miss Jessel's ghost. (James 212-14) These three moments in the narrative will play a central role in my interpretation as they demonstrate how the mirror motif introduces concepts that support multiple interpretations within the same narrative. For example, one concept closely connected to the mirror motif is perception, which directly affects one of my main themes: innocence as it is viewed through the lens of different perspectives. This link suggests that innocence can be relative, shaped by the observer's point of view.

Therefore, I firmly believe that the mirror is one the most important motifs, if not *the* most important motif of James's novella due to its symbolic meaning. It features conceptual relations such as reflection and distortion that enrich the reading of the work while simultaneously creating dichotomies (objective vs. subjective, fiction vs. reality, innocence vs. corruption, dominance vs. submission)—especially as seen through the lens of the governess's unreliable narration.

In my paper, I intend to examine the narration, the connection between the mirror and the theme of innocence—and how it changes depending on the observer—the duality of innocence and corruption, and the relationship between reality and fiction through distortion. I aim to develop the various concepts through the three scenes mentioned above, thereby reinforcing my argument that the mirror motif serves as the element that connects the text's contrasting concepts and ideas.

In my essay, I use the term *mirror motif* primarily to refer to the symbolic, ambiguous boundary that separates perception from objective reality. It serves as a metaphor for the visible and the invisible, as well as for visibility itself. The mirror is not merely a passive duplication in the text; it also mirrors inner fears, desires, and (often internal) conflicts. As a literary device, the mirror challenges the credibility of narration and invites questions—such as those surrounding innocence and corruption—because, when approached from different angles, the mirror presents varying images.

By unreliability, I not only mean the questionable mental state of the governess and her constant struggle to differentiate reality from her imagination, but also the prologue, which is supposed to serve as a frame and yet is unfinished. If we compare it to a mirror, which also has frames and limits, the omission of an outro adds a layer of anxiety for the reader due to the lack of symmetry. (Bellringer 99-100)

We, as readers, never return to the Christmas party. Just as a broken mirror evokes a sense of foreboding and unease in a superstitious person, the open-ended conclusion of the story leaves readers with a similar sense of disquiet. Furthermore, there is no final revelation about the connection between the governess in the story and the one from whom Douglas obtained the manuscript. Was she commemorating her own dark past or did the author of the manuscript personally know the governess? Or perhaps—what I find the most intriguing possibility—the story might be entirely fictional, merely a written account of a ghost story whose true horror comes alive through the imagination of its readers.

The narrative unevenness in *The Turn of the Screw* characterises not only the frame of the novella but also the power dynamics, narration, and morality, which all point to a more complex and unorthodox approach from the writer. The imbalance allows a multifaceted interpretation of the work while emphasising the limitations of the governess's perspective. Henry James's choice to reveal less while suggesting more intentionally creates an ambiguous and unsettling atmosphere. He also encourages readers to question the reliability of the governess and the truth behind her retellings of events. (Beidler 45)

1. “the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot”

The large, impressive room, one of the best in the house, the great state bed, as I almost felt it, the full, figured draperies, the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot, all struck me — like the extraordinary charm of my small charge — as so many things thrown in. (Chapter I, 291)

1.1. Innocence

The first scene I need to focus on is the one where the governess sees herself in a full-length mirror for the first time in her life. The first concept I need to explore is innocence. What do we consider innocence, and does innocence even exist? To address this question, we first need to examine what was considered innocence in the late Victorian era. This is necessary to understand the duality present here. The sense of guilt stemming from original sin, characteristic of Puritanism, was still prevalent, while the Romantic perspective, which regarded children as inherently innocent, also persisted.

These images of innocent and natural childhood did not enjoy a wholesale and uncontested triumph. The challenge to them came from three directions. First, the Puritan emphasis on original sin remained alive. It made adults anxious about children, an anxiety they projected onto the children themselves... This legacy from the Puritans was reinforced by the Evangelical revival at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1799 the Evangelical Magazine advised parents to teach their children that ‘they are sinful polluted creatures’, and in the same year Hannah More, one of the leading figures in the Evangelical revival, warned against the prevalence of treating children as if they were innocent. (Cunningham 51-53)

Robert P. Falk's article, "Henry James and the 'Age of Innocence'," contextualises the concept of innocence and explains the societal values and moral codes of the late 19th century.

"James's response, therefore, to the restraints of Puritanism and propriety was his method of ambiguity and suggestion. He was quite aware of the tendency of English and American fiction to be "shy," addressed as it was largely to young people. But, unlike Howells, he criticized the hypocrisy which allowed a great difference "between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know." (Falk,180)

This duality may contribute to the varying interpretations of the story, depending on the perspective. On one hand, if no one is truly innocent, Miles and Flora could be consciously trying to drive the governess to madness. On the other hand, if the children are innocent, it is the governess who corrupts them.

1.2. Identity

Another rather broad concept is identity, which contains many related ideas. Probably the most interesting question is one about self-definition and self-recognition, whereby Lacan and his mirror stage theory becomes especially relevant. Although Lacan's theory is based primarily on observation of 18-month-old children, I believe it can be relevant to the interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. According to Lacan, the self-image of the individual, or the identity of the "I", is originally not internal but rather constructed from the outside, usually in some form of distorted or idealized manner. The governess acts as a sort of mirror reflecting the children's innocence and their assumed corruption.

Additionally, it is essential to note that the governess "confronts" Miles with Quint's figure. If we consider the previously mentioned notion of possession or influence, this confrontation becomes a form of suffering for Miles, and not merely on a physical level. Assuming that Quint influenced him without his awareness, the realization of both self-awareness and its absence could culminate in a traumatic experience for him.

Just as 18-month-old children experience the conflict between their imagined autonomy and the reality of their confinement, as outlined in Lacan's mirror stage theory, Miles too simultaneously embodies someone else and yet is not himself. Naturally, this would only be true if there were a real connection between the figures of Quint and Miles. The question also arises whether, just as with children, self-awareness and confrontation are inevitable developmental stages. If this developmental process does not apply to Miles, then Quint is truly the embodiment of the governess's fears, which she projects, and the constricting embrace that likely leads to Miles's death as the governess confronts the fact that the two images in her head do not match.

1.2.1. Corruption

After innocence, I also need to address the concept of corruption. In *The Turn of the Screw*, corruption could be described as a state of moral and psychological decline that both the characters and their surroundings at Bly undergo. This degradation presents itself in the ghostly forms of Quint and Miss Jessel, whose interaction with the children, Miles and Flora, personifies a passage from innocence to moral and spiritual deterioration. Corruption within the novella functions at a number of levels, through the perversion of innocence—especially of the children—the blurring of boundaries between life and death, and in destabilising effects in the way the governess perceives reality. The governess's obsession with innocence and corruption seems to overwrite any other characteristics. It is almost as if the children's whole identity was defined by it.

The unreliability of the governess is most evident in how she changes due to her anxiety and how easily she is swayed by her insecurities. It is important to note, however, that the governess is young, and she lacks experience (being a governess at Bly is her first job). Her employer asked her not to contact him, so in a sense she is abandoned by her "master." She probably must rely on preconceptions because she lacks experience. (Bellringer 102) In some ways, because of her young age, she is still in the process of transitioning from being a child to being an adult.

1.2.2. Femininity

At this point, I would like to focus on two concepts related to identity: one is femininity, and the other is the already-mentioned authority. The former may be important because, as a Victorian heroine, the governess can be seen as an example of a woman suffering from sexual frustration due to restraint, which can lead to insanity (Falk 173).

Her infatuation of her employer might be partially the result of the time, as marriage was seen as the central place in the conception of womanhood.

Marriage was seen as woman's natural and expected role: it satisfied her instinctual needs, preserved the species, provided appropriate duties, and protected her from the shocks and dangers of the rude, competitive world. In the privacy of the home, her finer instincts—sensitivity, self-sacrifice, innate purity—could have free play. Women had to be kept safe at home; their perfect compliance, obedience, innocence, and refinement would make them too easy to victimize in the competitive public world. (Mitchell 267)

Societal expectations likely placed immense pressure on women, and in the case of the governess, her isolation and lack of suitors might have made her more prone to sexual frustrations.

Katalin G. Kállay suggests that the governess's idealised male figure may be broken down into three people. (Kállay 149-150) The uncle embodies the unattainable gentleman, Miles represents innocence, and Quint symbolises masculine sexuality. This possible interpretation also highlights that the constructed images are distorted and do not objectively reflect the individuals.

Additionally, the quotation highlights that women were expected to be innocent and obedient, which might explain her fear of corruption and constant need to protect the children.

1.3. Authority

My claims can be supported by the governess's account of her experience when she is given one of the house's larger, more impressive rooms, yet she feels small within it. On the one hand, this may reflect the modest financial circumstances in which she grew up, and on the other, it can show that despite the authority her position entails, she does not feel at home and is lost in the role. Let me quote the passage again:

I slept little that night—I was too much excited; and this astonished me, too, I recollect, remained with me, adding to my sense of the liberality with which I was treated. The large, impressive room, one of the best in the house, the great state bed, as I almost felt it, the full, figured draperies, the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot, all struck me—like the extraordinary charm of my small charge—as so many things thrown in. (James 291)

This also raises the question of whether she has the necessary knowledge to be considered as an authority figure. Authority itself, as a concept, will appear several times in my paper because I believe the link between the mirror and the idea of innocence can change depending on who wields the power. For example, the governess is supposed to govern, yet she has to rely on her only source of information and guidance: Mrs. Grose. The governess often bombards Mrs. Grose with her suspicions and theories. There are times when it seems that while Mrs. Grose plays along with her theories by not openly contradicting the governess, she is sceptical and questions the governess's mental state. Their dynamic is very interesting, as it can be approached in different ways. On the one hand, Mrs. Grose might go along with the theories because she is not in a position as a housekeeper to question the governess; there might be an unsaid hierarchy. On the other hand, Mrs. Grose can act as a silent observer, an authority figure, waiting for concrete evidence. Even though Mrs. Grose doesn't seem to believe in the governess's sightings, in my opinion, the psychological changes taking place in her are most noticeable in her relationship with Miles and Flora.

2. "a person on the other side of the window"

The day was gray enough, but the afternoon light still lingered, and it enabled me, on crossing the threshold, not only to recognize, on a chair near the wide window, then closed, the articles I wanted, but to become aware of a person on the other side of the window and looking straight in. One step into the room had sufficed; my vision was instantaneous; it was all there. The person looking straight in was the person who had already appeared to me. (James, Chapter IV, 308)

2.1. Reflection, perception and distortion

I wish to move on to the concepts of reflection and perception, focusing on the next 'reflection' in the mirror. While reflection is objective, perception is subjective. How we see others, or how they see us, rarely aligns. Therefore, I would like to examine the work from this perspective as well.

2.1.1. Perception: child characters as moral mirrors

One way to approach the mirror motif is to look at the child characters as moral mirrors. We learn about Flora and Miles's characters through the eyes of the governess, and we inspect their behaviour through her ethical standards. The first time she meets the children she is taken aback by their beauty. She is still captivated by Miles's beauty and even more so by the idealised image of him as someone who knows nothing of the world but love, embodying an idolised concept of innocence¹, however, as the novella progresses, she grows increasingly wary of Miles, questioning whether his appearance blinds her to his wrongdoings. Miles is the character who defies the duality of corruption and innocence the best. While he outwardly embodies the perfect child, he also becomes the vessel of evil for the governess.

2.1.2. Distortion

The confrontation with Peter Quint at the end of the novella leads to Miles's death. The reader is not offered an explanation as to why Miles's heart stops, so it raises the question of whether the confrontation itself may have played a role or whether the governess's violence caused the death. If the answer is closer to the former, another question is whether we consider Miles and Quint separate entities that coexist within the same body, or did Peter fully take control over Miles? The latter raises additional questions such as how do we differentiate between the actions of Miles and Quint; who influenced whom? If they become one entity, trying to separate

them may have been the very cause of the tragedy. (Reed 108-109) Lacanian theory also adds another layer to this, since the governess forces the child to face what she perceives as Quint's ghost—a confrontation that results in unresolvable trauma and ultimately leads to his death. Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage" suggests that the formation of identity is a fragmented process, where the self is initially formed through an external image—often idealized or distorted. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess forces Miles to confront what she perceives as Quint's ghost, which becomes a traumatic confrontation with a distorted version of himself. According to Lacanian theory, this forces Miles to face the "mirror" of his own divided self, where his identity is not whole or unified, but broken into conflicting parts (Miles and Quint). The result is a psychological rupture, where the self that Miles knows and the self that the governess forces him to see are irreconcilable. This trauma, the inability to reconcile the conflicting identities, may be what leads to his death, as it reflects a deeper rupture within his sense of self.

Taking into account Henry James's interest in the occult, I would not dismiss the possibility that Quint tried to corrupt Miles not only mentally but in other ways as well. If Quint is not a ghost but a demon, and if we base this on Miles's final words—which, incidentally, are not explicitly attributed to anyone—then even physical possession could be considered. (This is, in fact, a possibility raised by the Netflix retelling of the story, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, which combines elements from several of James's works.²) Furthermore, Fred Kaplan refers to an interpretation of their relationship that suggests a homosexual undertone. In this sense, the term "vessel" (Kaplan, Introduction, X-XII) could be interpreted as possession, or Quint's dominant position suppressing or shaping the boy according to his expectations. Additionally, James's interest in the occult is well-documented, it is the focus of, for example, Martha Banta's book titled *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension*. James's interest in such topics suggests that the supernatural elements in his works, such as the characters of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel as ghosts, may be more than mere figments of the governess's imagination.

2.1.2.1. Knowledge: A Source of Distortion of the Ideal

The governess also suspects that Flora knows more about the supernatural than she is willing to tell her and conceals her knowledge. Knowledge and its possession to the question of authority. The governess convinces herself that she is protecting the children by keeping information from them:

² The script seems to be a combination of adaptations of Henry James's work. For example, characters from the short story titled "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" also appear in it and interact with characters from *The Turn of the Screw*.

I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most loveable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep constant ache of one's own engaged affection. We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me, and I—well, I had them. It was in short a magnificent chance. This chance presented itself to me in an image richly material. I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would. (James 318)

When the governess learns about the children's knowledge, which she interprets as their corruption, she is horrified:

'They know—it's too monstrous: they know, they know!' (James 320)

If the children know about ghosts, then they are corrupted, which goes against the governess's ideals and puts a strain on their relationship. Moreover, as a governess, her duty is to educate and protect her pupils, which she failed to do if they have achieved this forbidden knowledge. Furthermore, if the children had the knowledge and remained silent, effectively keeping secrets from her, then the angelic image morphed into a manipulative one.

While her need to protect them could be seen as something positive — perhaps even maternal instinct — the way she deliberately withholds information might be considered indirect lying. As a governess, she is a guiding figure, a role model in a sense, and yet she is unstable and unreliable. The children's situation is already unique: they are orphans; their guardian, their uncle, has abandoned them in every sense but financially; their previous governess, Miss Jessel, died under mysterious circumstances, leaving them vulnerable. What the children and the governess lack is emotional stability.

2.1.3. Attention

Children tend to pay attention to their surroundings and learn about the world by mimicking or mirroring others. Ágnes Zsófia Kovács examines Henry James's works on childhood development through the lens of Sebastian Watzl's three major attitudes toward defining attention: the intuitive, the reductionist, and the anti-reductionist perspectives.

Firstly, it is possible to approach attention as a foregrounding selective method in the emergence of the Jamesian artist — this falls into the category of the intuitive understanding of attention, Watzl's first group. By contrast, it is impossible to adopt a reductive model as I cannot possibly perform an empirical study about sub-personal faculties of the brain connected to attention, which would belong to Watzl's second group. Finally, it would be more attractive to adopt a non-reductionist model that claims attention has a function on the level of the person either as a problem-solving device, as a rationalizing device, as a structuring device. (Kovács 230)

While Watzl's theory can be applied to Miles and Flora, I believe it is more significant in connection with the governess. She is primarily intuitive when she tries to understand

what is happening around her, interpreting the events as supernatural. Her intuition is not based on hard evidence but on her emotional responses and gut feelings, which drive her to protect the children and solve the mystery she believes is unfolding. The novella doesn't give a definite answer as to whether she is mentally unstable, hallucinates, or is seeing actual ghosts, but her main focus is to solve the problems, make sense of the children's behaviour, and protect them.

2.1.4. Interpretation

Despite this, the children do not receive proper guidance, and thus the concepts of innocence and corruption likely become blurred in their minds. Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are immoral, yet they previously filled a sort of father-and-mother role in their life. It is also important to note that Flora's relationship with the governess changes over time—somehow, her earlier attachment is replaced by hysterical revulsion. If we consider the children corrupted, Flora's silence may simultaneously signify loyalty toward Quint and Ms Jessel and a desire to protect the governess. However, it is crucial to note that Flora never confirms seeing either of them. More importantly, she becomes hysterical when she realises that Mrs Grose believes her and does not see anything either.

I've said it already—she was literally, she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly. '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 launched 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.

(James 375)

This section offers various possible interpretations. On the one hand, the governess tries to force a confession of what she believes to be the truth from Flora, thus seeking to justify her previous claims. On the other hand, Flora, who was once in a protected position, now becomes either accused or, at the very least, complicit.

There are several scenes in the novella that suggest intentional mischief on the part of the children, such as when Flora escapes into the garden or Miles takes the letter intended for their uncle. However, in my opinion, the most significant of these "pranks" is when Miles escapes to show that "he can be bad." I think this act goes beyond acting up or trying to attract attention;

rather, it shows that Miles wishes for control or autonomy, which again connects to the theme of innocence and authority:

He literally bloomed so from this exploit that he could afford radiantly to assent. 'How otherwise should I have been bad enough?' he asked. Then, after another embrace, the incident and our interview closed on my recognition of all the reserves of goodness that, for his joke, he had been able to draw upon. (James 343)

The quoted text makes me ponder over the motives of Miles. Why does he want to show that he can be bad? If one says that they can be bad enough, it implies that this is not their natural state and that they want to change as a result of something or someone's influence. Perhaps the most obvious candidate could be Peter Quint and his corrupting influence.

2.1.4.1. Biblical allusions

It can also be said that the governess forces Miles and Flora to see her "truth". This is what Shoshana Felman, following Lacan, calls "subjects pressured to know." The governess's plan with Miles is to force a confession out of him, and because of this, the scene could even have a religious reading, as confession is what leads to purification in the Christian tradition. (Felman 202-203)

Another biblical reference could be the way the governess holds Miles, which reminds me of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which depicts the scene when Mary holds Jesus after he was taken down the cross. The position the governess takes is more similar to a mother's than a lover's, which seems to go against the possibility of Miles representing repressed sexual desires.

But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day. With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion, but at the end of a minute I began to feel what I truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped. (James 236)

Another, more direct Biblical reference is David playing the harp for Saul in Chapter 18. In the Biblical story, David's harp playing brings relief to Saul, who is being tormented by an evil spirit. This parallel can be read in several ways. Miles can be likened to David, while the governess to Saul. Echoing the Biblical account, Miles's performance can almost be read as an attempt to ease the governess's escalating anxiety. Talent, specifically musical talent, can be considered God-given, which circles back to the idea of innocence.

On the other hand, if we address the tormented soul, again we face the question of who is overtaken—the governess or Miles—by an evil spirit. Such a lens of salvation and corruption

lends even more complexity to the dynamic between them. One becomes the saviour, while the other is the fallen figure but which one plays which role depends entirely upon our judgment regarding innocence. This allusion, much like the novella itself, confronts the readers with ambiguity in a manner that underlines the ebb and flow of power relations and moral ambiguities that define this text.

The way the adult characters view the children largely determines how the reader perceives them. The idealised image of the governess is just as harmful as viewing the children as tools to achieve one's own goals (as seen with Quint). The complexity of the characters is precisely the fact that we perceive that the images created about them are inaccurate, they may not accurately represent the children's true natures.

2.1.4.2. Fiction vs. reality

I have previously mentioned that I consider the beginning of the story as part of an unfinished frame. A story appears within a story, with the primary one being the Christmas party that opens the narrative. If the main story is the party, which is fragmented and incomplete, there should be some clarifications: did the governess, who gave the text to Douglas, simply come up with the story? Could she be the governess of Bly? Either way, completing the frame would take away from the story's overall impact. Leaving it open-ended seems much more logical. Can there be real elements in the story, and if so, where does fiction end and reality begin?

If the governess who gave the story to Douglas were the same governess who served at Bly, we might question her credibility less. Especially, because Douglas refers to her as "the most agreeable woman [...] in her position." (James 285) Katalin G. Kállay points out that this sentence can be interpreted sarcastically depending on how we take the story. (Kállay 147) Among other things, it is the ambiguity that sets *The Turn of the Screw* apart from other stories. The fact that we see the events through the governess's eyes both enhances our understanding—through her observations and assumptions—and limits it, as we never learn the objective truth. In narrative theory this is called focalization, a term coined by Genette and the spectrum of focalization ranges from more restricted (paralipsis) to less restricted (paralepsis). (Edmiston 741)

The moment we begin to doubt the narrator herself (which can differ from person to person), viewing her as unreliable opens up broader interpretations, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps, which makes the story also an interesting text for reader-response theory.

Are the ghosts real? Is the governess mad? These two choices had long been considered mutually exclusive: if the ghosts are real, then governess is sane; if she is mad, then the ghosts are mere figments of her imagination.

(qtd. In Womack 213)

The reader never gets a definite answer to these questions, and I believe that this type of freedom makes the work stand out even more. With each rereading, the reader can find more elements to depict and more possible readings to consider.

Katalin G. Kállay suggests that what frightens the governess most is the children's innocence, which reveals her role as a saviour to be the opposite. If we agree with such a reading, that means that the reader fills the unspoken parts with their own "twisted" version. (Kállay 150-151). This is in line with Felman's argument about the reader's necessary involvement:

"the most scandalous thing about this story is that we are forced to participate in the scandal, that the reader's innocence cannot remain intact: there is no such thing as an innocent reader of this text" (Felman 144)

2.1.4.3. Master and servant

Shoshana Felman also mentions sexuality since screw also means intercourse in American slang. She interprets the mast as a phallic symbol. She also connects the concepts of mast and master and points out that Miles himself is the little Master. (Felman 214-15)

This interpretation reminds me of Hegel's master and slave (or servant) dialectic. Both parties try to identify and find their counterparts, and in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, I think the original master is the uncle, but due to his absence, Miles "steps up" and takes over the role.

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (Hegel 111)

In the novella, this dynamic plays out in the shifting roles between the governess, the children, and the unseen authority of the uncle. The "twist" in the title may thus refer to the manner in which roles shift in the novella: how the governess, starting off as an innocent, almost naive figure, is pressed toward madness by the pressure of events. This twist can also be found in the narration, the unfinished frame, and the switches of focalization. In addition, turning the screw can indicate pressure. The governess is under constant pressure, as she has no support, so insanity or mental instability can stem from the lack of a "safety net." The twist can also appear depending on how the reader interprets the story.

My argument is that the mirror motif ties together themes of morality, perception, and fiction. The open ending allows the reader to become part of the mirror; their interpretations shape the image they form regarding the overall theme and even the genre. Is it a ghost story? (Henry James does refer to it as such; Kaplan 475) Or is it a psychological thriller? These possibilities vary from person to person.

3."on the other side of Sea of Azof, we had an interested spectator"

We were on the edge of the lake, and, as we had lately begun geography, the lake was the Sea of Azof. Suddenly, in these circumstances, I became aware that, on the other side of the Sea of Azof, we had an interested spectator. The way this knowledge gathered in me was the strangest thing in the world — the strangest, that is, except the very much stranger in which it quickly merged itself. I had sat down with a piece of work — for I was something or other that could sit — on the old stone bench which overlooked the pond; and in this position I began to take in with certitude, and yet without direct vision, the presence, at a distance, of a third person. (James, Chapter VI, 319)

3.1. The Others and the Doubles

Miles joins the *Others* (Peter Quint and Miss Jessel), to use the Freudian term. Miles's character is the most interesting for me since he can be read as an Other and a *Double*. As I have previously implied, he may serve as a 'replacement' for the absent uncle, but he could also be considered a double in the sense that the governess projects her own fears, desires, and beliefs onto him. During their first meeting, the governess is struck by Miles's beauty and charm; he embodies what she believes is innocence. She fears his knowledge and dark power over her, which can be interpreted as a sexual threat.

C.G. Jung states that “neuroses are the results of the person’s failure to confront and to accept some archetypal component of the unconscious. Instead of assimilating this unconscious element to their consciousness, neurotic individuals persist in projecting it upon some other person...” (Guerin, 169.) While the projection onto Miles (and Flora) might be signs of a neurosis, the parallel between Miss Jessel and the governess is uncanny, a clear connection to the concept of a double:

Seated at my own table in clear noonday light I saw a person (...) Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me; but even as I fixed and, for memory, secured it, the awful image passed away. Dark as midnight in her black dress her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. While these instants lasted, indeed, I had the extraordinary chill of feeling that it was I who was the intruder. It was as a wild protest against it that, I actually addressing her — “You terrible, miserable woman!” — I heard myself break into a sound that, by the open door, rang through the long passage and the empty house. She looked at me as if she heard me, but I had recovered myself and cleared the air. There was nothing in the room the next minute but the sunshine and a sense that I must stay. (James, 357-358)

While in the most part, Miss Jessel seems to embody the governess’s repressed desires, this scene forces her to face their consequences. The female characters’ lives appear parallel in many ways: both women shared the same profession, worked for the same employer, lived in the same house, and are described as young and beautiful. However, while the governess repressed her desires, Miss Jessel acted on them, gaining knowledge and freedom in ways the governess did not allow herself. After her death, Miss Jessel appears pale and in black clothes, mourning.

The suicide of Miss Jessel is implied in the novella; however, what we learn about her is all through gossip and assumptions. In a way, the governess reads between the lines of the stories she hears about Miss Jessel, almost taking a reader-writer role.

3.2. Redefining innocence

One argument that Shoshana Felman makes in her essay is that there is no such thing as an innocent reader. I would extend this idea further and argue that it is not only readers who are influenced by their own moral standards and biases but scholars are no exceptions either, shaped by the frameworks of earlier literary criticism.

Shoshana Felman suggests that innocence in the novella is a construct that reflects the reader's interpretations, questioning the children's innocent or corrupted state. The basis of her argument is the governess's unreliability as a narrator. However, the framework of her analysis is Edmund

Wilson's "Freudian reading" of *The Turn of the Screw*. The study fails to address how the title already shows signs of bias. "Henry James: Madness and the Risks of Practice (Turning the Screw of Interpretation)," already shows that she has decided on the governess's madness, even though this text is often highlighted among others due to its ambiguity on many aspects—some that Felman discusses, like how the reader is left with questions and those can lead them to madness. However, Freud's theory on the uncanny (Das Unheimliche) could be applied to the children and not just the governess or the ghosts. She never offers the possibility that the children deliberately try to drive the governess mad, even when it would be a fitting idea that would still fit the title. Of course, her main focus is psychoanalysis and how storytelling has psychological dimensions that might justify the limitations, but this approach has a risk of limiting the reading itself. (Felman 141-149) With each rereading, the reader can find more elements to depict and more possible readings to consider.

This supports the notion that the complexity of the theme and how innocence in the novella appears as both a virtue and a source of corruption, requires the reader to continually reassess their understanding of the characters and the unfolding events. The reader's role is crucial since they question both the concept of innocence and the reliability of the narrator, which suggests that the narrative technique made boundaries between the moral categories relevant beyond the novella's historical context. (Falk 1952) However, what is not yet understood is the precise nature of the children's agency, since the main focus is usually the governess instead of them. Another research gap in the critics' approach is societal gender norms, particularly the uncle's abandonment. Even though a feminist reading might offer a new insight into the moral questions, especially if we consider Hegel's master and slave theory (Hegel 1977), which could provide new insights into how innocence is constructed and contested in the novella.

In conclusion, *The Turn of the Screw* makes use of the mirror motif with great critical effect in order to traverse and interlink the complex ideas of innocence, corruption, authority, and perception. Through the framing device of unreliable narration from the governess, the reader is led into a tale that is as much about what is seen as it is about what is unseen, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. The novella's open-endedness forces any reader into confrontation with their own interpretation and prejudices, making them an active agent in meaning making. It is this ambiguity and the deliberate avoidance of closure that leaves many issues—like the broken frame of a mirror—unfinished, and the novella, perforce, a matter of continuous debate and discussion—continuous, because every new reader would have given it a different shape. Leaving the questions of the ghosts' existence and the governess's sanity open, James manages to create an experience that is hauntingly reflective even long after the actual text is finished and challenges our presumptions about truth, authority, and the very nature of

innocence. It is in the play of ambiguity and reflectiveness that *The Turn of the Screw* is ultimately secured as an ageless psychological and gothic masterpiece—one whose perceptions continue, with each encounter, to "turn the screw."

Bibliography

Beidler, Peter G., editor. *Henry James: The Turn of the Screw: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Macmillan Education, 1992.

Bellringer, Alan W. *Modern Novelists: Henry James*. St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Cunningham, Hugh. *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2021.

Edmiston, William F. "Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of the Theory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1989, pp. 729–44. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772808>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2024.

Falk, Robert P. "Henry James and the 'Age of Innocence.'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 7, no. 3, University of California Press, Dec. 1952, pp. 171–88.

Felman, Shoshana. "Henry James: Madness and the Risks of Practice (Turning the Screw of Interpretation)." *Writing and Madness: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, Stanford University Press, 2003.

Guerin, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 1992.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977.

James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*. Signet Classics, 2007.

Kállay, G. Katalin. *Going Home through Seven Paths to Nowhere: Reading Short Stories by Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and James*. Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003.

Kaplan, Frank. Introduction. *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*, by Henry James, Signet Classics, 2007, pp. vii-xiv. James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*. Edited by T. J. Lustig, Oxford UP, 1992.

Kaplan, Fred. *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius: A Biography*. William Morrow, 1992.

Killoran, Helen. "The Governess, Mrs. Grose and 'The Poison of an Influence' in 'The Turn of the Screw.'" *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1993, pp. 13–24.

Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. "Forms of Attention in Henry James's Texts About Childhood Development." *The Arts of Attention*, edited by Katalin G. Kállay et al., Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary; L'Harmattan, 2016, pp. 229–36.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Bruce Fink, Routledge, 2001, pp. 16–21.

Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine. *The Mirror: A History*. Translated by Katharine H. Jewett, Routledge, 2014.

Mitchell, Sally. *Daily Life in Victorian England*. 2nd ed., Greenwood Press, 2009.

Reed, Kimberly C. "The Abysses of Silence in *The Turn of the Screw*." *A Companion to Henry James*, edited by Greg W. Zacharias, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Robbins, Ruth. "The Seasoned Spirit of the Cunning Reader: The Textual Subversions of *The Turn of the Screw* in Victorian Literary Cultures." *Studies in Textual Subversion*, edited by Kenneth Womack and James M. Decker, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016.

The Holy Bible. New King James Version, Thomas Nelson, 1982.