

Critical Essay Sample

The Unseen: Ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw*

The Turn of the Screw tells the story of a governess who takes a job at Bly. Shortly after arriving, she begins seeing apparitions that she believes are affecting the children in strange ways. Established as the narrator early in the piece, the governess is arguably unreliable. The governess' position as narrator and the deliberately vague nature of the text have fueled numerous conflicting views of *The Turn of Screw* and ultimately contribute to the story's greatest strength – ambiguity.

It is often stated that the governess is an unreliable narrator. Douglas tells us as much when, responding to his companion's request for further information, he explains, "The story *won't* tell...not in any literal vulgar way" (James 147). The reader should remain unsure about the events of the story. This is a deliberate choice that gives *The Turn of the Screw* more longevity than other American ghost stories. The governess' position as narrator opens numerous avenues for interpretation and analysis. In his article "Cinematic Ambiguity: James's *The Turn of the Screw* and Clayton's *The Innocents*," James W. Palmer explains that the persistent debate surrounding the governess and her narrative "has certainly revealed the implicit ambiguity" (198).

Ambiguity is a major aspect of the story due to the uncertainty surrounding the events as the governess relates them. There is no way to know if the governess is really seeing the apparitions. Perhaps she is. Or perhaps they are simply hallucinations brought on by her slowly declining mental state. We can only understand that she truly believes she is seeing ghosts. The ambiguity of the ghosts provides fertile ground for further interpretations to grow.

The governess is visited by two apparitions who she believes are the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, but her recollection of the events leaves much to the imagination. In recalling her third ghostly visitation the governess describes “a figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful - with such an air also, and such a face!” (James 182). This only confirms that the governess saw another person - a woman. The phrases “unmistakable horror and evil” and “such a face” tell the reader nothing definitive.

This linguistic ambiguity is a key element of *The Turn of the Screw*, and one that encourages endless readings and interpretations. In their article “Ghostly Ambiguity: Presuppositional Constructions in *The Turn of the Screw*,” Helen Aristar Dry and Susan Kucinkas explain that James utilizes “presuppositional constructions: syntactic structures that, in normal conversations, evoke a type of pragmatic inference difficult either to verify or to challenge” (71). This style keeps things deliberately vague, adding to the ambiguity of an already uncertain narrative and giving scholars further fuel for varying analyses.

The Turn of the Screw is a classic piece in the American canon and a strong example of a different approach to the traditional ghost story, one that remains largely ambiguous. This is, undoubtedly, its strength. This ambiguity allows for an endless number of interpretations and critical analyses, and it only added to be the governess’ position as the narrator and her potential unreliability.

Works Cited

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