

The role of quint and jessel in henry james' "the turn of the screw"



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Peter Quint and Miss Jessel symbolize the indistinguishable nature of both the governess and Miles's sexuality in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Whether or not these ghosts actually exist in the literal sense, Quint's presence evokes what could be construed as sexual desires in the governess while also reminding her of her social status. Similarly, Quint forces the reader to question Miles's sexuality because of the implication that their past relationship was of a sexual nature. Miss Jessel, on the other hand, serves as the governess's only reminder of the wickedness of her desire for a sexual self and ultimately, prevents her from acting upon those desires. These developments emphasize the mysteriousness of the connection between Miles and the governess and lead to a deeper sense of dismay about the true nature of their bond. Although *The Turn of the Screw* begins in a rather somber mood with Douglas's tale, it quickly shifts tones during the telling of the governess's first meeting with the wealthy uncle. This scene makes it clear that the governess places the uncle on a pedestal and that she desperately wants to be in such a privileged position herself. Her attraction for him quickly moves beyond that of an employee to one that nears sexual desire. She even describes the "moment [when] he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded" (James 29). While this is only the introduction to the piece, her attraction to the uncle plays an enormous role in the subsequent encounters with Quint, a former house worker who was known to parade around in the master's clothes. In fact, at the moment when she first sees Quint's alleged ghost, she is fantasizing about meeting the uncle and is nearly fooled by the sight of Quint in the master's clothes. She proclaims "he did stand there," as though the man whom she spotted was truly the uncle. However, upon discovery of the man's true identity, she

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states that “ my second [reaction] was a violent perception of the mistake of my first: the man who met my eyes was not the person I had precipitately supposed” (James 39). She is initially disappointed that she meets Quint rather than the uncle, but soon develops a growing desire to encounter the ghost. This misplaced longing to meet Quint is, however, nothing more than a projection of the governess’s desire for the wealthy uncle rather than true attraction to Quint. While she claims that she “ confidently [hurries] to meet” Quint, her enthusiasm is only the result of her misplaced attraction (James 72). She does not really want to meet Quint, but the sight of him allows her to believe that she will one day be in view of the wealthy uncle who is ultimately, the key to the privileged life she has always wanted. This desire for a life of privilege and her apparent desire for the uncle is directly supported by the text within the nature of Quint’s first appearance. Rather than a traditional entrance, he simply appears to the governess “ at the very top of a tower” which hangs over a lawn (James 39). This apparent phallic symbol could be seen as a direct insinuation of the Governess’ attraction to Quint. However, the text identifies her attraction to Quint in relation to her desire for the uncle a few lines later. She claims “ they were distinguished... though I could see little difference, as the new and the old (James 39). In terms of the two men, the governess suggests here that Quint resembles the uncle and thus, she is drawn to him. This sort of fuzzy logic is a moment which allows the reader to see the credibility of the governess deteriorating and ultimately may influence her opinion of the children’s psyche.

Ultimately, the only true distinguishing factor that the governess can come up with is the simple fact that Quint does not wear a hat (James 48). This fact alone is one which is brought up in her description of Quint and ultimately <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-quint-and-jessel-in-henry-james-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

changes her opinion of him. When the governess first sees Quint in the garden she believes him to be a noble man. It is not until she discusses the man's attire with Mrs. Grose that she fully understands Quint's social position and formulates a more solid opinion of him. The governess's opinion of Quint, which develops after noticing that he wears the master's clothes, brings her to question other aspects of Quint's time at Bly. Most notably, his relationship with Miles is often under scrutiny. From the start, the reader is lead to believe that there is more to their relationship than meets the eye. Mrs. Grose enhances this suspicion in her initial description of Quint's relationship with Miles; she claims that " it was Quint's own fancy. To play with him...to spoil him" (James 51). She even goes so far as to say that " Quint was much too free" (James 51). The reader's reaction to this statement is directed by the governess's response; she reacts to the news with " a sudden sickness of disgust" and proclaims her shock at the revelation (James 51). Still, many scholars debate that the implication that Miles's engaged in a sexual relationship with Quint because they claim it is based purely on speculation. However, Mrs. Grose again implies an odd nature to their relationship when she tells the governess that " for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together" (James 61). The significance of this statement is not fully understood until later in the book when Miles tells the governess that it appears strange " for a fellow to be with a lady always" (James 83). He implies here that spending a great deal of time with one particular person, as he is rumored to have done with Quint, suggests there is a more to the relationship than what is visible on the surface. The fact that Miles immediately jumps to such a conclusion makes his relationship with Quint even more suspect of sexual transgressions.

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These questions that lie between the lines of Quint's relationship with Miles are frequently a topic for discussion. However, there is another unusual relationship between Miles and the governess which is even less overt and is often viewed differently by various readers. This relationship lies within brief moments throughout the book when their connection seems to be deeper than their actions initially suggests. Much of Miles's speech is involved in the odd feelings that the reader develops for his relationship with the governess because it seems abnormally mature for his age. His constant use of the phrase, " my dear," when addressing the governess is one strange aspect of their relationship because it sounds like the language of one lover to another. This is most apparent during their discussion in the church yard when even the governess notices the peculiarity of his speech. She states, " his ' my dear' was constantly on his lips for me, and nothing could have expressed more the exact shade of sentiment with which I desired to inspire in my pupils than its fond familiarity" (James 83). Although her reaction to Miles's odd tone seems fairly docile, her fondness of his mature speech suggests to the reader, once again, that is more below the surface of their relationship than simple " fond familiarity" (James 83). From the first time the governess meets Miles, she describes him adoringly, analyzing his every feature, " his wonderful smile, the whites of his beautiful eyes and the uncovering of his clear teeth" (James 74). While at times this seems harmless, her descriptions of him sometimes appear peculiar and overly-flattering, forcing the reader to address the possibility that her desires, which were previously directed mainly at the wealthy uncle, are not attractions for a particular person. Rather, the governess may simply desire a man, no matter what the circumstances or what it could cost her. The governess's

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desire for a man plays into the underlying story of Miss Jessel's relationship with Quint. Jessel's character demonstrates the true price for what is considered sexual promiscuity through her reason for leaving Bly. As the footnote depicts, "the implication is that Miss Jessel left because she was pregnant," but, she is also subtly cursed by Mrs. Grose for acting upon her sexual desires with Quint (James 59). This reasoning greatly influences the actions of the governess because the knowledge that Jessel's forbidden relationship cost her everything would force the governess to reconsider acting upon her own desires. Whether these feelings are toward the wealthy uncle, Quint, or Miles, they evoke the same fear in the governess. This fear is perhaps the exact reason that she began to see the ghosts in the first place. As Quint's first appearance immediately follows her dreaming about the wealthy uncle, it would suffice to say that Quint appears as a reminder of her social position. His appearance in the master's clothes is a definite implication that Quint's ghost serves the purpose of reminding the governess of her place in the social order (James 48). Similarly, Miss Jessel reminds the governess that her attraction to Miles is inappropriate and the ghost acts as a window of what is to come if she allows her desires to control her. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* engages in a struggle with sexual identity. Both the governess and Miles find themselves lost in a gray area of their own sexuality. Although for Miles it relates to his relationship with Quint and how that translates into his own sexuality, the governess creates her own hardship through her desire for a sexual identity. While she is eventually attracted to every male that she meets, she still does not accomplish her various goals, from privilege to love. The wealthy uncle indeed presents an opportunity to achieve a higher status, but even in this case, she translates

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her dream into sexual desire. It is this desire which manifests itself in the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. These two individuals manage to represent everything about the governess that she fears. Quint presses her desire for the wealthy uncle while Jessel questions her adoration for Miles.

Works Cited
James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw*. 2nd ed. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2004.