

Silences in the turn of the screw



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' Silence' in Henry James' The Turn of the Screw is integral to the text not only in a literal sense, but also figuratively; the gaps that are purposefully left in the plot and the reader's knowledge also act, powerfully, as "silences". Whilst literal, aural silences provide an atmospheric tone in James' novel, it is the metaphorical, textual silences that take precedence, sitting at the centre of the book.

James purposefully implements such gaps, and stubbornly refuses to fill them. It is, consequently the reader's task to take these silences on, guided by markers in the text. In " The Turn of the Screw", the gaps left unfilled by James have been under constant critical debate since the novel's first publication, culminating in a vast array of diverse interpretations of the tale; testament to the effectiveness of these silences. It is the reader's straying imagination that fills the gaps, naturally led by the horrifying implications James provides for them.

One of the major ' silences' central to the novel as a whole is a product of James' layered narrative, where, as Anthony Mazella comments, " the governess' manuscript is mediated through Douglas's transcription and editing," with an additional narrator at the opening of the novel recounting Douglas's telling of the tale. Naturally, such a narrative leaves gaps in the novel. The reader, for instance, never discovers Douglas's relationship towards the governess, the identity of the initial narrator, or indeed very much information about the governess herself, her being nameless throughout. Additionally, the framing of the governess's narrative within another, told some time after the events of hers had taken place, " it has not been out for years," creates a gap or ' silence' in those years which the

reader never learns about, creating a marked distance from the primary tale. What this achieves is in a dissimulation of “ an origin, and thus a fixed point of reference for the story,” as Shoshana Felman argues, implementing a structural silence which causes the reader to question the plausibility of the governess’s narrative entirely.

Additionally, there occurs a literal ‘ silence’ at the close of the novel, in the sense that the framing narrative does not return after the death of Miles. This runs contrary to the reader’s expectations of a framing narrative. As in novels with a similar Chinese-box structure such as *Wuthering Heights*, the structure is circular and returns to Lockwood’s narration at the end. Because of this silence at the end of the novel, a jarring effect occurs, where, as Richard Rust comments, “ the horror is accentuated by the undermining of the frame structure itself, something we counted on to provide control.”

However, there here arises the question in this instance of whether this effective ‘ silence’ ‘ refuses’ to be filled, as Claire Seymour has suggested. It is the reader’s own ‘ horror’ at the end of the novel which one could imagine would undoubtedly be shared with that of the group being told the same story, were they to appear once more. Thus, while the absence of the framing narrative at the end of the novel is a silence, it is one that is in theory, ‘ filled’ by the reader’s own horror.

The governess in the novel may also be thought of as a generator of silences throughout the text. These lie both in her refusals and hesitancy to communicate as well as her withholding of information; the latter being a very literal kind of silence. For instance, the governess frequently hesitates

to ask either Flora or Miles outright whether or not they have seen the apparitions of Quint or Miss Jessel, instead making assured assumptions that they have, telling Mrs. Grose for instance that although Flora did not say “ a word” at the lake about seeing Miss Jessel, the governess is certain that “ she saw,” though the truth of this is left ambiguous to the reader.

Another of the major instances in which the governess upholds her silence is in her lack of correspondence with the master, or the children’s uncle. Even upon receiving an expulsion letter from Miles’s school, she claims to have “ made up her mind” to say “ nothing” to the master. It is possible, as claimed by Douglas at the opening of the novel, that the governess is infatuated or even in love with the master, and the ghosts that these willful ‘ silences’ are a bravado attempt to avoid disappointing the master. However, critic Thomas J. Bontley suggests that the governess sees the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel as “ a personal challenge to her chosen role as defender of innocence,” an idea which suggests that her refusal to break or ‘ fill’ the silence on Miss Jessel or Quint with the children is her own desperate attempt to shield them from the apparitions: “ I was a screen- I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would.”

The literal, aural silences in “ The Turn of the Screw” often occur in the presence of the ghosts or in the moments leading up to their appearance to the governess. In one instance, the governess actually comments that “ It was the dead silence of our long gaze at such close quarters that gave the whole horror, huge as it was, its only note of the unnatural.” Indeed, this comment on it being solely the silence lending a tone of the ‘ unnatural’ seems representative of the book in its entirety; it is the silences or gaps

that James refuses to fill that instill the most horror. It is also possible however, that the governess's encounters with the ghosts being entirely silent is indicative of her own madness or hallucination. One critic, Thomas J. Bontley suggests that the "[the governess'] horror must be seen as a result of her own intense vision of sexual evil." In other words, because the governess is aware of Miss Jessel and Quint's illicit sexual affair whilst living, she sees them as symbols of sexuality and thus a corrupting force which it is her utmost role to protect the children from.

This idea brings us neatly onto another 'silence' central to the novel which lies in implication and unspoken tension, in the form of sex and sexuality. Silenced both by the real Victorian world lying outside the book's bounds and reinforced within the governess desperately attempts to prevent the children from being "corrupted," encompassing in her character traditional Victorian values about sex and sexuality. The silence surrounding sex in the novel manifests itself symbolically through particular images and subtle nudges towards the subject. Quint, for instance, first appears to the governess atop the 'old tower,' an imposing phallic image which again combines the inherently evil supernatural with sex, and as Bontly phrases it, "evil is given actuality in actual ghosts, and is explicitly associated with human sexuality." Thus, whilst sex within the novel is a 'silence' in the sense that it is not written about explicitly, yet again the reader is invited to 'fill' the gap with the implications James peppers throughout the novel.

Victorian ghost stories such as James' *The Turn of the Screw* often used silences both literal and metaphorical for the intended goal of horrifying or scaring the reader, a tradition which has retained its power over time, found <https://assignbuster.com/silences-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

in modern ghost stories as well as horror films; it is often commented that the most 'scary' horror films are the ones where the 'evil' is not, or barely ever present, and thus a 'gap' or 'silence' in the story. "The Turn of the Screw" is no exception to this rule. The novel's power rests upon the aural, implied, and textual silences at the heart of the novel which lie deafeningly open to the reader's imagination. It is the reader's own fears, those that they bring to the book themselves, that fill these open holes. As James himself so aptly put it of his readers: "his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy [...] and horror [...] will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars."