

A screw loose with society



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BUSTER**

The general rule of thumb when performing handiwork involving screws—ingrained in one’s mind from youth and persisting forever onwards—is that age-old, ever-so-slightly childish mnemonic, “ Righty tighty, lefty loosey.” When one expects the screw to tighten, right is the way to turn it, and the reverse holds just as true. Simple enough to remember, is it not? However, for the longest of times, the rudimentary logic of expectation versus the realization of that expectation, the uncomplicated rationale of turning the screw the proper way to garner the ideal result, has been lost on society in terms of its treatment of women. As Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* portrays, society has been putting unreasonable expectations onto women in ways that impact them horrendously. Just as ignorantly as someone turning a screw left and expecting it to tighten, society attempted counterintuitively to strive towards utopia through the backwards method of subjecting women to strict gender roles and expecting the world to grow better for them. Ever since James first published the book, fools and scholars alike debated pointlessly and endlessly over whether or not the Governess’s tale is truly supernatural, and so far, there have been no conclusive conclusions. Caught up in the heat of a fruitless battle, close readers of *The Turn of the Screw* oftentimes hunt immediately for hints as to the true nature of the ghosts, ignorantly overlooking the potential of the story to serve as a feminist commentary devoid of any specters. As such, although many dismiss his tale as simple horror fiction, Henry James actually utilizes ambiguity in his narrative to establish the narrator as unreliable. This narration style serves as an underhanded commentary on the status of women, as the Governess’s insistence on the existence of the ghosts is highly attributable to the mounting pressure on her to conform to society’s traditional gender roles so

that she can impress the children's uncle. When readers consider her characterization in light of Feminist critical theory, it is clear that the necessity of her conformity drives her to insanity, thus forcing her into delusions of grandeur under the guise of the supernatural.

Before venturing forth into the realm and root of the Governess's plight, it is necessary to establish the presence, purpose, and pertinence of the ambiguity in her narrative. When one looks into every twist and turn of the tale with great scrutiny, it becomes apparent that the Governess's story is not as cut-and-dry as it initially appears to be. In fact, "Almost every detail in the story... can be interpreted in a double sense, and the two possible meanings... are incompatible with each other—as the governess herself realizes, she is heroic if the first interpretation is valid and guilty of terrible things if she isn't" (Lang 110). In other words, there are two ways to interpret the tale, leaving the true nature of its events up in the air, and with the Governess herself as the narrator, there is quite a bit of both capability and incentive for her to tell it in a way that portrays her as the heroine. Even so, the mere presence of ambiguity is not enough to tint the narrative a suspicious hue. What matters next is whether or not the Governess actually desires to paint herself as the heroine, and as many of her own admissions implicate, she more than certainly does. Early on, she proclaims, "I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw, the less [the children] would. I began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised excitement" (James 47). Through the giddy explanation of her opportunity to protect the children from the supposed ghosts, the Governess reveals just how much she longs to come off as heroic. She feels not dread over the apparitions'

existence, nor fear for the children's safety, but rather, a "disguised excitement," and that excitement she feels is that of a woman waiting for her chance to be the daring protagonist. Thus, by writing the Governess's narrative to be rife with ambiguity and giving her a distinct desire to tell the story in a certain way, James establishes the tale's narrator as unreliable.

Furthermore, James's story provides even more reasoning for the Governess to depict herself the way she does: her blatant affections for the uncle of the children under her care. From almost the very beginning of the tale, James expresses emphatically the Governess's emotions for her employer, the uncle. At the first meeting between the two, "when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, [her employer] held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded" (11). In the simple statement that she "already felt rewarded" after the uncle does nothing more than hold her hand lies the evidence of the Governess's attraction towards the man. As such, since "the governess herself... was in love with her employer... The presence of such emotional involvement... discredits any pretense at objectivity" (Cohen 78). In essence, the Governess has feelings for the uncle, and as a result of those feelings, an unremovable air of subjectivity shrouds her narrative. Therefore, just as the Governess's desire to come off as a heroic draws suspicion to the reliability of her narrative, so does the presence of her romantic interest in her employer.

Putting aside the ambiguity for a moment, the tale offers beneath the surface a biting commentary on the status of women in James's world.

Throughout the entirety of the tale, the Governess struggles to stay true to the role that her employer has assigned to her, to the role that society has

assigned to women. By definition, a feminist “novel... [shows] us that the characters who conform to traditional gender roles are harmed by those roles” (Tyson 85). In this fashion, should *The Turn of the Screw* have potential to serve as a feminist work, the Governess’s obedience to her gender role must end up harming her to some degree. Towards the novel’s conclusion, her conformity does just that in a confrontation with Flora, one of her charges. Flora, fed up with the Governess and her talk of ghosts, shrills, “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!” (James 122). As a consequence of the Governess’s ardent allegiance to her gender role and her fervent desire to appear motherly and heroic, the very children her employer hires her to raise and protect end up despising her. As follows, it is through this harm which her conformity causes that the story serves as a feminist commentary.

Moreover, the Governess herself helps to bring out the story’s feminist implications through the way she takes her conformity to a delusional extreme. In accordance with Feminist critical theory, a woman fits the traditional female gender role if she abides by certain characteristics.

Amongst these characteristics, “traditional gender roles define women as naturally emotional..., weak, [and] nurturing,” and, “The ‘true woman,’ who fulfilled her patriarchal role in every way, was defined as fragile, submissive” (Tyson 87, 89). If we analyze the actions and narration, the fact emerges that she does indeed meet these requirements. For instance, the Governess is “nurturing” when she remarks, “I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world... the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become too explicit, a deep, constant ache of one’s own committed heart”

(James 47). Through her words, the Governess expresses her earnest desire to protect the children from the ghosts, and in that earnest desire is the nurturing, motherly aspect of her role. Additionally, in mental response to Mrs. Grose asking that she contact the uncle, which would thus break an agreement she had made with him previously, the Governess says, “ She didn’t know–no one knew–how proud I had been to serve him and to stick to our terms” (84). From this piece of narration, one can very easily glean that the Governess also meets her gender role in that she is submissive; she and the uncle make an agreement that she is not to disturb him, and she prides herself in being obedient to his demands. However, now taking into account once more the tale’s ambiguity and the unreliability of the narrator, there rises to the surface the dismal reality that the Governess takes her conformity to society’s expectations too far, driving her to the point of delusion. When she and Miles, her second charge, are standing alone in his room as the lights suddenly go out, the Governess describes the incident as follows: “ The boy gave a loud, high shriek, which, lost in the rest of the shock of the sound, might have seemed... a note either of jubilation or of terror.” She then goes on to make note of her reaction and Miles’s response, with her crying, “ Why, the candle’s out!” and Miles replying, “ It was I who blew it, dear!” (109). First, her description of Miles’s shriek proves intriguing at best, the ambiguity in “ either of jubilation or of terror” standing out starkly. Through this piece of the scene, James re-establishes the dubious nature of the Governess’s chronicle, as joy and fear are two very distinct emotions. For the Governess to place the two options as equally likely draws suspicion to what she has to say. The fact that she wishes to highlight fear as a possibility further supports the notion that she simply wants to come off as

heroic so she can give off an air of her protectiveness and motherliness towards Miles. Even more, Miles's affirmation that he is the one who blew out the candle makes it glaringly evident that the Governess is merely—through the power she has as the narrator—creating an ambiguous scenario so that she can step in as the motherly hero, thus conforming to the societal standard of being a nurturing woman.

By the story's final moments, the Governess again illustrates through her recounting of the events an ambiguous situation meant to paint her character a certain way. After the final encounter with one of the ghosts, she explains, " 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 it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (149). There the Governess stands in the estate, all alone with the corpse of young charge resting in her arms, and as is the nature of this story, there are two ways to view this occurrence: Either the Governess valiantly tries and fails to save Miles from the ghost of Peter Quint, or the Governess, delusional, kills him herself and blames it on the supernatural. Taking the two views into consideration, the Governess has a lot to gain from narrating this part of the tale ambiguously. Once again, the Governess tells the story as if the first view is true so that it reflects very well on her character, showing once more her excessive acquiescence to her gender roles. However, with the second view also being a possibility, this scene brings to light the truth of the Governess's self-deception. In sum, the delusional extremity to which the Governess takes her job also contributes to the feminist nature of this narrative.

Even after all of the above, one burning question still remains unanswered, and that question is, why is the Governess deluding herself? More aptly, why must the Governess delude herself? The answer relies once more on Feminist critical theory in conjunction with the Governess's attraction to the uncle. According to the critical theory, "women who adhere to traditional gender roles are considered 'good girls,'" and "good girls" are the ones that men deem worthy of marrying (Tyson 87). Therefore, at the very basic level, the Governess acts the way she does in order to be a "good girl" so that she can win over the uncle through adhering to her role. As such, her delusions are also a part of that need to be a "good girl"; the pressure to conform drives her to being an unreliable narrator, which "forces us to reevaluate the female role to which the governess so exaggeratedly conforms and see it as the potential breeding ground for... an imagination which arises in order to fulfill the expectations created by the role" (Cohen 79). In other words, the ambiguity of the tale, the supposed existence of the ghosts, all stems from the Governess's need to fit her gender role; she fabricates the ghosts so that she can appear more motherly and nurturing; she tells the story ambiguously so any errors she makes in being that nurturing character are suddenly more subtle, elusive. The relationship between her self-imposed ignus fatuus and her strict need for conformity, in turn, "connects the governess' [sic] mental illness with a social reality likely to foster it and though... she may be insane, the world she inhabits... must drive its women insane" (79). Hence, *The Turn of the Screw* posits that, yes, the Governess is delusional, and yes, the Governess's delusions arise as a result of her strong desire to comply with gender roles, but the real heart of the matter lies right

in the chest of society itself. It is society that puts these pressures on the Governess, and as follows, it is society that drives her to insanity.

All in all, *The Turn of the Screw* is no mere ghost story; through the lens of Feminist critical theory, it becomes a tale that utilizes the Governess's characterization—from her unreliability as a narrator to her need to conform—in order to tell the story of many, if not all, women of James's time period. Through the use of ambiguity, James establishes the Governess as unreliable, further pinpointing her reasons for being that way through her attraction to her employer. In light of these details, the story gains the potential to be a feminist narrative through the combination of the Governess's conformity, the results of that conformity, and the root of her delusions. With all that being said, the Governess's tale does not truly end where James ended it; if society keeps turning the screw loose and expecting it to tighten, if society keeps subjecting women to unreasonable standards and pressures and believing that doing so will lead to a “morally” better world, then do not be surprised when the screw inevitably falls out of the hole, when everything the screw served to hold in place crashes right down with it. If it reaches that point, then we're really screwed, and there's nothing ambiguous about that.

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