

Are the ghosts real in henry james's the turn of the screw essay

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Are the Ghosts Real in Henry James's The Turn of the Screw Much has been said about whether the ghosts in Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (1898) are real or just a product of a troubled mind.

In the story, the governess is convinced that the ghosts of two deceased employers, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, are haunting the children, Flora and Miles, respectively. She believes that it is part of her job to keep the children from the evil. The novel ends with a horrifying showdown between the governess and Peter Quint. Miles dies as she tries to keep him safe. The readers are presented with two interpretations: whether the governess suffocates the poor child or the ghost won and possessed the boy.

Are the ghosts real, in the first place? On the one hand, critics establish the reality of the ghosts pointing out that the governess strongly convinces herself as well as the readers that the children are indeed seeing apparitions. On the other hand, anti-ghost critics explain that the governess is mad and that she herself creates apparitions in her mind. Her strong desire to be loved drives her insane. But James also does an excellent job of making the ghosts appear real.

The discussion of this book remains stubbornly inconclusive, but this paper will present some evidence in the book to argue that the ghosts are a result of psychological breakdown. Real Ghosts? For many readers and critics, The Turn of the Screw is a story that involves real ghosts. They point out that the governess is able to describe the ghosts in full detail because she actually sees them with her two eyes. Another evidence is Mrs Grose, a realistic person in the actual world who believes there are ghosts.

Additionally, according to them, the fact that the boy gets in so much trouble in school is related to the presence of real ghosts. In the end, Miles dies because Peter Quint possessed the boy and killed him. Critics also present two ways to get at the reality of the ghosts, which goes beyond the story itself. One approach is to look at how James uses ghosts in his other stories.

In fact, the author wrote several ghost stories, and the ghosts in these tales are generally real. While James used them as having thematic and symbolic utilities, the ghosts are also real, suggesting that the spirits of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint are genuine, too. Another way is through the author's notebook entries about the book and preface to *The Turn of the Screw* in the New York Edition (James, 1984). Both documents seem to make clear that the author thought of the ghosts in the story as quite real. But anti-ghost critics counter that the author's phrasing is ambiguous. There are overwhelming clues in the book suggesting that the ghosts are only images that appear only in the governess' crazy mind. She is having a psychological breakdown because she is lonely and longs for love.

The rest of this paper will discuss the clues that lead many readers and critics to this conclusion. Psychological Ghosts Anti-ghost critics examine the governess' state of mind to prove that the ghosts do not appear in the real world, and they have many pieces of evidence to support that the governess is only imagining things. The opening chapter clearly gives readers an idea of what is going on inside her head: "I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops" (16). This suggests that she

is already overcome by doubts; she is not sure whether she is fit for the job. The governess again becomes fully anxious when she says, "I found myself doubtful again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake" (16). She seems to know every thing in advance: how come does she know early on that things are going to be all bad? The governess thinks like this throughout the story, almost sure of herself that she knows nearly everything. This casts doubt about the soundness of her mind.

In the governess' first interview, James describes her job as "a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness" (13), a proof that the job requires little social interaction. The nature of the employment makes the governess' mind wander a lot of time. Moreover, during the interview, she becomes attracted to the uncle, using words such as "pleasant" and "handsome" to describe him.

She begins to fall for the man, but finds herself all alone again when he leaves. This shows her emotional and mental instability. She is isolated at Bly and there is no one around to interact with. The governess begins to make the first apparitions around this time. The governess becomes so lonely, and decides to have a walk. She dreams of a man on the turn of the path that would stand before her and smile in approval, "And with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there" (33).

The man is the ghost of Peter Quint. The governess creates this image in her mind, even stating that her imagination has become real. The author then tells the readers that the image is produced in her mind, but the way it is

narrated brings so much shock, convincing the readers that it is indeed actual ghost. No one else in the book sees the ghosts, except for the governess.

When she keeps on saying to Flora and Miles that she sees the ghosts, they become very hysterical. There is certainly a Freudian significance to her seeing the ghosts while Flora is trying to fit a piece of wood into another piece of wood that has a hole in it. Her sexual repression makes her to hallucinate. In addition, the governess' detailed description of the ghosts is due to her talking with the townspeople.

This is how she knows the cause of the death of the ghosts. It becomes very obvious that there are no ghosts when Peter Quint appears near the end of the book and the governess scares Miles. Of course, the boy does not see the ghost, but asks her if he is there out of fear.

She says, "It is he!" (172). There is a footnote referring to the boy's eyes as sealed. The author makes a comparison between the eyes of the boy and Mrs. Grose's, who has never seen the ghosts. The ghosts-are-real critics and readers interpret the final scene as the governess holding Miles tight and protecting him against the ghost. But it can be concluded otherwise, that she is actually suffocating the boy, "We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (172).

Another ingenious argument to support that the ghosts in James's novel is not real is to look at the author's source of the name Peter Quint. O'Gorman (1980) sees it Peter 5. The New Testament contains 1 Peter and 2 Peter, but

the latter can be ruled out since it only contains three chapters. The eighth verse of 1 Peter 5 says, “ Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”

O’Gorman (1980) links this with how the governess devilishly describes Peter Quint – red hair, peaked eyebrows, etc. and to James’s (1984) own admission in the preface that Peter Quint is more than a ghost, that is, he is a demon or goblin. The thesis of O’Gorman (1980) is that the Devil possesses the governess who then makes Peter Quint’s reality. But this misses the point of the reference to 1 Peter 5 – that it is not that the Devil possesses her, but that the governess is Devil-like in her many attempts at possessing Flora and Miles, projecting these attempts onto the ghosts.

One can see in James’s *The Turn of the Screw* two interpretations: a ghost story and a psychological thriller. It is not obvious at first that the ghosts are just made up by the governess, but after realizing how she longs to be loved, it all becomes clear. This desire compounded by her repression drives her to lose her mind and even to commit murder. The novel is a product of the governess’ mind, and she successfully makes it to become a reality.

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