

# The sentinel before a prison: the prison of language in the turn of the screw



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is a difficult text, one so littered with ambiguity that the lack of clarity between characters becomes a significant plot element. The governess works to dissolve this ambiguity and does everything she can to obtain answers to her questions throughout the text. Yet the governess herself speaks cryptically, holding back information from the characters with whom she interacts. The last chapter in the tale reveals her desperate attempt to find the answers she seeks, when she completely abandons her duties as caretaker in favor of her desire to explain the unknown. The epitome of the brashness of her desire begins when the governess asks Miles if he stole the letter she had written to his uncle, and she observes, "Peter Quint had come into view like a sentinel before a prison" (116). This simile is telling. As the governess is trapped inside a prison of ambiguous language and mysteries, the ghostly figures she sees represent all that is unknown, and embody the barriers of communication between the characters.

When Quint appears, the governess keeps her composure "to keep the boy himself unaware" of the presence of Quint (116). Even as the governess tries to answer the questions that have plagued her throughout the story, she still tries to keep secrets from Miles, an act that suggests the governess herself is dishonest and, in fact, creates more questions than answers. She even describes her ability to keep secret this latest appearance of Quint as something that comes naturally and without effort. Miles then finally admits that he did take the letter, at last addressing her question that brought about the ghostly appearance. The governess, overjoyed by his admission, "kept [her] eyes on [Quint] at the window and saw [him] move and shift [his]

posture” (117). Quint’s presence, cryptic and elusive, is a representation of the uncertainties that exist between the characters. When Miles finally opens up about what he has done, the dynamic of communication between him and the governess changes, and so the image of Quint “ shifts” accordingly. She describes this movement like “ the prow of a baffled beast,” changing and twisting as the silence between the characters slowly begins to dissipate (117).

The governess then goes on to confront Miles about why he would take the letter, as Quint stares through the window. Miles admits that he took the letter to find out what she was saying about him, and the governess notes the complete “ ravage of uneasiness” that appears on Miles’ face (117). This exemplifies how the characters in the story are uncomfortable disclosing information to each other, and have apprehensions about communicating important ideas to one another. Quint, the prison sentinel, symbolizing constrained communication to the governess, vanishes once the lines of communication open and the confusion begins to disappear.

As the governess becomes intoxicated with joy and the barriers of language begin to fade, she recalls, “ I felt that the cause was mine and that I should surely get all... I let my elation out” (117). Her language here suggests that there is some kind of struggle of power for information, as though her goal of finding out these secrets was some kind of game, and Miles her opponent. He sadly admits that he “ found nothing” in the letters (117). The governess, however, is elated by his lack of discovery. Though she has forced Miles to be honest, she has shared no information with him. It’s as though she wants to exclusively possess as much information as possible while not releasing <https://assignbuster.com/the-sentinel-before-a-prison-the-prison-of-language-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

any substantial amount of information to her peers, which draws question to her reliability as a narrator.

The governess, seeing an opportunity and still under the influence of her “information intoxication,” begins to press Miles for something she has desired to learn all along: the reason he was expelled from school. When Miles questions how she knows of his expulsion, she claims, “I know everything” (118). Though obviously she doesn’t actually know everything—she presses him for more information just two lines below—she tries to use duress to intimidate the young man into submission and make him reveal everything she wants to know. The idiom “knowledge is power” affirms itself here; the governess tries successfully to gain power and control of the situation by making Miles feel as though he is in the dark, coercing him into sharing more information.

She tries to push forward still and asks again why exactly he was expelled. He says he “said things” but does not give details about what he said (118). Slowly, Miles begins to turn the tables on the governess’ control of the situation because she accepts this half admission and does not press him for specifics. She describes herself as being “blind with victory” (118). Her blind victory, of course, is not a victory for her at all, and Miles knows this and nearly smiles at her. But why would Miles almost crack a smile when just a moment before he was uneasy? He has now put her in the dark. As we have seen, openness breeds discomfort and sadness; vague, incomplete language satisfies them because it gives both parties what they want. On one hand, the governess has finally learned something of why Miles was expelled. But on the contrary, she really doesn’t know much of anything, and Miles is

<https://assignbuster.com/the-sentinel-before-a-prison-the-prison-of-language-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

happy he has satisfied her desire without having to reveal too much about himself.

She asks him who he said these “ things” to, and again Miles’ memory conveniently fails him, except to mention he uttered these things to “ those he liked” (119). The governess, aware of the ambiguity now, admits his statements send her “ not into clearness, but into a darker obscure” (119). By this point, Miles has gained complete control over the situation, and the two have switched places, the governess even admitting a brief feeling of paralysis. She lets go of him and admits that she “ suffered, feeling that [she] had nothing now there to keep him from” (119). Though a simple reading of this line suggests the governess laments that there is nothing between Miles and the window she saw Quint standing outside of, a closer reading reveals that she feels at a loss of power, having no knowledge to hold over his head, and realizing he still withholds information from her. Though at first she blindly accepts the vague statements Miles presents to her, she eventually realizes that by doing so she no longer has the upper hand in the situation.

As she laments her loss of control, “[Miles] was soon at some distance from [her],” and the physical separation of the two is symbolic of the regenerating barrier between them (119). He then divulges slightly more information to her—however uninformative that information is—as he describes the process of “ those he liked” repeating what he said, until eventually those words reached the ears of the masters (119). Still, he gives her no real new information. Angry, she gets stern with him, and describes herself as “ his judge, his executioner” (119). This is the second metaphor in this chapter <https://assignbuster.com/the-sentinel-before-a-prison-the-prison-of-language-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

relating to incarceration and she forces Miles to “ avert himself,” and once again the barriers of communication are as high as ever (119). Fittingly, Quint, the ghostly representation of lies and distance in the story, appears once more.

The governess feels “ a sick swim in the drop of [her] victory and all the return of [her] battle” upon the vanishing of open communication and the reappearance of Quint (120). Her battle now is not a battle to protect the children but rather a battle of information and power. The appearance of Quint now not only represents the presence of lies and unknowns, but he also represents a loss of control for the governess. Her own motives overshadow her duties to Miles, and she is enraged that this figure, which is beyond her understanding, has once again appeared as a sign obstructing her path to knowledge. She panics, pulls Miles towards her, and curses the ghostly man.

Miles, alarmed by the governess' behavior, asks “ is she here?” And the governess is taken aback by his belief that Ms. Jessel might be present, and tries to pressure him into mentioning Quint instead. She challenges him to think again, and explains that she “ was so determined to have all [her] proof that [she] flashed into ice to challenge him” (120). She gets him to mention Quint's name, much to her satisfaction. But what ground does the utterance hold? The governess, feeling as though she has lost all control of the situation and fearing she may not hear the information she craves, uses leading questions and statements to force Miles into mentioning Quint's name. She holds Miles as he dies in her arms, satisfied having finally heard the words she wants to.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-sentinel-before-a-prison-the-prison-of-language-in-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

The metaphors of the judge and executioner, and the prison sentinel, are extremely important. As mentioned before, the 'prison' that they are in is the lack of communication between all the characters, and Quint fittingly is the sentinel keeping them in this prison. Later on, when the governess describes herself as the judge and executioner, these metaphors are also appropriate. She has come to be the judge of what's true, and tries to get Miles to admit the secrets she thinks he holds, leading him towards her preconceived notion of truth. At the end, when she finally hears all the evidence she needs, the governess—the executioner—puts Miles to death.

The ambiguity of the text in *The Turn of the Screw* leaves much interpretation up to the reader. However, the story is really about ambiguity; the uncertainty between characters is a main element of the plot. The governess spends the entire story trying to get Mrs. Grose and the children to reveal to her the information that she desires, which she learns early on she cannot obtain. By the end of the story, she is so shrouded in curiosity and bent on understanding the characters that she causes one of the children to die as she presses him for information. The ghosts she sees represent all of her unknowns, sentinels outside of the prison that the ambiguity of language has put her in. At the end, she becomes the executioner inside the very prison that entraps them all.

## **Works Cited**

James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. Print.