

The turn of the screw: novel vs. film adaptation



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Henry James' 1898 novel *The Turn of the Screw* is renowned for its ambiguity and its effectiveness as a psychological thriller. As a result, it has been adapted into many films, including one of the same name directed by Tim Fywell in 2009. This adaptation based upon the original text promotes the idea of supernaturalism whilst trivialising the unique storyline, thus making it less engaging to an audience than James' text. Many events, values, and themes present within both forms are articulated in different ways and to varying degrees. These are shown throughout many aspects, including the historical period, characterisation of the children and the ambiguity of the ghosts – all of which contribute to a thrilling and complex story, at least where the 1898 text is concerned.

In the film adaptation, the historical era of *The Turn of the Screw* was transposed to a period of time twenty years later. This affected the prominence of crucial themes, including sexual repression, within the novel. As depicted by James in Victorian England, the society of the time was extensively repressive for women and condemned the idea of sexual interaction. The statement "It was a pleasure...tranquil and justified...I was giving pleasure...to the person who's pressure I had responded" (29-30) articulates the Governess' in depth speculation about her future interrelating with the Master's. She is captivated by him as a result of her lack of contact with men excluding family members and is a victim of hormonal curiosity. As the film was set during the Edwardian reign, society was more enlightened and freedom was granted to individuals, allowing them to express their sexual emotions. This was shown in a particular scene in which Mrs Grose and the Governess discuss experiencing similar emotions in being "carried

away” in Whitmore Street with the Master. At ease, these women don’t attempt to disguise their reactions or detract from their magnitude. This particular modification detracts from the tyranny of repression, thus losing a strong impact on the audience.

The film adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw* also made major adjustments to the characterisation of the children, Flora and Miles. In the novel, Flora is 8 years old and described with purely physical observations as unimaginably beautiful and angelic. Miles is a 10-year-old precocious child and predominantly mystifying to the Governess. The description of “ my little girl...the vision of whose angelic beauty had probably more than anything else to do with the restlessness...” foreshadows the Governess’ unhealthy infatuation with the children. James used this specific description to remind the reader who the narrator of the story actually is and alludes to the possibility of events being distorted as a result of personal perspective. Subsequently, all opinions we receive are from the Governess’ point of view, conveying the notion that the children are more likeable characters in the novel than in the film.

Recalling James’ use of nested narration, the film’s perspective is that of the psychiatric doctor who is interpreting the Bly incidents from the Governess’ retelling of events. The children are older with more prominently talkative roles and are depicted as unfriendly, unlikeable, and corrupted characters – as if they have alternative agendas. Although Flora is as angelic as described in the novel, she is shown with another side to her character and thus seems not nearly as naïve or innocent. In the instance of Flora picking flowers with another person and the Governess assuming it was Mrs Grose, we are shown

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a contrastingly cunning side of Flora. In essence, this side of her character may have existed within the novel but has not been outlined by the Governess. This could be a result of Flora not showing the Governess a possible alter ego or of her perception of the physical appearance of the children masked all other aspects of them. Miles also inhabits a more dominant role and mirrors his Uncle's crafty disposition. After his arrival at Bly, he puts his feet up and expects the maids to attend to him. This allows the audience to view him with more authority, as if he is the "master" of the house. Though detracting from the original events of the text, this adaptation situates the film within a horror-based genre, promoting the alteration of the children into characters necessary to heighten the suspense and aid the continuation of the modified story.

The Turn of the Screw novel and its film adaptation both present ideas of the ghosts being real versus existing as a figment of the Governess' imagination. James constructs the novel in a way that, potentially, supports both arguments, rendering large portions of his work ambiguous to an extent. Indeed, the Governess has a tendency to discover Quint or Miss Jessel when she is distressed or alone while reflecting on the physical descriptions and opinions of Mrs Grose. This factor, alongside the emotional impact of sexual repression and isolation at Bly, contributes to the idea of the Governess' downward mental spiral.

Although partially set in an asylum, the film advocates the reality of the ghosts' existence. The statement "I believe in the other" (Anne, Governess) gives an introduction into the horror theme and allows the audience to be persuaded towards the idea of supernatural entities. As this quote occurs

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earlier on in the film, this idea is contrasted with the authorities doubting the Governess to the extent of arrest. In a further contrast to the original, Mrs Grose remains separate from planting the seed in the mind of the Governess by the introduction of Carla. This aids the latter perspective as a scene follows where Miss Jessel appears to the Governess in order to “ Save her” while Flora was standing on the windowsill. While simultaneously removing their ambiguity, this tactic also alludes to the ghosts physically interacting with objects from the real world. Carla commits suicide immediately after allowing the audience to contemplate how the deceased apparition physically communicated to the Governess events that hadn’t yet occurred.

Many aspects of James’ original *The Turn of the Screw* were heavily modified in the modern film adaptation. This is a result of many factors, including time constraints, techniques specific to film (sound, visual cues, leit motifs and camera angles), and the necessary alterations in narrative structure in order to modify a novel which (necessarily) only features a narrator and literary devices. Whilst engaging in a film, a different section of your brain is used to comprehend meaning. In the Governess’ delusions throughout the book, the text is constructed in such a way that individuals have to visualise them – all with varying perceptions. Yet the film emphatically displays scenes of the ghosts embedding the significance in reoccurrence to easily convey meaning. This tactic keeps members of the audience from missing crucial sub-plots and, subsequently, losing interest. In addition, the narrative structure was transformed to voyeuristic narration to allow for the audience to remain engaged and interested. If the film were narrated by the Governess, most of her internal monologue would be unsatisfying as a result

of the difficulty of displaying inner thoughts thrillingly on screen. This particular modification was compromised by the introduction of Carla to act as the Governess' subconscious mind, while still promoting ideas of her paranoia and voicing her opinions of the uncanny supernaturalism at Bly. Despite the understandable intentions behind them, these adjustments detract from the main ideas and concerns present within the novel.

The film adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw* was ultimately unsuccessful in remaining faithful to the original text and values it promoted. These include the historical era, ambiguity of the ghosts, and the characterisation of the children. The transposition of events and ages of the children to a later point in history highlighted the modern film as less emotionally engaging as a result of James' writing for a specific moment of the 1800's. The themes of sexual repression, childhood innocence, and supernaturalism were also alluded to in various scenes of the film, but were expressed with less emotional depth and understanding, therefore detracting from the values James prioritized in the novel. In essence, the modified story promotes the reality of the ghosts' existence, thus removing events in the novel from the original context and lacking James' famous ambiguity.