

"the malevolent
governess and the
benevolent ghosts": a
subversive reading of
the...



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This paper postulates a subversive reading of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The novella ostensibly relates the tale of a governess who struggles to shield her charges from supernatural malevolence. Yet I suggest that it is actually the story of a governess who abuses her charges in an attempt to take control of Bly. The ghosts, conversely, are benevolent companions to the children. My thesis is loosely based on Sami Ludwig's article, "Metaphors, Cognition and Behavior: The Reality of Sexual Puns in *The Turn of the Screw*," in which Ludwig argues that Miles and the governess are having an affair. Ludwig claims that when Miles tells the governess, on their way to church - "You know, my dear, for a fellow to be with a lady always-" (53) - he is subtly suggesting that their relationship become sexual, thereby instigating their affair. Ludwig points to the feelings of helplessness and fear that Miles' suggestion arouses in the governess, claiming that her precarious position, as a woman who is neither a family member, nor a servant, renders her helpless to flatly refuse. She therefore reacts with confusion, dodging the boy's innuendos and hurrying towards the church. Ludwig subsequently turns to the second bedroom scene, in which Miles asks the governess to come to his room and admits that he has been lying awake thinking of her. The governess reacts by changing the subject and inquiring about his old school, from which he has been expelled. Their conversation gradually becomes physically intimate, culminating in fierce hugs and kisses between the two. Ludwig interprets this scene as a further step in Miles' sexual advances towards the governess. He points to the boy's request for "a new field" (62), arguing that by this request Miles is demanding sexual education. Ludwig also construes words such as "posses," "little," and "die" as erotic Shakespearean allusions. In analyzing the novella's denouement, Ludwig

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claims that the chaotic sentences following Peter Quint's final appearance are a guised description of the sexual act. Ludwig notes that the physical positions of the governess and Miles are not specified in this scene, yet their emotions and movements, and the sounds they emit, are detailed. He interprets this discrepancy between omission and specification as a subtle delineation of sexual intercourse between Miles and the governess. Ludwig consequently construes Miles' "death" as a Shakespearian death: an orgasm. He concludes that *The Turn of the Screw* is a Bildungsroman depicting a young boy's sexual initiation by his governess. Ludwig's analysis, while innovative and insightful, suffers from two fundamental drawbacks. First, the critic's contention that Miles manipulates the governess into an affair is founded on shaky ground, and I intend to counterclaim that it is rather the governess who seduces Miles. Secondly, Ludwig does not explain the function of the ghosts in the novella. I will address this issue further on in the paper. Ludwig's assertion that Miles is the instigator of the affair can be refuted by three points. First, the governess refrains from any action that would enable Miles to resume his studies at school. When she learns of the boy's expulsion, she reacts by doing "' Nothing at all.'" (13). Even after Miles repeatedly requests to return to school, she remains impassive. This consistent, unprofessional refusal suggests that she has an ulterior motive for keeping Miles at Bly. Secondly, the governess' behavior towards Miles is overtly sexual even prior to the church scene, in which, according to Ludwig, Miles allegedly initiates the affair. On the night that Miles wanders off to the lawn, the governess leads him back to his room, and caresses him in the following manner: " I placed on his small shoulders hands of such tenderness with which... I held him there well under fire." (45). Furthermore, as the boy

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leans forward to kiss her goodnight, the governess returns his kiss, clasps him to her breast, and suggests that he remove his clothes: " I met his kiss and... I folded him for a minute in my arms... I could say - ' Then you didn't undress at all?'" (45-6); Hardly appropriate behavior for a governess who is merely evincing motherly affection towards her charge. Third, the governess refers to Miles as " the little gentleman" (10), shortly after she describes the uncle as " a gentleman" (7). This similarity in title suggests that the governess sees Miles in a similar light to that in which she sees the uncle, as a man of higher standing and therefore a potential husband. Although certain critics, such as Beth Newman, claim that the governess is infatuated with the uncle, I argue that she harbors no intense feelings for him. Rather, she wishes to marry him in order to better her financial situation and social status. Douglass explicitly tells us that " what took her [the governess] most of all [about the uncle]... was that he put the whole thing to her as a favour." (my emphasis, 4). The governess believes that the uncle is requesting her cooperation as a personal " favour," and that he will consequently be indebted to her if she assents. We may surmise that she hopes he will repay her by marriage, the most important act an upper class gentleman could bestow upon a middle-class woman. Thus, the governess assumes a calculated attitude toward the uncle, not an infatuated one. Furthermore, in the scene between the governess and Mrs. Grose, when the latter extinguishes the governess' hopes for marriage with the uncle, by telling her, "' Well, Miss, you're not the first - and you won't be the last.'" (8), the governess responds, "' Oh, I've no pretensions... to being the only one.'" (8). Her collected answer supports my argument that the governess perceives the uncle as nothing more than a social ladder to wealth and high status. In <https://assignbuster.com/the-malevolent-governess-and-the-benevolent-ghosts-a-subversive-reading-of-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

light of the governess' practical approach to marriage with the uncle, we should pay special attention to the question she poses to Mrs. Grose, immediately after learning that he is not interested in her: " My other pupil, at any rate... comes back tomorrow?" (9). The juxtaposition of the governess' revelation that the uncle is unattainable, and her question concerning Miles, suggests a connection between the two. In order to understand this connection, we must take into account two facts. First, Miles will become the master of Bly when he enters adulthood, and second, Douglas tells us that the governess has " supreme authority" (5) over Miles. Hence, we may conjecture that the juxtaposition signifies the governess' decision to substitute the inaccessible uncle for Miles, over whom she has an advantageous position. The governess, I suggest, believes she can exploit her power over Miles to manipulate him into marrying her when he comes of age. Their marriage will bestow upon her the title of mistress of Bly, thereby granting her social and financial advantages, similar to those which aroused her interest in the uncle. The governess' interest in Miles can be further understood through her frequent use of the term " possession." She applies the word to a variety of actions, including physical grasping: " she always ended... by getting possession of my hand" (65), knowledge accumulation: " they were in possession of everything that had ever happened to me" (49), and even self control: " my show of self-possession" (33). The governess' reiteration of the word in so many different contexts suggests that she perceives everything around her in terms of possession. In her eyes, people are constantly struggling to control property, each other, and themselves. Accordingly, the governess endeavors to possess Miles, and thus to

vicariously possess Bly. At the outset of the narrative she notes that " he [the
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uncle] had put them [Miles and Flora] in possession of Bly" (my emphasis, 5), and later on describes her behavior towards Miles as an attempt to possess the boy: "I... seize[d] once more the chance of possessing him [Miles]" (62). This description is especially telling when we observe that, among other denotations, "to possess" also means "to have sexual intercourse with" (OED). Based on the arguments heretofore presented, I suggest a reading of the scenes discussed by Ludwig that is diametrically opposed to his analysis. Rather than flirting with the governess on their way to church, Miles is attempting to break free from her. She has been overly intimate with him - "for a fellow to be with a lady always" (53) - and he is frightened by her behavior. He asks her to let him go: "when in the world, please, am I going back to school?" (53), and when she dodges the question, he resorts to pleading: "'you can't say I've not been awfully good, can you?'" (53). Finally, he threatens to contact his uncle. This is not the behavior of a boy who is teasing his love interest. In the bedroom, when the governess urges Miles - "'I thought you wanted to go on as you are.'" (61) - the boy rejects her: "'I don't - I don't. I want to get away'" (61). Yet she reacts by forcing herself upon him, twice in the same scene: "I threw myself upon him and... embraced him" (62), "it made me... drop on my knees and seize... him" (62). Miles first asks her to cease - "'let me alone'" (62) - and when she grabs him a second time, he voices "a loud high shriek" (63). I give little weight to the governess' claim that he screamed out of fright of "a gust of frozen air" (63). Having established the governess' malevolence, I would now like to make a case for the ghosts' benevolence. It seems appropriate at this juncture to reevaluate the governess' declarations of the ghosts' "quite unmistakable horror and evil" (30). Ellis Hanson has already observed that <https://assignbuster.com/the-malevolent-governess-and-the-benevolent-ghosts-a-subversive-reading-of-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

the ghosts do not “ beckon, invite or solicit the children or... coax them into physical danger” (377). He also remarks that “ the children found nothing terrifying about a living Quint and a living Miss Jessel” (377). Dawn Keetley reinforces Hanson’s remark, suggesting that Quint and Miss Jessel “ might in fact have been beneficent influences” (149). By integrating these comments with our previous observations on the governess, we may well conclude that the governess’ portrayal of the ghosts is unreliable, and attempt to draw our own conclusions concerning Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. Miss Jessel’s ghost is portrayed throughout the novella as either a weeping victim or a companion to Flora. The fact that Flora enjoys and even seeks the ghost’s company is exemplified by the girl’s assembly of a toy boat, as she plays at the lake’s shore opposite from the shore where Miss Jessel is standing. By assembling this toy boat, Flora expresses her desire to create a vehicle that may carry her over the lake to the ghost. Furthermore, towards the novella’s denouement, Flora sails on a real boat to that very area, thus closing the circle that began with her toy boat. The governess, on her part, exploits her knowledge of the secret meetings between the ghost and the girl to further her plans. She needs to get rid of Mrs. Grose and Flora in order to coerce Miles into full sexual intercourse. She therefore exerts emotional pressure on the girl to reveal her secret, thus driving her to a breaking point: “ she [Flora] launched an almost furious wail. ‘ Take me away, take me away - oh take me away from her!’” (70). The governess then uses Flora’s breakdown as a pretense to send Flora and Mrs. Grose away: ““ You must take Flora... Away from here. Away from them.”” (73). Note that it is the governess, “ her” (70), not the ghosts, “ them” (73), from whom Flora wishes to escape.

Quint’s ghost rivals the governess in her efforts to possess Miles. Their <https://assignbuster.com/the-malevolent-governess-and-the-benevolent-ghosts-a-subversive-reading-of-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

struggle over the boy begins after the governess sees Quint for a second time, realizing his interest in Miles: "' He [Quint] was looking for little Miles... That's whom he was looking for'" (25). Further on in the same scene, Mrs. Grose remarks: "' Quint was much too free'" (25), to which the governess responds: "' Too free with my boy?'" (25), thereby claiming Miles as her possession, and expressing anger at Quint's impingement on her claim. Henceforth the governess regards Quint as a threat - " he was absolutely... a living detestable dangerous presence" (39) - and compares their struggle over Miles to " fighting with a demon for a human soul" (82). It is worth noting that many critics prescribe to her view, construing Mrs. Grose's remark about Quint's excessive freedom as a euphemism for his sexual abuse of Miles. Robert W. Hill Jr., for example, claims that " Quint seems to have been capable of... engaging a prepubescent boy in whatever took the man's perverted fancy." (58). Textual evidence, however, does not support Quint's vilification. Quite the contrary, Miles seems to have loved Quint: " for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together... as if Quint were his tutor - and a very grand one" (34-35). Hence, I suggest a different interpretation of Mrs. Grose's remark that "' Quint was much too free'" (25). Mrs. Grose also states that Quint "' did what he wished'" (32). This statement can be regarded as a posterior elucidation of her initial remark. If we accept it as such, then Quint's freedom is his ability to act as he pleases, without subjugation to the will or mores of others. His freedom thus defies the governess' view of people as either possessors or possessed. Moreover, the governess herself admits that Miles desires freedom: " he [Miles] should probably be able to... gain, for his own purpose, more freedom." (55), and in a moment of despair she claims that Miles has <https://assignbuster.com/the-malevolent-governess-and-the-benevolent-ghosts-a-subversive-reading-of-the-turn-of-the-screw/>

won " his freedom now" (71). We may therefore surmise that Quint and the governess have antipodal approaches to Miles. While the governess attempts to possess him, Quint tries to accord the boy the freedom he craves. The case for Quint's benevolence is further strengthened by a biblical allusion embedded in the ghost's first appearance. Quint's emergence " at the very top of the tower" (15) alludes to the prophet Habakkuk: " I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me" (my emphasis, King James Version, Hab. 1. 1). Habakkuk stands atop a tower to speak to God and condemn the sinners, especially the prideful: " he is a proud man... who enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death" (Hab. 1. 5). This biblical allusion appears immediately after the governess entertains prideful thoughts about becoming the mistress of Bly - " I fancied myself... a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear." (15) - thereby presenting Quint as a prophet who rises from the dead to chastise the governess for her sins. The struggle between the governess, who attempts to possess Miles, and Quint, who endeavors to free him, culminates in the novella's denouement. As Ludwig convincingly argues, in this scene the governess and Miles have sexual intercourse, beginning the moment Quint appears in the window. The governess seems to have triumphed, since she has finally coerced the boy into the sexual " act" (81). Moreover, after their sexual intercourse, Quint disappears from Miles' sight: " he [Miles] had already jerked around, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day" (85). Any doubt concerning the governess' malevolence or Quint's benevolence dissipates as Miles mourns the loss of Quint, while the governess gloats: " With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he [Miles]

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uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss" (85). Yet despite Quint's disappearance, it may be argued that Miles wins his freedom. Contrary to Ludwig's reading, I construe Miles' death as an actual passing away. He dies either from the governess' strangling grasp, as suggested by Steven Swann Jones, or from emotional trauma, as Robert W. Hill Jr. claims in his paper, or, I may add, from sexual trauma. Whatever the cause, the end result is the same. Miles escapes the governess, " his little heart dispossessed" (85) of her grasp. This paper has proposed an alternative reading of *The Turn of the Screw*. I have argued that the ostensible devotion of the governess and maliciousness of the ghosts are merely a narrative ploy. Beneath the surface of the text one may unveil the tale of a malevolent governess and two benevolent ghosts. Thus, *The Turn of the Screw* shows us how easily we are deceived by evil's facade of righteousness. The novella reminds us to be cautious of what we are told, especially if the words are spoken with unquestioning conviction.

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