Turning the Screw: Douglas's Triumph

Merav Galili

Proseminar

Anna Kissin Shechter

Spring Semester, 2007
Turning the Screw: Douglas’s Triumph

“… and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph…” (1)

Over the years, much of the debate concerning Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw has focused on whether the ghosts that haunt the country estate Bly are real. There are two well-defined, strongly-opposed sides to this discussion. The “non-apparitionist” side claims that the governess who sees these ghosts is either sexually repressed or insane, and therefore is only hallucinating. The “apparitionist” side proposes that it is either an old-fashioned ghost story or an allegory.\(^1\) In this context, the ghosts are seen as incarnations of evil that the governess must battle in order to save her two young charges, Miles, a boy of ten, and Flora, a girl of eight. As the narrative is told from the governess’s point of view, in first-person narration, both sides concentrate their efforts on establishing whether or not the governess is a credible narrator. If she is not credible, then the ghosts are only a figment of her imagination, and the story is a psychological case study of insanity. If she is credible, then the ghosts must be real, and the story is therefore a fable of good vs. evil. Therefore, according to the non-apparitionists, the deranged governess, in forcing Miles to see what she sees, inadvertently suffocates him by grasping him too strongly. According to the apparitionists, Miles death is the result of his dispossession from demonic forces, enabled by the governess’s final confrontation with the ghost of

---

\(^1\) The terms “non-apparitionist” and “apparitionist” were coined by Thomas Mabry Cranfill and Robert Lanier Clark, Jr. in An Anatomy of The Turn of the Screw.
Peter Quint. In one reading, the governess is an accidental murderer, in the other, a valiant savior.²

While this question is complicated enough in itself, it becomes more complicated when we take into account that The Turn of the Screw does not begin with the governess’s narrative. Rather, it is embedded within another narrative which takes place years later at another country house. In the frame story,³ a group of people have gathered for the Christmas holiday and are telling ghost stories before the drawing room fire. The governess’s story is brought forth by a man named Douglas, who claims to have known the governess after the events at Bly took place, while she was the governess of his own sister. He vouches for her respectability as a person, and thus prepares his audience for a fantastic story from a reliable source. As the governess’s narrative progresses, however, the aforementioned problem concerning her credibility arises, and by the end we are faced with another problem: Miles’ death.

Whether you read the story as a fable of good vs. evil or as a psychological case study, as an apparitionist or a non-apparitionist, Miles’ death makes Douglas’s faith in the governess seem absurd. A child’s death at the hands of his governess, however unintentional, would have made it virtually impossible for her to gain employment as a governess ever again, even if there had not been serious legal consequences, which is highly improbable. What could the governess have reported to the police in her defense – that she was trying to save Miles from the ghost of Peter Quint? Such an explanation

² There are variations and even contradictory interpretations on both sides. I have merely stated the two main trends in order to establish my own argument. Harold C. Goddard’s and Robert B. Heilman’s are typical examples of non-apparitionist and apparitionist readings, respectively.
³ Critics refer to this narrative as either “the frame story” or “the prologue.” The difference in terminology exists because the frame does not resume at the end of the governess’s manuscript, and thus can be treated as a prologue in a formal sense. However, since the manuscript is read within the events of Douglas’s narrative, the text is usually regarded as an embedded narrative within a frame.
would make anyone pause to consider the governess’s character, not to mention her sanity. But Douglas still vouches for her unequivocally: “She was a most charming person… she would have been worthy of any [position] whatever.” (2).

While this is problematic in terms of content, there is another problem in terms of form. The governess’s narrative is ostensibly a manuscript written by her own hand and read to the company by Douglas. He provides some background information concerning her age, her upbringing, how she became Miles and Flora’s governess, and then we are given her own words. It is no longer Douglas speaking, but a separate text narrated by the governess. Douglas hardly provides any information which cannot be inferred from the governess’s own words. Moreover, the few details which cannot be inferred do not hinder our comprehension of the narrative.\(^4\) Ostensibly, the governess’s narrative can be read independently, and if so, then logically the frame is superfluous.

I am not suggesting that the frame should be ignored, quite the opposite. If it is unnecessary in terms of exposition, then it must have another function. It has often been regarded as merely a conventional ghost story element – creating the proper atmosphere for receiving the story. It is also used to settle the issue of the governess’s credibility – enlisting Douglas’s information as proof. However, it is not illogical to suppose that the frame is more than a formal convention for establishing the right tone. In addition, as I previously noted, Douglas’s assertion of the governess’s credibility complicates the discussion rather than simplifies it. Therefore, I would like to suggest another interpretation for the connection between frame and embedded narrative: the governess’s manuscript is an illusion cleverly constructed by Douglas.

\(^4\) Goddard, perhaps the perfect non-apparitionist, does not even mention the frame in his analysis. Though he does relate to information provided by Douglas without citing Douglas as his source – it is merely the governess’s exact age, which can be more or less inferred from the text.
After listening to one of the ghost stories which features a child visited by a ghost, Douglas acknowledges this as a “particular touch,” and that “it’s not the first occurrence of its charming kind” (1) that is known to him. Considering the governess’s unnerving narrative, the word “charming” is an odd adjective. Pursuing this strange train of thought, Douglas questions his audience whether two children constitute another “turn of the screw,” and they reply that two children equal two turns. The phrase “turn of the screw” comes from use of the thumbscrew, an instrument of torture – when one turns the screw, one increases the torture.\(^5\) Thus, in the case of the governess’s narrative, it can be inferred that Douglas intends to heighten the torture, or tension, rather. Once Douglas excites his audience with the promise of greater tension than they experienced with the previous ghost stories, he declares that, “Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It’s quite too horrible.” (1). This excites them even more, and “give[s] the thing its utmost price.” (1). They are given the privileged feeling of being told a great secret, which is a perfectly strategic action on Douglas’s part – tapping into a basic aspect of human nature in order to magnify the audience’s interest.

Overall, Douglas exhibits a keen theatrical awareness in his words and gestures. Several times he turns away from the group before the fire, ostensibly to gather his thoughts or mask his emotions but conceivably to heighten anticipation with a dramatic pause. He passes his hands over his eyes when he is supposedly recalling the horror of the governess’s manuscript, and taps his heart to emphasize how the impression is burned onto his being. His language has a decidedly melodramatic flavor. When asked why he claims the story is superlative, he replies, “for dreadful – dreadfulness!” (1) and a moment later, “for general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain” (2). Within the brief

\(^5\) OED, “turn”, I. 2. d.
space of a sentence he has combined a myriad of terrors: dread, ugliness, horror, and pain, which supposedly manage the somewhat contradictory feat of being both general and uncanny. Lest this seem like pointless hairsplitting, it should be kept in mind that merely a paragraph earlier, he used the word “charming.” More than a prologue providing exposition or setting the tone, the frame functions as a “teaser,” stimulating the audience’s interest in the governess even before her narrative begins.

Douglas is a skilled performer – he plays to the crowd, giving it precisely what it wants. The governess’s unrequited love for her employer, the Master (the children’s uncle and guardian), is often regarded as the central motive for the governess’s actions and even the catalyst for her madness. On a more basic level, it is a juicy piece of gossip, which appeals to human nature and imagination alike. While this tantalizing detail quietly hovers behind the governess’s words, Douglas paints a colorful picture and brings it to the fore, though he initially claims he never openly discussed the issue with the governess. The governess’s infatuation also provides a convenient explanation for the absence of “proper authority” in the story, which essentially enables the events to deteriorate in the way that they do. Though we naturally expect the servant to turn to her master for instructions in the event of trouble, the Master’s primary condition upon hiring the governess is that she never contact him about a single thing. She, on the gratifying notion that she is doing him a great favor, complies, and thus the governess’s desire to succeed for the master’s sake makes the situation superficially plausible as well as intriguing.

6 “…she couldn’t tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw it; but neither of us spoke of it.” (3).
Douglas exhibits great shrewdness in the type of information he withholds as well as in the type of information he provides. He withholds the governess’s name since it adds another shade of mystery to her character and promotes the idea that she is a real person whose identity must be protected. On the whole, the scattering of detail is strategic – just enough so we believe the governess is a real person with a credible background. Descriptive phrases such as “awfully clever and nice” (2) and “a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” (4) are deceptively straight-forward – insignificant in themselves, cumulatively giving the impression of a sufficiently sketched portrait, but in reality giving no substantial concept. The sheer amount of critical debate concerning the governess’s character, ranging from martyr to murderer, is a testament to how flexible Douglas’s information is.

I think the issues I have raised sufficiently undermine the idea that Douglas is merely the medium through which the governess’s manuscript is brought to the audience and that the governess is indeed a real person. The sentence I quote at the beginning of this essay, which appears on the very first page of The Turn of the Screw, effectively summarizes Douglas’s character and the nature of the story he presents to the company: “…and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: ‘It’s beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it.’” (1). In other words, the subtle and artful Douglas is setting up his audience for a marvelous story. This story is “his triumph,” not simply in the sense that he is in physical possession of the manuscript, but in the sense that he is the author of it.

Anthony J. Mazzella provides another theory concerning Douglas’s possible authorship. He suggests that the manuscript was written by the governess, but that
Douglas, out of his affection for her, edited it. This editing consisted of completing sections where the ink was too faded to be legible, and thus “colored the words with the emotion of his love.” (332). However, I think there is no textual evidence to support this theory, since a faded manuscript does not indicate that its writing is illegible. Moreover, given the narrative’s ambiguities, not to mention its shocking ending, it is difficult to view it as the product of “affectionate” editing.

Jeff Williams claims that the governess’s narrative is the product of competition and one-upmanship. According to Williams, the events at Bly are not meant to be taken as true, but as pure entertainment (50). While I agree with Williams that Douglas is telling a story for the sake of entertainment, I think his interpretation does not go far enough, because it does not properly address the presence of the frame narrator. It must be taken into account that the frame is not narrated by a neutral or an omniscient, third-person narrator, but by one using the first-person “I.” An “I” narrator is the expression of a distinct persona endowed with thoughts, feelings, and a history with which the reader is familiarized in varied degrees. However, in the case of the frame narrator, we know practically nothing about him, save that he was present at this Christmas gathering and has a prior acquaintance with Douglas. Despite the personal and accessible note the “I” is supposed to strike, the narrator remains very impersonal and remote. This is a stark contrast with the governess’s narration – we are so submerged in her consciousness that it is difficult to assess whether the events she witnesses are true or not.

Alexander E. Jones suggests that this “I” is simply a matter of James placing himself, and thus the readers, within the circle before the fire – a technical way of

---

7 The frame narrator’s gender is not indicated in the text. Rather, it is generally assumed the narrator is male, because Henry James is male. Michael J. H. Taylor discusses this issue of gender in more detail, but since it has no direct relevance to my argument, I have not included it in the discussion.
creating total inclusion, as it were (112). However, the narrator’s “I” in conjunction with the cool impartiality of a third-person allows him to do more than sit within the circle. In the scenes before the fireplace, the narrator quietly cooperates with Douglas. Remarkably attuned to each other’s thoughts, the narrator prompts Douglas for information by asking pertinent questions that increase the intrigue and suspense. Furthermore, when addressing the readers, the narrator provides additional details concerning Douglas, the group before the fire, and even places the entire narrative in retrospect by mentioning that Douglas gave him the manuscript before he died.

Essentially, the narrator subtly mirrors Douglas’s actions regarding the governess and her narrative in order for us to accept the narrative as a whole. The parallels are striking. The hint of intimacy between Douglas and the narrator is akin to the intimacy hinted at between Douglas and the governess. Douglas claims he received the manuscript from the governess before she died, and so the narrator receives the manuscript from Douglas. Just as Douglas gives a character to the governess, the narrator gives Douglas a character – strategically scattering details and insignificant epithets, such as “our friend” (1) and “poor Douglas” (6), which seem to signify something, but in the end signify nothing. We are given merely a fleeting impression. Furthermore, the circle before the fire is artificial, stand-ins for us, the real readers – who are being taken in, just as we are being taken in. The narrator is not really part of the group, though he places himself among them. Similarly, the “I” creates the impression that he is part of our group, though he is not among us either.

Ostensibly, I am proposing a contradiction: how can the narrator inform us from the outset that Douglas is creating an illusion while evidently promoting the illusion
himself? After all, the narrator is already completely familiar with the governess’s manuscript, and the only response he reveals is calling it, in a rather droll fashion, “the interesting consequence” (1) of the round of storytelling. He never goes beyond saying he was excited or impressed to hear it at the time. “Interesting” is apparently its only lasting effect. The word is as appropriate and lukewarm as Douglas’s “charming.” While it initially seems that this would neutralize the effect of the governess’s narrative, it is in fact the element which enables it to function. In expressing skepticism toward the governess and indifference toward her narrative as merely creations of Douglas, he is denying her existence, but he is simultaneously promoting the idea that Douglas exists. In the same token, asserting that Douglas is real promotes the idea that the frame, likewise, is real.

This perhaps explains why both apparitionists and non-apparitionists treat the frame as realistic, even though apparitionists argue that the frame is only a realistic gateway to the embedded allegory/ghost story and non-apparitionists treat the entire narrative as realistic. This ensures that the frame is commonly used as a reference point for the governess’s narrative. Almost universally, the frame is appealed to in its realistic nature, and thus interpretations are built upon the principle that the governess is a real person who actually wrote a manuscript. I have argued that there is no such person and therefore no such manuscript. Now I am arguing that there is no Douglas or group in the drawing room either. In the end, I think, there is only the narrator – skillfully misleading us, and finally leaving us with no firm ground to stand on.

Jones objects to this approach, ironically remarking: “[…] how can we be positive that Douglas is not the liar, forging a manuscript to entertain his little circle of friends?
Indeed, what assurance have we that the ‘I’ narrator at the beginning of the story is not deceiving the reader by fabricating both the tale of an imaginary governess and also the opening ‘frame’ device, with its storytellers around a Christmas fire in an old house? Once an erosion of authority begins, who can say where it must stop?” (122). Although Jones raises this issue in order to emphasize that the governess must be reliable and that the ghosts must be real, I think he succeeds in highlighting the opposite: that the narrative is constructed so that we cannot ultimately reconcile with it. Susan Crowl appropriately notes that, “The story is self-critical, open-ended in form and content, and the critical debate over it is an extension of these attributes.” (110). Despite all of the interpretations, discussions, and different approaches, the only definite conclusion we seem capable of reaching is that it is impossible to reach a definite conclusion

Likewise, my own suggestions do not solve the questions of the ghosts or the governess’s credibility. Indeed, I think nothing can, and that this is the true nature of the narrative “triumph,” because if the question can never truly be settled one way or another, then it can be argued about and reinterpreted endlessly. The frame undermines both interpretational trends and all of their variations, and thus, by preventing us from solving the mystery, it in effect preserves it. The frame is like misdirection used in a magic trick, meant to cloak the trick itself, and essentially enabling the illusion to work. Like all great illusions, its mechanics are simple, obvious, and thus inevitably disappointing. We instinctively wish to exclaim, “Is that all? Have we been taken in by a ghost story simply because it was preceded by a respectable history involving supposedly real people to whom we may anchor our readings?” The answer, I think, is yes, since James, like Douglas and the frame narrator, is a skilled performer.
Works Cited


