
The Manifestation of Unconscious: Obsession and Power Dynamics in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James

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Abstract: The complex journey of the human development from youth to maturity often affects the psychological behaviour in the society. This paper explores the manifestation of the *unconscious* in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, and focuses on characters like governess and her obsessive preoccupation. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, it examines how the governess's fears, desires, and suppressed anxieties shape her perception of reality, leading her to project internal conflicts onto the external world. Her fixation on protecting the children, particularly Miles, becomes a manifestation of her unconscious desire to assert authority in a space where her social position is inherently unstable. This obsession with power distorts her judgment, blurs the boundaries between imagination and reality, ultimately contributes to the ambiguous and unsettling nature of the narrative. Through this lens, the paper highlights the interplay of unconscious desires and societal expectations that inform the governess's actions and perceptions.

Keywords: Unconscious, Psychology, Power, Culture, Hyperreality and Governmentality.

Introduction

The Turn of the Screw by Henry James is a psychological horror novella that follows a young, unnamed governess who is hired to care for two orphaned children, Miles and Flora, at a secluded English estate called Bly. The governess, whose employer has forbidden her from contacting him about any issues, initially finds the children charming and well-behaved. However, she soon begins seeing ghostly figures around the estate, whom she identifies as Peter Quint, a former valet, and Miss Jessel, the previous governess both of whom died under mysterious circumstances. She becomes convinced that these apparitions are trying to corrupt the children, though neither the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, nor the children openly acknowledge the ghosts' existence. The governess's paranoia grows as she believes the children are secretly communicating with the spirits and hiding their influence from her.

Henry James in this novel purposefully blurs the boundaries between illusion and reality, leaving readers in a condition of constant uncertainty. This uncertainty is never more evident than in the governess and Miles's connection. The governess thinks she is seeing paranormal activity and that Miles is engaged in a spiritual and psychological conflict. Another theory, on the other hand, contends that the ghosts are extensions of her own thoughts, meaning that her impression of Miles is a continuation of her psychic projections. The governess's interactions with Miles traverse the lines between the real and the hyperreal, ultimately undermining any firm reading of the text, using Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious, repression, and the uncanny.

Theoretically, the paper uses Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical perspective to understand *hysteria* and *unconscious*. According to him, "the people who have strong emotions but no suitable way to express them frequently exhibit 'signs of psychological anguish' (*Studies on Hysteria* 178). Based on this, the humans display symptoms of paranoia, hallucinations, and compulsive behaviour, all of which point to an 'unconscious battle with suppressed fears and impulses' (178).

A rising attraction sometime based on the above assertion is accompanied by this apparition reflecting what Freud categorises as "dynamic resurgence of the repressed" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 239). According to him, it appears in the theory of *projection*, where people blame others for their undesirable urges or fears to justify to what he also terms *Defense Mechanism* (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* 97). In order to passify their suppressed desires, Children, according to Freud, internalise the projections of authoritative people and this shapes their cognitive development (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* 54). As Freud further claims that, "The superego retains the character of the father,

while the more powerful the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression... the stricter will be the domination of the superego over the ego later on" (*The Ego and the Id* 34). Having referred to it, marks a shift to the change of personality as well drives individual towards the repressed desires.

Therefore, it is possible to read the governess's growing fixation on Miles as a reflection of her own psychological tensions. Despite the evident change, she relies on is largely subjective and stems from her interpretation of Miles's behaviour, such as his charm, intelligence and ambiguous statements. She perceives his mature demeanour as unnatural which fuels her paranoia, she starts to believe that Quint is influencing Miles. This projection is reflected in her conversation with Miles, "Think me—for a change—bad!" (James 64). This justification appears to be drawing attention to defend her own psychological behaviour. On the contrary, it also appears that Miles's request implies with what governess demands through her *unconscious*. Miles' fate is eventually determined by the governess's belief in his depravity, illustrates how her unconscious anxieties influence the story of her life. Delving upon how the unconscious is determined, Freud claims that *childhood trauma*, children who are navigating repressed experiences frequently display conflicting behaviours, appearing both intelligent and naive (*The Ego and the Id* 29). According to Freud's *Oedipus complex theory*, children negotiate unconscious desires towards their parents, which results in identity and authority conflicts (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 95).

For instance, in the book governess claims, "I had the view of a face—a face neither young nor old, but so long and gaunt, with so much more than a hint of depravity" (James 32). It appears as an example of her initial vision of Peter Quint. The governess's psychological breakdown is fuelled by her inability to reconcile her feelings, prompting her to project her concerns onto external figures, like that of Quint and eventually, Miles.

Miles's battle with repression, the uncanny, and his need for autonomy are characteristics of his cognitive growth. An occurrence that has been buried in his unconscious is suggested by his unexplained dismissal from school. He gives the vague remark, "Well—I said things," when asked about it. (James 47). According to Freud's theory of repression, socially inappropriate ideas or painful experiences are repressed but nevertheless show up in indirect ways (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 72). Miles' unwillingness to confront his history head-on suggests a repressed trauma that may have been influenced by Quint.

The uneasiness around Miles can be explained by Freud's idea of the *eerie*. When something familiar (a youngster) becomes uncomfortably unfamiliar (too grown or knowledgeable), the uncanny occurs (*The Uncanny* 142). This motif is reinforced by the governess's repeated descriptions of Miles' unusual poise: "He was incredibly beautiful, but not impertinent, nor consciously bold" (James 30).

The governing nature and her psychological state provide what Foucault calls "governmentality" (*Security, Territory, Population* 37). With the self-acclaimed power, control and authority, the governess's notion suggests that authority is manifested not solely through established political institutions but also through individuals who *internalize* and *impose discipline* (Foucault). As he states, "Government is the conduct of conduct; it is, in fact, a form of activity that aims to shape, guide, or affect the conduct of people" (*Security, Territory, Population* 37). Therefore, the governess perceives her function as one of moral oversight, viewing herself as the guardian of the children's purity. Miles's disturbing maturity implies that he has encountered events that are beyond his years, but his incapacity to completely integrate them is impeding his cognitive growth. The governess and Miles's psychological growth are intricately linked. Her trying to maintain justice results in the clash of the ordinary and the strange, primarily in the double-edged ending with Miles' death. Although the governess acts as a mother figure to Miles, their interactions usually conflate fear, admiration, and authority. This struggle for control is exemplified by Miles' last encounter with the governess: "'You, you frighten me!'" (James 87).

His cognitive conflict is highlighted by his admission. He ultimately finds himself imprisoned by the governess' psychological illusions despite his desire for autonomy and acceptance. Children frequently experience anxiety when confronted with conflicting expectations from carers, according to Freud's analysis of authoritative figures (*Totem and Taboo* 90). This paradox stunts Miles' development and ultimately leads to his psychological collapse.

Miles becomes the centre of the governess's worries as her paranoia intensifies. How unresolved problems are projected onto other people through *transference* (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 114). Despite Miles's obvious distress, the governess puts more and more pressure on him to admit his wrongdoing. His last words, "'Peter Quint—you devil!'" (James 87), imply a final run-in with his inner demons. According to Freud, repressed trauma frequently resurfaces during times of crisis and shows up as unexpected outbursts (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 88). It is possible to see Miles' death as the pinnacle of his psychic load, at which point the pressure from outside sources and repression becomes too much to bear.

Debating the Obsession and Power Dynamics

The governess creates an idealised picture of Miles right away. She reinforces an image of innocent childlikeness by describing him as “extraordinarily good” and “exceptionally beautiful” (James 18). This idealisation is consistent with Freud’s theory of projection, which holds that people project their unconscious fears or desires onto other people (*The Ego and the Id* 27). The governess, who yearns for meaning and approval, views Miles as a representation of innocence that she needs to guard. However, when it is revealed that Miles was expelled from school, this perception starts to fall apart. The governess is obsessed with this enigma because she believes that beneath his endearing facade, there lies something “uncanny.” According to Freud’s theory of *repression*, an individual’s unconscious conflicts show themselves as external manifestations when they are unable to face them (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 223). Instead of facing her own feelings of loneliness and inadequacy, the governess externalises them onto Miles, viewing every action he takes as evidence of corruption.

Miles is a figure of uncertainty. He appears oddly adult due to his maturity and civility, which has the ‘uncanny effect of compounding his youthful innocence with a spooky awareness that belies his age’ (*The Uncanny* 241). This ambiguity is heightened by the governess’s suspicion that Miles is being influenced by Peter Quint. Is Miles actually haunted, or is the governess creating an exaggerated picture of him that is influenced more by her own inner anxieties than by the outside world the question remains unanswered throughout the novel.

A delicate struggle for dominance characterises the relationship between Miles and the governess. According to Freudian *Oedipal Desires* the struggles with authority figures characterise childhood development (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 55). Although Miles is too young to apply this notion directly, there is an unconscious rebellion in his interactions with the governess. He avoids talking about his expulsion from school, declines to give her straightforward answers to her questions, and even subverts her authority in subdued outbursts.

For example, he coolly responds, “Think me—for a change—bad!” when the governess presses him to confess what transpired at school (James 66). She no longer sees him as completely innocent or tainted after hearing this statement. She becomes even more obsessed with him and sees him as a mystery because according to her he doesn’t fit into either extreme. The governess responds by squeezing Miles harder, both mentally and physically. It is possible to read her increasing yearning to ‘rescue’ him from the spirits as an unconscious need for power. People project their own emotional difficulties onto other

people, according to Freud's theory of *transference* (*Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 32). Isolated and unskilled, the governess assigns Miles a position that fulfils her own psychological requirements. Whether as a naive victim or a tainted child, Miles ceases to be an independent person and instead becomes a product of her imagination.

Miles's character can be interpreted as a mirror of the governess's unconscious mind as she creates a hyperreal version of him. The most 'unnerving sensations occur when something familiar becomes strange', according to Freud's theory of the *uncanny* (*The Uncanny* 241). As a youngster, Miles should be a symbol of innocence, but his calm manner and unclear past make him an uncannily adult.

The ultimate test of reality is the final encounter between Miles and the governess. She demands that Miles confess, that Peter Quint is there, and that she is saving him from an invisible power. Her failure to offer concrete evidence, however, raises the possibility that she is trapped in her own psychological fabrication. It is possible to interpret from Miles's last words, "Peter Quint—you devil!" (James 87).

Although it was created several years after *The Turn of the Screw*, Jean Baudrillard's idea of *hyperreality* offers a helpful framework for comprehending the book's ending. According to Baudrillard, signs and symbols take the place of objective truth in a hyperreal world, producing a reality that is more "real" than reality itself (*Simulacra and Simulation* 11). Because of her ambitions and concerns, the governess's vision of Miles becomes more real to her than the youngster himself.

The line between the real and the hyperreal has completely blurred by the time Miles passes away. Declaring, "I have saved you" the governess feels she has won, but her triumph is a sham. Miles' actions have caused an unnecessary tragedy if she was never really tormented (James 87). Her attempts to "save" him have failed if he was possessed. In any case, the story ends in uncertainty, failing to address the conflict between reality and perception.

The concept of innocence and experience is far more unsettling as the governess initially adores Miles and Flora, believing in their purity. Yet, as the novel progresses, Miles and Flora's supposed innocence is corrupted by the governess's paranoia. As James describes, "There was no ambiguity in anything; none whatsoever at least in the conviction I, from one moment to another, found myself forming" (James 56). Instead of a clear transition to experience, the governess remains trapped in confusion, unable to distinguish reality from illusion. By twisting the expectations of the Bildungsroman, *The Turn of the Screw* transforms the familiar coming-of-age structure into a haunted exploration of fear,

obsession, and power dynamics. Rather than finding wisdom, the governess becomes a prisoner of her own anxieties, demonstrating the fragile nature of perception and self-identity.

Conclusion

This paper highlights how the governess's unconscious desires, fears, and anxieties shape her perception of reality and lead to her obsessive fixation on Miles. Her repressed emotions and internal conflicts manifest as external projections onto the children and the supposed spectral threats of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. This unconscious projection distorts her judgment, blurring the boundaries between imagination and reality, and ultimately culminating in Miles's tragic death. The governess's interactions with Miles reflect a complex interplay of power dynamics, where her need to assert authority over the children transforms into a psychological struggle rooted in societal expectations and personal inadequacies.

Moreover, it also underscores how the governess internalizes and enacts power, positioning herself as the moral guardian of the children's purity while inadvertently becoming an agent of psychological oppression. Through Jean Baudrillard's framework of hyperreality, the governess's constructed perception of Miles becomes more real to her than the child himself, culminating in a distorted reality where her actions produce irreversible consequences.

Finally, *The Turn of the Screw* dismantles the binary between innocence and corruption, leaving readers in a state of narrative ambiguity where the true horror lies not in external apparitions but in the unconscious anxieties that shape human behaviour. By examining the governess's obsessive preoccupation with power and protection, this paper highlights how unconscious desires, societal pressures, and the complexities of authority can converge to create a disturbing exploration of psychological collapse and moral uncertainty.

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