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The Unreliable Narrator in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*

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## Introduction

*The Turn of the Screw*, throughout its existence has been an object of controversy due to a new type of narration that was determined by the absence of confirmation of any of the arising interpretations. The fact that the novel failed to give answers on the existence of ghosts, or possible psychological disorders of the governess has encouraged those theories that have given the novel the status of an unreliable narration. In the following dissertation, however, we will focus on the features present in the narration that has led the readers to be wary of the narrator's recount of events happening at Bly. We will not discuss in depth any of the previously mentioned interpretations, since we will carry a more objective analysis of the way the governess narrates her story, focusing on her narrative techniques and behavioural aspects that are revealed through her tale.

Although Gothic literature is characterised by the skepticism surrounding supernatural occurrences, it was not that common to find a narrator whose story was hard to believe. It was acknowledged that a good ghost story demanded the suspension of disbelief from its readers, as Lionel Stevenson presents in "The Rationale of Victorian Fiction". He presented the pragmatic requirement of Victorian literature, that consisted in the obligation the novelists had "to prove that their representation of experience was accurate and informative. An impressive accumulation of familiar detail was necessary in order to convince unimaginative readers that real life was not being falsified", and what's more, he comments that every dose of suspicion made to catch the reader's attention must always be solved (396). So, a story as ambiguous as *The Turn of the Screw* was bound to be

conflictive and controversial at the time, where confirmation, accuracy and realism was demanded. Thus, it is understandable that critics could not agree on a single interpretation, and that readers were not capable of fully understanding the governess' narration.

To fully comprehend the topic we propose, we need to understand that the problem of reliability lies in the fact that its presence determines our view of the speaker, the reality evoked, and the norms implied in the world described (Yacobi 113). Having this in mind, we can notice that the narrator in James' novel is not reliable, since our view of the governess' is determined by her own recount of events, that is characterised by leaving many blanks and presenting incongruities that distance us from the world described. This unreliability is distinguished by the governess' narrative features and techniques that work to make the reader feel puzzled, as they do not provide the answers to the mysteries presented in the novel.

Ever since its publication, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* has been an object of study due to the extensive and varied interpretations that have arisen from literary critics. For example, Edmund Wilson was considered to be the chief proponent of the "psychical school" where the ghosts are considered a result of the governess' sex repression (Ives 184). Miss Kenton follows his line of thought but proposes that she experienced a severe case of hysteria that caused her hallucinations. Nonetheless, other critics had the firm belief that this was a typical ghost story and any interpretation that derived from that were

unfounded overstatements (Jones 116). Some of the main proponents of this idea were Joseph Warren, F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock.

Nonetheless, other critics have made a closer attempt at looking at this novel's narration without falling into one of these possible interpretations. Daniel Costello, for example, proposes in his work about the structure of *The Turn of the Screw* that the governess never narrates a paranormal eventuality as an "objective incident but always subjective interpretation" (314). Similarly, José Antonio Álvarez proposed that the governess was unreliable because of her first-person narration:

Unreliable narration has been frequently associated with first person or homodiegetic narrative texts ... Such a position can be easily understood, since homodiegetic narration has always been considered the locus of subjectivity: it is conducted through a narrator endowed with human characteristics, and readers tend to assume that such a narrator may not be wholly reliable. (54)

In James' novel, the governess does present many human characteristics that, in the end, are what cause her narration to distance from an objective report. In other words, that she is so "human" and so prone to reporting incidents subjectively, as Costello proposes, is precisely what points to those features that frame her as unreliable.

Thus, in the novel, the governess is constructed so as to be perceived as an unreliable narrator by the attentive reader, since her discourse contains several inconsistencies, such as her awareness of her role as narrator, her subjective language, and manipulation, which make the reader become suspicious and doubtful of her version of the story. Our analysis combines both the literature regarding the possible interpretations of the novel and that

related to the narratology and structure of the way the governess narrates. So, in order to give an insight into the governess' behaviour and the reasons behind her ambiguous discourse, we provided a deep study of particular personality traits hinted in her narration that incriminate her as unreliable.

The present dissertation is structured in three chapters, which look into the main features that evidence the narrator's unreliability. The first one tackles the "detective framework" (qtd. In Zerweck 156) we, as readers, go through when trying to find all the inconsistencies in the narrator's discourse. Meanwhile, the second and third chapters move towards the subjectivity and omission of information that later will reveal her strong manipulative behaviour. Particularly, the second chapter deals with the narrator's lack of objectivity and absence of confirmation in her narration, while the third chapter refers to abuse of power and overinterpretation as manipulative techniques. As a whole, they work to expose the governess' nature and the approaches she uses in her narration to appear trustworthy when she is clearly not.



## **Chapter I**

### **Self-Awareness and Unreliability**

According to Bruno Zerweck, throughout the nineteenth century, unreliable narration was not popular. However, towards the end of the century, in the transition from the Victorian to the Modernist era, there was a growing amount of authors relying on this technique. Among them, Henry James was recognised for his ambiguous storytelling and the introduction of narrators with “deviant personality models”, who were acclaimed in the period (Zerweck 161). It is this ambiguous narration that has made this novel so controversial and what has arisen the question of whether it counts with a reliable narrator, which is why we found it important to analyse and determine what aspects in the governess’ report and behaviour had been crucial for the amount of interpretations present in criticism. To do this, we focused on Tamar Yacobi’s distinction between self-consciousness and unconsciousness in the narrator’s internal discourse, and Bruno Zerweck’s historical background of unreliable narration. Thus, it is possible to say that in *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess’ narration loses reliability as she gains awareness of her role as a narrator, since instead of simply reporting or testifying events to an addressee, she tries to persuade them of her trustworthiness, making the reader lose credibility of her authority.

### **Self-incrimination**

The term “unreliable narrator” was first introduced by Wayne C. Booth in nineteen sixty-one, stating that a narrator was considered reliable “when he speaks for or acts in

accordance with the norms of the works (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (qtd. in Zerweck 151). Accordingly, the governess becomes unreliable when she fails to follow the norms of a supernatural tale, that is, to maintain the suspension of disbelief. Regarding this, Coleridge states that for a supernatural tale to be believable there must be an excellence that consisted in "the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real" (1) (emphasis added). Then, what makes the governess unreliable is failing to provide the necessary emotions that would appear natural in supernatural events. Moreover, she notices that she is failing to maintain the suspension of disbelief, starting to doubt her discourse, which ends up incriminating her as an untrustworthy narrator.

Nonetheless, for this chapter we rendered it necessary to focus on the reading process more than on the narration per se. Thus, we found more accurate for our analysis Monica Fludernick's stance on the unreliable narrator. She points towards a literary work that is "strongly determined by a 'detective framework' that dominates the reading process and creates the illusion of the narrator's *unintentional self-incrimination*." (qtd. in Zerweck 156) (emphasis added). With this, she implies that the work leaves clues for the reader to find within the narration, so it is our job to notice the narrator's inconsistencies that end up incriminating her as an unreliable narrator.

Relying on Fludernick's definition, we could find several pieces of evidence that helped to create the unreliable profile of the governess. Considering the intriguing ending of the novel with Miles' inexplicable death, it is not unreasonable to think that the

governess could have written the recount of events at Bly as an alibi to cover a possible murder. Regarding this reading, Muriel West presents the interesting possibility that the governess had killed Miles by putting him under too much physical and emotional pressure when interrogating him:

We certainly get the impression by this time that her combination of questioning and manhandling resembles the time-honored practice of extracting damning confessions from a taciturn heretic or witch ... continuing the process of physical 'persuasion' until the victim admits that the devil himself prompted him to repudiate the particular religious or political orthodoxy then in power. (285)

Having this in mind, the way the narrator speaks, expresses her feelings and interprets events may arguably have the purpose of convincing the reader that the evil comes from a supernatural threat and not from her. Thus, guilt can explain the constant *self-incriminating* behaviour she exhibits in the novel, with persistent (and increasing) doubts about how she is narrating, as well as justifications that make the reader incapable of truly trusting her recount of events as we will present in the next section of this chapter.

This “detective framework” for the reader starts from the very beginning of the story. In a close reading of the novel, taking into consideration that the governess may be writing an alibi, the first glimpse of the governess’ discourse appears to be filled with her playing the victim, and conveys the idea that she may have “dreaded” or “sensed” what was expecting her at Bly, which diminishes her agency and responsibility of the forthcoming occurrences: “I remember the whole beginning as a *succession of flights and drops*, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong. After rising, in town, to meet his appeal *I had at all events a couple of very bad days* - found all my doubts bristle again, *felt indeed sure*

*I had made a mistake*” (James 123) (emphasis added). The governess here implies that she may not remember the story accurately, describing it as a succession of *flights and drops*, which gives the sense of hurry and lack of attention that characterise busy days. Besides, by saying that she was not on her right mind because she had a couple of bad days, she instantly makes the reader empathise with her and put her as the victim of the story. Thus, we begin reading the novel with a sense of pity towards the narrator that will affect the way the story is perceived.

Nonetheless, the governess fails to maintain this sense of pity, since, as the story develops, the narration turns manipulative and forced. She uses her poor state of mind and her own difficulties to make the reader aware of her relationship with the children:

Of course I was *under the spell*, and the wonderful part is that, even at the time, I perfectly knew I was. But I gave myself up to it; *it was an antidote to any pain, and I had more pains than one*. I was in receipt in these days of disturbing letters from home, where things were not going well. *But with this joy of my children what things in the world mattered?* (141) (emphasis added)

It is this potentially manipulative nature of the governess’ discourse that plays against her reliability. Firstly, she diminished her feelings in order to highlight and make explicit those related to the children in order to appear as a loving governess who cared deeply about them. She intends to make the reader believe in the loving nature of their relationship, so that she, under no circumstances, could be blamed for Miles’ death in the dénouement of the story. Thus, when things start drifting from her plan of being perceived as innocent by the reader, her discourse evolved into dangerously paranoid, which ends

in the extortion of Miles' testimony that Muriel West hinted to when saying that the governess was "physically" persuading him until the point where he lost his life (285).

### **Self-Awareness and Paranoia**

As the story progresses, there comes a time when the narrator realises she may be incriminating herself with her discourse, which results in a self-aware narration that taints even more her reliability. Then, through a close observation of the way she is telling the story and how much or little attention she is paying to details, she becomes paranoiac as she conceives the possibility that the reader could not be trusting her version of the tale. Thus, the narration turns into a constant attempt to convince the reader that she is, indeed, a reliable source, and that she is telling the truth about the supernatural events happening at Bly, distancing herself from an accurate and objective recount of events, which is self-defeating.

Tamar Yacobi, in her work about fictional reliability, makes a distinction between unaware and hyper-aware narrators, and the dubious and questionable interpretations present in their discourses. She states that "as soon as the speaker himself is invested with self-consciousness ... two communicative processes simultaneously arise and develop, the narratorial and the authorial, each with its own features, its own aims, and possibly ... its own addressee" (124). In this sense, it is possible to determine the governess as a self-conscious or self-aware narrator, and that her story turns away from a "neutral" narration directed to an inattentive addressee (narratorial), to become the alibi we previously mentioned, which is directed to an hypothetical reader that may encounter her story, even

if it is years after (considering how long after her depart from Bly it took her to share her story with Douglas), and discover her possible inconsistencies (authorial).

An explicit instance of the governess' self-awareness happens when she acknowledges the nature of Miles and Quint's past relationship. With this new information, she gets cautious about how she is expressing her feelings, transmitting her insecurity about her lack of credibility: "I scarce know how to put *my* story into words that shall be a *credible* picture of *my state of mind*" (James 152) (emphasis added). This could be considered a common trope in Gothic literature; for example, in *Carmilla* we also notice Laura's attempt to sound credible: "I am now going to tell you something so strange that it will require all your faith in my veracity to believe my story. It is not only true, nevertheless, but truth of which I have been an eyewitness" (Le Fanu 6). However, in this case, the governess does not appeal to the credibility of the reader to believe a strange, supernatural occurrence. On the contrary, she is trying to prove her "state of mind", she wants the narrator to believe *her* as a reliable source. This is why she also tends to justify herself and her word choice, which, in the end, is what makes the reader conceive the idea that what she may tell could be a distorted testimony.

One consequence of the narrator's constant attempt of sounding credible, results in a paranoiac attitude, which Kevin Murphy alludes to when he states that "the governess' fear and hesitancy *all but disarm the reader's skepticism* since she, as much as any outside critic, grants the *improbability* of the apparition" (543) (emphasis added). Even though Murphy does not refer to her paranoia per se, he does highlight her agency on *granting*

*the probability* of a misleading tale, which, as we previously mentioned, is what makes the reader doubt her testimony. Going back to the possibility that she may have written this tale as an alibi for Miles' death, this insecurity and paranoia produces the opposite effect, making her be perceived as untrustworthy and guilty of a crime.

Accordingly, as a result of her paranoia and her attempt to maintain her authority as a reliable narrator, the governess supplies multiple justifications when something turns out to be mildly incriminating. When Quint appears in the house for the first time, she pays close attention to the sequence of actions, which may have the intention of demonstrating her knowledge and clarity of mind: "At this point *I precipitately found myself aware* of three things... My *candle*, under a bold flourish, went out, and *I perceived*, by the *uncovered window*, that the *yielding dusk of earliest morning* rendered it unnecessary. Without it, the next instant, *I knew* that there was a figure on the stair" (James 170) (emphasis added). However, she becomes aware that this detailed sequence could have been too specific and immediately backs out of it by saying: "I speak of sequences, but I required no lapse of seconds to stiffen myself for a third encounter with Quint" (170). Thus, she shows her need to explain, what she thought was an "unusually" detailed description, that could be self-incriminating and make the reader suspect about her narration. However, it is the insecurity shown in justifying this sequence which grants the likelihood of her unreliability, and providing support for something she previously stated, serves as sufficient proof to incriminate herself.

Although unreliable narration was not very common in the nineteenth century, Henry James did an outstanding job in the characterisation of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. In the preface of the novel, James states that providing an atmosphere of “suspected and felt trouble”, makes the reader imagine the details for themselves (120). By doing that, he created an astonishing storytelling for the governess, which is why this novel has caused so much controversy until this day. Since the publication of the novel, critics have shared their own understanding and interpretation of the governess’ story from different disciplines.

The fundamental part of our chapter consists in the governess awareness as narrator, since through it, her reliability becomes weaker. Her constant insecurity about the way she is telling the story makes us think, even when she is trying to make it appear as a ghost story, that instead, we are facing a written form of alibi, an idea supported mainly because of her self-incriminating behaviour. Besides, the governess becoming paranoid and trying at all costs to maintain the readers’ trust, makes more evident the fact that she may be guilty of assassination. Furthermore, the suspension of disbelief is lost very shortly after meeting the governess’ narration because of her paranoiac attitude, which makes the story feel more of a “detective framework”, as Fludernick pointed out, where the reader tries to unravel any narrative inconsistencies, rather than enjoy a perturbing ghost story.



## Chapter II

### Subjectivity and Omission of Information

Understanding subjectivity as “the influence of personal beliefs or feelings, rather than facts” (“Subjectivity”), we can say that the governess tends to prioritise her personal beliefs after experiencing a supernatural occurrence. She jumps to conclusions that lack critical rationality, since she does not rely on any hard evidence when it comes to narrate her story. Besides, she omits information from the addressee, relying on the absence of confirmation to control the development of her narration. Thus, in *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess' subjectivity gets in the way of a reliable report of events. Moreover, there are more questions than answers eliciting from her discourse as a result of her subjectivity, which remain unsolved throughout the story. Therefore, the governess tends to deliver an unfounded recount of events while hiding information from the addressee that could be used as confirmation, which leads to the readers' wariness of her reliability.

### Narrator's Subjectivity

As William Penny expresses in his work about subjectivity in James' tale, the governess' “narrative is a conscious attempt to recall what she is convinced “must-have been” (255). Hence the narrator's tendency to jump to conclusions without presenting a strong confirmation to support her claims. This subjective character of the governess becomes explicit after she witnesses the apparition of Peter Quint on the old tower since, without any hard evidence, she concludes that the presence of the ghost has a direct relation with Miles being in danger: “He was looking for little Miles.’ *A portentous*

*clearness now possessed me. 'That's whom he was looking for.' ... 'I know, I know, I know!'*" (James 149) (emphasis added). In this sense, a supposed "clearness" proves to be an example of what the governess considers enough to prove what "must-have been", which does not correlate with her strong certainty.

Consequently, the narrator's tendency to jump to conclusions without evidence, contributes to creating a sense of distrust in the reader about her actual knowledge regarding the supernatural events happening at Bly. Donald Costello, when discussing the narrator's reliability, makes a distinction between the reports of the governess and the interpretations she makes afterwards:

When the governess reports the phenomena she had observed, the effect on the reader is one of horror—horror at the very reality of the ghosts. When she comments on these observed phenomena, the effect on the reader is one of *mystification*—mystification concerning the purpose of the ghosts, and, more, *concerning the reliability of the governess*. (313) (emphasis added)

The presence of these two emotions, horror and mystification, are contrasted in the reader's experience since they are entirely different. From a state of horror, the reader is taken into the narrators' mind tainted with her precipitated conclusions that estrange them from the reading, which creates doubts and the sense that she is not being reliable.

Additionally, the governess tends to ignore reliable facts and resort to superficial evidence as facial expressions or appearances. This is what happens when she meets Miles. By this point, she had tangible evidence that Miles could be, not bad, but at least unruly, as he had been dismissed permanently from his school. However, she decided to

ignore the letter of dismissal and Miles' possible disobedience, as she was carried away by his appearance:

He was incredibly beautiful... everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his *presence*... *It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence*, and by the time I had got back to Bly with him I remained merely bewildered — so far, that is, as I was not outraged — by *the sense of the horrible letter* locked up in one of the drawers of my room. (James 132) (emphasis added)

Relying only on superficial parameters as she falls for Miles' *sweet* and *innocent* demeanour, she gets to the conclusion that it was impossible that Miles could have done anything so bad. More to this, posterior to meeting him, she manifests being bewildered by the “horrible letter” that had previously been the cause of her perturbation.

This connection between beauty, innocence and goodness has been discussed by psychologists in relation to the effects beauty has on people's trust. A study we considered useful for the present analysis is Stirrat and Perrett's, who state that “attractive people are usually perceived as honest, and people tend to ignore the risks in their interactions with attractive people” (856). However, Rick Wilson points out that “*judging a book by its cover*... seems a risky strategy. Relying on *deliberate signals* like smiles ... *seems naive*” (190). It is possible that this naive connection between beauty and innocence was calculated by the governess so she could maintain her façade of victim, since she tries to appear innocent, blaming the children's beauty that “tricked her”. Thus, this technique in her narration functions as a way of covering up Miles' possible murder, as mentioned in the previous chapter, by manipulating the reader's response and how she is perceived.

The governess' tendency of relying on superficial parameters is repeated when she discusses the content of Miles' letter of dismissal with Mrs Grose. Here, the governess asks her whether it was possible that the boy could injure others. As it is described, Mrs Grose *flamed up* at the thought, and the governess saw: "such a *flood of good faith* in it that, though I had not yet seen the child, *my very fears made me jump to the absurdity of the idea*" (James 129) (emphasis added). Here, the governess' interpretations are proven to be subjective as she relies on superficial and ambiguous parameters like Mrs Grose's facial expression, which does not necessarily reveal any information about Miles' past. For the reader, who can create Miles' problematic profile based on his letter of dismissal, the governess' extreme confidence about the boy's goodness make them question the reliability of her narration and her naiveness.

### **Absence of Confirmation**

Apart from providing weak evidence filled with subjectivity, the narrator also omits relevant information from the addressee. Regarding this omission, Ronald Schleifer states that "what is revealed in *The Turn of the Screw* is precisely what cannot be spoken, what the governess cannot articulate or even 'see'. Like Miles' history, his antecedents, it is a revelation of absence, of 'nothing'" (314). William Penny also offers his stance regarding omission, commenting that "as author of events, the governess is in a position to *suppress the background* to the account she relates in her written manuscript so that there is never interference from anyone else at the manor house" (258) (added emphasis). As Penny

mentions, is this authority that the governess has as author of the story that allows her to omit important details from her narration. Consequently, it contributes to the reader's increasing doubts about her reliability. We wonder if this "absence" and "suppression of background" information is calculated in order to hide inner motifs, such as the possible murder of Miles.

Furthermore, one of the mysteries of the novel is that we are presented with two letters whose contents are never revealed: the letter of dismissal from Miles' school and the letter the governess writes to the children's uncle asking for a visit. Homer Brown, in accordance with the contents of the letters, points out that "it is always important what the letter says can't be *said* in any other way, can't be spoken. Instead of the endless round of speculation that is gossip, the letter gives answers (information); it's emphasis is *revelation*" (qtd. in Schleifer 314). It is important to note that the letters in *The Turn of the Screw* would offer a clue for two of the main mysteries of the novel: Miles' background in his school, and the possible relation Miles had with the ghosts. Moreover, they provide a lot of tension that surrounds the novel, nonetheless, their content remains hidden and the only one who gets to read them is the governess.

Regarding the letter of dismissal, the addressee only gets a notion of its contents from what is told by governess' dialogues with Mrs Grose. The narrator affirms that this letter contains Miles' permanent dismissal from his school but she does not supply any

information that can confirm it. When commenting it with Mrs Grose, she hints that he had done something bad:

“Is he really bad?”

The tears were still in her eyes. “Do the gentlemen say so?”

“They go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him. That can have but one meaning ... That he is an injury to the others”. (James 129)

She leaves the reader hanging with an intriguing line of thought: that Miles is “an injury to the others”. However, we never see any proof of this statement nor any explanation regarding his dismissal from school. Even at the end of the novel when she asked Miles about his behaviour, she states that the masters (from school) “never told. That’s why I ask you” (235). This grants the first mystery unsolved by the novel and one of the instances where she jumps to conclusions without confirming her “theory” of Miles’ disobedience.

The second letter also remains hidden from the addressee. Moreover, it maintains the mystery of the first letter since the governess's aim when writing it was to make the Master know about Miles’ “wickedness” that caused his dismissal from school (199). Nonetheless, we never get to know what she actually writes to him, since Miles, in order to learn about its contents, decides to steal it:

“What did you take it for?”

“To see what you said about me.”

“You opened the letter?”

“I opened it.” ...

“So what have you done with it?”

“I’ve burnt it”. (254)

In this way the possibility that the addressee learns the content of the letter is eradicated, as well as any clue that could point to Miles' relationship with Quint. Later, we only discover through Miles' extortion that he had found "nothing" in it (232). This generates the questions of whether Miles was actually bad and that was the reason he stole the document, or if he was worried it would reveal a connection with the ghost. Thus, the lack of information given about these letters show the governess' tendency of omitting evidence, which creates doubts in the reader about her reliability.

The ending of the novel also lacks confirmation as readers know for a fact that Miles dies, but, why? What was the reason that "*his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped*"? (236) (emphasis added). The governess does not supply the information needed to know the causes of his sudden death and because the novel ends abruptly, readers have no access to the events that occurred afterwards. Any of the possible explanations for his untimely death (that the governess had been the murderer) remain unknown; there are no explicit clues that point to a reasonable ending, which increases the doubts that surround the governess' unreliable narration.

As we have mentioned, the governess' subjective language and lack of confirmation presented in her tale are key elements to demonstrate her unreliable character when telling her story. Since she narrates in first person, we never get to have an objective or neutral recount of events. Due to this recurrent feature of the governess, many mysteries remain unsolved by the end of the novel, leaving the reader wondering what happened afterwards,

since no kind of closure is provided. She has the authority to hide information from the reader, nonetheless, it plays against her reliability since it creates an atmosphere of secrecy and manipulation. From this analysis, we were able to notice that the governess uses her manipulation for bigger purposes, such as maintaining the readers' trust and not only as a consequence of her subjectivity, which will be discussed in depth in our next chapter.



## Chapter III

### Manipulation and Authority

According to Sigmund Freud, the storyteller “has a peculiarly directive power over us [readers]; by means of the moods he can put us into, *he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another*, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material” (951) (emphasis added). In *The Turn of the Screw*, the narrator uses her discourse to manipulate how she is perceived, meddling with other characters’ agency in reporting events while making use of said “directive power” or authority. Thus, the narrator manipulates dialogues to her own benefit, so she can convince her addressee that she has validation and confirmation from other characters. She does this so she can prove herself as a reliable narrator either by overinterpreting silences and interrupting the discourse of others, or by using her position of power to extort desired answers.

### Overinterpretation and Interruptions

Ronald Schleifer, in his study about the Gothic traditions used in *The Turn of the Screw*, states that the language of Henry James’ characters consist in “filling the silence of spaces between words, supplying, as the governess says, all the nature, attempting to find a plethora of meaning where there is really very little” (312). Filling silences is exactly what causes debate among the critics when talking about the unreliability of the narrator. The governess takes over the testimony of others that could be used as evidence to prove the existence of the ghosts. Yet, she leaves the reader only with her version of events, which

has already been proven to be dubious and ambiguous in the previous chapters. By dismissing testimonies, the governess manipulates the course of the narration, making the reader lose trust as she stops having support from other characters that can verify her interpretations.

This tendency of finding meaning where there is none is reflected when expressing to Mrs Grose her concern about Quint wanting Miles: “My exaltation grew. ‘And you know, my dear!’ *She didn’t deny this but I required, I felt, not even so much telling as that*” (James 149) (emphasis added). In the absence of a reply from Mrs Grose, the governess took the opportunity to use her silence as enough confirmation that she was agreeing with her, with the purpose of persuading the addressee to believe that her claims were supported by other characters. Nevertheless, instead of controlling the readers’ response to the story, this only contributes to revealing her manipulative nature. She does exactly what Shleifer pointed out: she supplies meaning where there is only silence.

This situation is repeated, though differently, when the governess questions Mrs Grose about Miles and Quint's possible relation. On this occasion, the narrator interrupts the servant, stopping her discourse, so she can anticipate what she think the latter is going to say:

“But *I shall get it out of you yet!*”

“There was something in the boy that suggested to you”, I continued, “his covering and concealing their relation.”

“Oh he couldn’t prevent—”

“Your learning the truth? I daresay!” (164) (emphasis added)

Here, she begins her dialogue saying that she wants to get the information about Miles “out of her”. Thus, her interruption reveals her expectations to get an answer that can fit her version of the story, which shows a desperation to get more details about Quint and Miles’ relationship as well as a confirmation that such connection existed. This is particularly incriminating for the governess, considering that Mrs Grose was beginning to defend Miles, which would affect her agenda to make the addressee believe that he was related to the ghosts. However, this exposes her manipulative nature and makes the reader doubt whether Mrs Grose wanted to actually say that or not.

### **Hierarchy and Power**

Besides overinterpretation as a manipulative technique, the governess uses the power structure to her advantage, as she tends to use her authority to control Miles and Mrs Grose’s answers so they say what she desires to hear. Power is a recurrent trope in Gothic Fiction, since its stories tend to be “fascinated by violent differences in power ... constraint, entrapment and forced actions” (Bowen). Differences in power and, particularly, forced actions, are present in the behaviour of the governess towards secondary characters. For example, nearing the end of the narration, the governess tried to get a confession out of Miles by putting him under emotional and physical pressure. In this context, she questioned him about the letter she wanted to send to his uncle, where she had requested him to come to the manor:

“You opened the letter?”

“I opened it”... “*And you found nothing!*”—I let my elation out.

He gave the most mournful, thoughtful little headshake. “Nothing.”

“Nothing, nothing!” *I almost shouted in my joy.*

“Nothing, nothing,” he sadly repeated. (James 232-233) (emphasis added)

Before waiting for an answer, the governess overtakes Miles’ turn to speak by saying “and you found nothing!”, being the one who provides the answer she was expecting from him. Overwhelmed by the governess’ superiority in age and position, Miles has nothing else to do but repeat that answer, to which she appears to be very glad as she “almost shouted in her joy”.

The narrator abuses the authority she has over the children, which is morally questionable and inexcusable since she was in charge of them as their governess and responsible adult. In other words, she uses her charge as the carer of the children to use them as back up to her narration, because they will say whatever she wants. In the field of psychology, researchers have made explicit the differences in power between adults and children, which is relevant to explain the authority the governess exert over Miles. About this, Anca Gheaus states that “children are incapable of defending their own interests ... Because they lack full autonomy, children are justifiably subject to paternalism – *adults have a moral right to exercise authority over them*” (61) (emphasis added). Therefore, the children are hierarchically lower in power and tied to social conventions that required obedience towards the governess; they are ruled by her reasoning and orders.

Consequently, we can understand that Miles’ right to express his thoughts was restrained by the governess’ presence and authority, to whom he must obey. The

governess is aware of her superiority and uses it to extort an answer from Miles' that could serve as a confession about the ghosts' feasibility, so she could prove herself to the addressee as a reliable narrator. Nonetheless, as readers we feel distrust in response to her manipulative behaviour, since the governess explicitly puts her desire and excitement about an answer she had already anticipated.

Besides the habit of extorting answers from the children, the governess also tends to use her socio-economic superiority over Mrs Grose to force her to give her information about events that occurred at Bly prior to her arrival. As someone who was in charge of the children's education, it is possible to assume that the governess belonged, at the very least, to the middle-class. Being responsible for the education of wealthy children makes it possible to infer that she was well-educated, which may have influenced the Master's decision of hiring her, as he was concerned about giving them a decent education. On the contrary, Mrs Grose was a servant of the manor, so we can assume she belonged to a lower social class.

One of the reasons we think the governess forces Mrs Grose to give her the information she wants, is because she assumes that her class and occupation as servant was inferior compared to hers. Taking into account the period of the story, Ronald Neale's study is significant to understand how people saw social stratification in the late Victorian era. He states that class is "determined by some objective, measurable, and largely economic criteria such as source and size of income, occupation, years of education, or size of

assets” (9). Thus, the governess sees herself as superior not only for her position, but also for her education which she uses to her advantage. This became explicit when the governess attempted to show Mrs Grose the contents of the letter of dismissal from Miles’ school. In this context, Mrs Grose said: “Such things are not for me, Miss.” (James 128), and the governess immediately assumed her as illiterate, when it is not necessarily a fact, but merely a prejudice based on her lower class. So, it is the power she has that allows her to manipulate others’ interference in her narration.

One instance where the governess abuses her social power is when she forces Mrs Grose to tell her the details of Miss Jessel’s death. On this occasion, Mrs Grose was reluctant to talk about that, but the governess kept pushing her:

“Well, Miss— she’s gone. *I won’t tell tales.*”

“I quite understand your feeling,” I hastened to reply; but *I thought it after an instant not opposed to this concession to pursue*: “Did she die here?”

“No— she went off”

I don’t know what there was in this *brevity* of Mrs Grose’s that struck me as *ambiguous*. “Went off to die?” Mrs Grose *looked straight out of the window*, but I felt that, hypothetically, *I had a right to know what young persons engaged for Bly were expected to do*.

“But please, Miss”, said Mrs Grose, “I must get to my work”. (James 131)  
(emphasis added)

In this passage, we can see that the governess uses her position of superiority over Mrs Grose to extort answers from her, just as she did with Miles. It is possible to notice that even after Mrs Grose had explicitly told her that she wished to stop talking about Miss Jessel, the governess continued interrogating her. She ignored her clear signs of

discomfort, such as the brevity of her answers, her ambiguity, and her refusal to look at her, compelled by her “right to know” and position, which is inferred when Mrs Grose pleads that she lets her resume her activities. Although the governess is only in charge of the children’s care, it is noticeable that she also has power over Mrs Grose since she requests the governess to allow her continue with her work.

The governess’ constant interruption of others characters' turn to speak, her over-interpretation of vague answers, and her abuse of power have the purpose of showing herself as a reliable source. However, in her desperate attempt to make the dialogues of other characters fit her narration, she produces the opposite effect; she appears to the reader as a manipulative person who is willing to extort answers in order to control how she is perceived. This manipulative nature is precisely what ends up incriminating her unreliability as narrator, since we, as readers, become aware of her narrative techniques and wonder if others characters’ dialogues were honest, or if they were tainted with the governess’ manipulation. In our previous chapter we hinted towards the governess’ manipulation, however, in this occasion it is not merely presented as a consequence of her subjectivity: it is calculated and thoroughly planned with desperation to prove herself as worthy of our trust.

## **Conclusion**

The governess' narration exposes the possibility of inner motifs that give her the title of unreliable. Hence, throughout this dissertation our aim was to make explicit those personality traits that are present in her discourse, that uncover the likelihood that she is not being trustworthy. In this way, we discovered that her self-awareness, subjectivity and manipulative behaviour is used to control how she is perceived by her addressee, and thus, by us, readers. These features or traits were analysed in depth aiming to understand how she used them in order to get particular responses and reactions from the hypothetical readers.

Starting with the governess' self-awareness, then, was deliberate. With this chapter we established the foundations of her unreliability, and made explicit her fear and paranoia of being perceived as a dubious story-teller. Then, having said that, we moved to the particularities of the evidence she provides as support for her story, that are mostly subjective. Considering that she tends to over interpret others' input in her narration, we were able to notice the tendency of manipulating the readers' response. Thus, we decided to conclude with her manipulative behaviour that is where she exposes herself not only as a questionable narrator but also as a questionable character. So, in order to accomplish her goals, she is willing to extort answers from children and servants while using her position of authority, as well as take dialogues out of context so they apply to her version of events.



Provided that we worked with the behavioural aspects presented in the governess' narration, the most challenging part of this dissertation was the limited amount of information we had about her background. For this reason, it was necessary to be particularly careful with the selection of quotes and making sure that our arguments were not based on one-time behaviours. That the governess presented the information with a tendency of relying on subjective evidence, and many times affected by her manipulative nature, made it risky to select specific moments as her narration is filled with ambiguities. Therefore, it was very easy to fall into overinterpretations and overstatements.

Nonetheless, we did a thorough work in finding particular attitudes that were repeated along the story, as was paranoia, subjectivity, and manipulation. Moreover, the literature used for this dissertation played a critical role in making the arguments strong and valid. This story has been widely discussed, therefore, there is plenty of criticism that have, not only possible interpretations, but also many refuted theories. So, that authors have already granted the improbability of some interpretations of the novel, made it easier for us to not make the same mistakes.

Despite restraining from falling into the controversy of the existence of the ghosts or the possibility of a mad governess, it would have been interesting to apply this analysis to address these interpretations. Because the literature about *The Turn of the Screw* was many times heavily influenced by the possibility of a mental disorder or a typical ghost story,

we were many times tempted to address them, particularly those related to hysteria since in this dissertation we worked with her paranoiac and manipulative behaviour.

Besides, we found many other narrative techniques used by the governess that could have given away her unreliability, but it was impossible due to time and extension to add them to this dissertation. For example, regarding the narrators' subjectivity there was a lot of material and evidence about emotive, dramatic language that could have been a great addition to that argument. In the same way there was information related to the absence of certain key elements, but we ended up only using the absence of confirmation, when in fact, in the novel there was also absence of dialogues and background information, that could have also interfered with the narrator's credibility.

We particularly liked working with the manipulative techniques the governess uses, and also with the idea that the governess may have written the story as an alibi for the possible murder of Miles. It would have been interesting to analyse in depth that possibility and make connections with her manipulative nature as a way of hiding a crime. In our last chapter we addressed manipulation in the sense of meddling with other characters' dialogues or abusing her authority to extort answers, however, we think that any of our arguments could give an interesting foundation regarding this particular theme. Considering that she becomes paranoid when conceiving the idea of the addressee not believing her, manipulation could be the reason for her proneness at playing the victim, as we briefly stated.

Consequently, the reader in the novel has a particularly active role in the narration, since it is our job to notice the clues in the governess' ambiguous report, and disclose her intentions. So, bringing back Monica Fludernick's definition of unreliable narration, where she sees it as a "detective framework" (qtd. in Zerweck 156), we can comprehend Henry James' preface where he states that the aim of this story was "allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand, of inviting it to act on a perfectly clear field, with no 'outside' control involved" (118). Hence, what makes this novel particularly challenging is that we, as readers, can participate more than simply observing: we can draw our own conclusions and question the governess' behaviours that appear untrustworthy.

The story, then, was constructed in a way that left the reader doubting the events, lacking enough evidence to fully confirm any of the interpretations that arose from the narration. So, it is not odd to think that this novel had some influence in the emerging detective novel, created by Edgar Allan Poe in eighteen forty-one with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. It is worth studying the possible connections *The Turn of the Screw* can have with the detective fiction genre, considering the similarities between the classical plot of the detective novels:

The plot of the classical detective novel comprises two basically separate stories – the story of the *crime* (which consists of action) and the story of the *investigation* (which is concerned with knowledge)... The first story (the crime) happened in the past and is –insofar as it is hidden– absent from the present; the second story

(the investigation) happens in the present and consists of uncovering the first story. (Hühn 452)

Having in mind the possibility that the governess may have written this manuscript in the shape of an alibi to cover Miles' possible murder –the crime–, we can understand the whole novel as a field of clues left to the reader as to uncover –the investigation– her possible crime.

Clearly, *The Turn of the Screw* is a Gothic novel. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the whole controversy surrounding it lied in the fact that it was different from other texts of its genre. This story leaves blanks and does not maintain the suspension of disbelief, since the atmosphere of terror the governess' narration supplies is interrupted with her dubious behaviour and discourse from beginning to end. Therefore, that the governess is constructed so as to be perceived as an unreliable narrator, can be explained through the possibility that Henry James experimented and played with the rules of the Gothic, in order to trick the non-attentive reader to believe this was a typical ghost story.

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