Spectral Attraction through Ominous Gaze in Henry James’ Turn of the Screw

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Abstract
Criticism on Henry James’ Turn of the Screw is predominantly psychoanalytic in nature with critics examining the Governess’ encounters, narrative, and motive. However, it seems that recent criticism on the novel focuses too much on the pedophilic aspect of the Governess’ rather than her interactions with the Ghost. I do believe that a significant, oft-overlooked aspect of the story is the non-verbal interaction and the mutual gaze between the Governess and Peter Quint. I wish to explore how this plays a fact in exacerbating the Governess’ tension prior to the events culminating in her pedophilic tendencies. Thus, I would like to attempt to go beyond previous psychoanalytic readings by suggesting that the true object of attraction of the Governess is the spectral image of Peter Quint, an unreal being. The essay will then have three parts: a review of key criticisms relevant to this essay, an elaboration of the theoretical framework which will incorporate key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and finally a reading of key passages from Turn of the Screw.

Criticism on Henry James’ Turn of the Screw is predominantly psychoanalytic in nature with critics examining the Governess’ encounters, narrative, and motive. The points established by previous critics are (1) the unreliability of the Governess as a narrator, (2) the Governess as a pedophilic and (3) the Governess as a sexually deprived woman. A point of contention is whether the ghosts seen in the story are real or are just made up hallucinations. However, it seems that recent criticism on the novel focus too much on the pedophilic aspect of the Governess’ rather than her interactions with the Ghost.

An oft-overlooked aspect of the story is the non-verbal interaction and the mutual gaze between the Governess and Peter Quint. I wish to explore how this plays a fact in exacerbating the Governess’ tension prior to the events of the story, culminating in her pedophilic tendencies. Thus, I would like to attempt to go beyond previous psychoanalytic readings by suggesting that the true object of attraction of the Governess is the spectral image of Peter Quint, an unreal and imaginary being. The governess’ attraction to Miles is merely a substitute for the unattainable ghost. Whether the ghosts the governess sees are hallucinations or not are trivial in regards to this work. Regardless of which, the ghosts are “real” for the main character of the story. The essay will comprise three parts: a review of key criticisms relevant to this essay, an elaboration of the theoretical framework which will incorporate key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and finally a reading of key passages from Turn of the Screw.

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Stanley Renner argues that the Governess is a sexual hysteric and that Peter Quint is a mere sexual hallucination born from the governess’ undisclosed desire for her employer (181). Finally, he suggests that the description of Peter Quint and its creation is based on the stereotypical Victorian-era male (Renner 184). The significance of this article is Stanley Renner’s idea that Peter Quint is a manifestation of the Governess’ sexual angst and depravity. Renner further implies that her primary object(s) of desire are the men she encountered before the events of the story (including the Uncle). However, my position is that the ghost that the governess’ supposedly crafted is a separate and independent being. Thus, her desire for this manifestation is limited to it, and not as a symbol of her attraction to the uncle, or other men she encountered in the past. Allan Williamson reiterates the suppressed sexual drives of the Governess typical for conservative Victorian women (6). His article generally reiterates the long-established view that the Governess sexualizes both Miles and Flora. However, I would argue that the Governess’ is not sexually attracted to Flora, but rather focuses her sexual angst to Miles alone.

Jenn McCollum interprets the pedophilic tendencies of the governess as romantic in nature and not as manifestations of barbaric lust (47). The essay generally builds upon the long established pedophilic argument and reinterprets it as romance and critiques the idea that there is minimal female pedophilia in criticisms on the novel. Contrary to her belief, my position is similar to most critics that the Governess is a heterosexual pedophilic. I further believe that her romantic inclination to Miles is a displaced form of romance. Her love for Miles is a substitution for the impossible desire for Peter Quint. Finally, Karen Halttunen gives a short analysis on the governess’ tendency to identify with the ghosts through the exchange of gazes (480). Halttunen also associates the interactions between the ghosts and the governess with the supernatural (483). She also notes the very detailed description of Peter Quint by the Governess in the ghosts’ first appearance (481). Although the essay focuses on these interactions, Halttunen associates these events with the psychological disorders of the Governess, adding that she has an obsession with the image of reflection as seen throughout the novel (479). However, my position is that her obsession with identification cannot be simply summed up to extreme psychological problems as the Governess’ seems to be psychologically stable, albeit with cracks at certain points which is the result of the inability to obtain her true object of desire.

Jacques Lacan theorized the three orders: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real in The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis, Lacan describes the Symbolic as a reality made possible through signification of objects through language (227). The Imaginary is described in Lacan’s The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience as the “I”’s identification with an image of the idealized other (76). Lacan’s concept of the Real, can be defined as “impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way” (Evans 163). The real essentially, cannot be represented in the physical world.

Slavoj Zizek in On Belief elaborates on and builds upon Lacan’s notion of the real saying that it has three modalities - the “real Real”, “the imaginary Real”, and the “symbolic Real” (82). Key to this essay is Zizek’s definition of the imaginary real which is “...the unfathomable ‘something’ that introduces a self-division into an ordinary object so that the
sublime dimension shines through it” (82). Peter Quint at face value, can be seen as the imaginary Real, as represented in the novel. Still, we are left with this limitation due to the impossibility of the Real to be fully replicated.

The Lacanian definition of the real presents a paradox as any representation of the (Real) through language or images strips of its “Real” qualities. Thus, it is more appropriate to refer to Peter Quint as the imaginary Real, at least based on the novel’s fearful depiction of Peter Quint and as recognition of the limitations of the reader to ever grasp the Lacanian “Real”.

Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* will be associated with the physical and Symbolic world as described by Jacques Lacan in this essay. Thus we move on the analysis of key passages in *Henry James’ Turn of the Screw*.

An important contention that has to be made is the difference on how the Governess’ describes Quint and Jessel. She first describes Peter Quint in this passage:

He has red hair, very red, close-curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight, good features and little, rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair. His eyebrows are, somehow, darker; they look particularly arched and as if they might move a good deal. His eyes are sharp, strange—awfully; but I only know clearly that they’re rather small and very fixed. His mouth’s wide, and his lips are thin, and except for his little whiskers he’s quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor (James 26).

In comparison, the governess’ description of Jessel is rather dull as seen here: “Another person—this time; but a figure of quite as unmistakeable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful—with such an air also, and such a face!” (James 33). This dullness can be attributed to lack of interest in the spectral image of Jessel. This means that the Governess is not in any way attracted to women. To an extent, this also means that she has no pedophilic tendencies towards Flora. Her interactions with Flora can be read as a mother’s obsessive love for her daughter, and that the seemingly sexual undertones to Flora may be read as acts of adoration.

The governess’ attention to detail in regards to the Peter Quint is very specific and the way she describes Quint resembles how a sexually repressed woman would intricately describe a man she longs for. Stanley Renner suggests that given the sexual fantasies for the uncle of the children, her hallucinations would take the form of a male ghost (181). This reiterates the idea that the Governess is heterosexual in orientation and not a bisexual as proposed before that the Governess is also attracted to Flora. This assertion would be very inconsistent given the fact that there is no “female” manifestation of her sexual desires.

The Governess describes the ghost in a way that betrays the notion that she was frightened by the spectral being. This intricate way of describing a ghost should not be attributed to the Governess as a supernatural medium or as psychological disorder as proposed by Halttunen (487). It is proposed that these incidents be seen as mere modernist aesthetics (Halttunen 487). Contrary to this, I propose that this description of Peter Quint is an early attempt by the Governess to bring him into her own symbolic world which she
could grasp. This attempt however somehow fails as the Lacanian Real is impossible to be signified in the first place. She is then left with the imaginary Real, which she is limited to interact with through mutual stare-downs.

The governess’ first encounter with Peter Quint is narrated and described in the following passage:

An unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred; and the figure that faced me was—a few more seconds assured me—as little anyone else I knew as it was the image that had been in my mind. I had not seen it in Harley Street—I had not seen it anywhere. The place, moreover, in the strangest way in the world, had, on the instant, and by the very fact of its appearance, become a solitude (James 19; emphasis mine).

At this first encounter, the Governess immediately describes Peter Quint as a fearful, spectral being. At this point, she does not explicitly know that what she is seeing is actually a “ghost” which she will find out later on. However, she then exhibits traces of desire and a sort of attraction as seen in these passages:

We were too far apart to call to each other, but there was a moment at which, at shorter range, some challenge between us, breaking the hush, would have been the right result of our straight mutual stare (James 19; emphasis mine).

There are three points of interests in these two passages: romanticization of the first encounter, the mutual stare they give each other, and the uncanny captivation of the Governess’ experiences. First, the Governess’ description of the encounter is unlike the usual experience of one who sees a ghost. Her mode of narration and description actually does not indicate fear, fright or terror. The fact that she was able to describe a supposedly “frightful” event in a ponderous manner indicates sanity and pensiveness at the situation. Next, the mutual stare between Peter Quint and the Governess’ is at first glance elusive. Why does such an exchange of gazes occur instead of the Governess running away like the usual course of action of those who see ghosts? The effect of Peter Quint’s gaze is best described in this passage: “Yes, it was intense to me that during his transit he never took his eyes from me...” (James 20). The intensity of this gaze captures the soul of the Governess into submission. This is evident in her usage of the word “mutual” which, in the long run, connotes a relationship. We may never know what was communicated to her in Peter Quint’s gaze and what the Governess replied in this exercise of non-verbal communication but succeeding events in the novel will show the “Governess” response to this gaze through her later actions. Finally, the Governess’ uncanny captivation by Peter Quint’s intense gaze seduces her into submission and in the long run, Quint unconsciously made her to look at him as an object of desire. This captivation fools her into thinking that she can attain him, which is impossible. Thus, the Governess is left with unbearable ambivalent tension, with her secretly desiring for him to return and appear. This tension can be explicated by saying that the Governess deep inside wants Peter Quint but at the same time, she outwardly exhibits fear, disgust, terror, and aversion. This uncanny feeling of ambivalence consumes a great part of her throughout the novel.
Before seeing Peter Quint for the second time, the Governess thinks that she “had an absolute certainty that I should see again what I had already seen” (James 28). From where did she pick up that idea at this stage of the story? It is unsubstantial to attribute this assertion with mere intuition and I would like to argue that this idea was unconsciously implanted on her by Peter Quint as a result of his intense gaze at her eyes, body, and soul. This powerful gaze was able to convince her of realities that will happen, and when it did happen, it reinforced the idea in the Governess’ mind that Peter Quint is the ideal object of desire.

We now move on to her second encounter with the ghost is described in this passage:

“The apparition had reached the landing halfway up and was therefore on the spot nearest the window, where at sight of me, it stopped short and fixed me exactly as it had fixed me from the tower and from the garden. He knew me as well as I knew him; and so, in the cold, faint twilight, with a glimmer in the high glass and another on the polish of the oak stair below, we faced each other in our common intensity” (James 44; emphasis mine).

At this point, the Governess is further attracted to this specter with the assertion that they know each other. This may be a delusion on her part, but at least in perspective, she is very assured as the Governess further succumbs by the powerful and intense gaze of Peter Quint. She continues her tendency referring to Peter Quint with dark descriptions as seen here “It was the dead silence of our long gaze at such close quarters that gave the whole horror, huge as it was, its only note of the unnatural” (James 44 emphasis mine). This consistent association of the ghost's gaze with fear, horror, and terror may be seen as a defense mechanism, as she outwardly denies her attraction to him by this association. Nevertheless, her identification with the ghastly image continues as first noted by Halttunen (480). This sense of identification should be seen as the Governess materialization of her unquenchable desire for Peter Quint. Of course, this mutual gaze serves only sates her desire partially. This attraction cannot be wholly signified and reduced to a simple Gaze. There must be more interaction to materialize her desire for the Ghost, which unfortunately can never happen because Peter Quint is the imaginary Real as represented by him being an immaterial object.

In her final encounter with Peter Quint, the images of fear and terror recur as seen the following passage:

“The appearance was full upon us that I had already had to deal with here: Peter Quint had come into view like a sentinel before a prison. The next thing I saw was that, from outside, he had reached the window, and then I knew that, close to the glass and glaring in through it, he offered once more to the room his white face of damnation”(James 90; emphasis mine).

The gaze in the final chapter is no longer mutual, as it is only Peter Quint who is constantly gazing at her. The governess’ is unable to gaze at the ghost like in the previous encounters
due to as she uses the appearance of the Ghost to grab Miles so that she can deny Peter Quint his object of desire – Miles.

A notable detail is that the Governess is certain of this appearance as Peter Quint’s last as seen here – “It’s there – the coward horror, there for the last time” (James 93). Again, this reiterates that something was surely communicated to her through Peter Quint’s ominous gaze and perhaps this became the source of her certainty.

With the gaze the primary means of communication of Peter Quint, this relates to the idea that the imaginary Real cannot be signified through language. Meaning and the idea of the imaginary real throughout the novel can only be grasped through that mutual gaze. During the times when she was under the dominion of Peter Quint, she has a somewhat more stable sense of self, environment and even time. When that mutual gaze was gone, she was thrown into disarray as she is conflicted with three thoughts: The aversion to the ghost, her attraction to miles, and the attraction of the unobtainable imaginary Real. This position is then different from Halttunen’s analysis of the mutual gaze as evidence of psychological issues (479) The Governess’ attitude and eccentric actions do support Halttunen’s assertion but to dismiss these events in the novel as such seem to disregard the significance the strain and pressure that these tensions place on her.

Her supposed attraction for the children supposedly began after the first appearance of Peter Quint:

“but I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me...I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most loveable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep, constant ache of one’s own committed heart...We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger... I was a screen—I was to stand before them” (James 31)

The appearance of the ghost implanted in her a need to protect the children from Peter Quint. This elusive passage seemingly gives the idea that the Governess is a noble, caring, and heroic mother figure. However, she uses this as a pretext to accomplish two things: To prevent Peter Quint from claiming Miles and to get closer to Miles. Getting closer to Miles, at least in the Governess’ own perception, is achievable. Williamson’s position is that the Governess’ is aware of her “own sexual power” (6). Furthermore, she is aware that she can subjugate Miles with her charms which she somehow does in the story. In relation to the first appearance of Peter Quint, her simple adoration to the kids becomes a hidden sexual desire. This desire is eventually contained to Miles alone during the novel. The next point is that the governess supposedly thinks that Peter Quint came for Miles, who was close to him from the following passage: “What if he should see him?’...‘Heaven forbid! The man. He wants to appear to them’. That he might was an awful conception, and yet somehow I could keep it at bay; which moreover, as we lingered there, was what I succeeded in practically proving.” (James 28). This is indicative of the Governess’ delusional envy as she thinks that instead of her, the ghost’s object of attraction is Miles and not her. From this point on, she realizes that if she can get close to
Miles, she can deny Peter Quint his object of desire, and that would certainly make him appear again thus providing her gratification. She then claims ownership of Miles as she refers to him as “my boy” (James 29).

The governess would be furthered enamored by Miles in the absence of her true object of desire – the imaginary real as represented by Peter Quint in the following passage: “...it was no revelation to me that little girls could be slavish idolaters of little boys. What surpassed everything was that there was a little boy in the world who could have for the inferior age, sex, and intelligence so fine a consideration.” (James 43). The Governess’ way of referring to Miles resembles how she regards Peter Quint but as Miles is only a substitute, she then cannot fully replicate the same intensity and desire she has for Peter Quint. Thus, this mode of description is somehow dull compared to the one she gives the ghost.

Eventually, the Governess becomes convinced that both Miles and Flora knew the ghosts’ existence. She succumbs to an obsession to prove this idea, as she might have the notion that if she proves this then she might confirm the ghost’s existence. This confirmation will make it more possible for her to make her spectral object of desire to exist in the symbolic world.

At some point, Miles somewhat reciprocates her desire, at least in her perspective by saying “Look here, my dear, you know” in a charming way (James 58-59). The governess interprets this as the boy flirting with her (James 59). Whether Miles is actually attracted to her is a point of contention but the effect of this on the Governess is clear from this passage:

“There was something new, on the spot, between us, and he was perfectly aware I recognised it, though to enable me to do so he had no need to look a whit less candid and charming as usual. I could feel in him how he already, from my at first finding nothing to reply, perceived the advantage he had gained...His ‘my dear’ was constantly on his lips for me, and nothing could have expressed more the exact shade of the sentiment with which I desired to inspire my pupils than its fond familiarity” (James 59)

This very romantic and enamoring perception of the events also enthralls her to Miles. I feel that this is exacerbated by the fact that she does not see Peter Quint as much as she sees Miles. This is a very symbolic version of desire as it is manifested through words alone. However, this does not sate her as she unconsciously looks for Peter Quint. The Governess’ flowery feelings for Miles can never match the uncanny feelings inspired by the intense Gaze of Peter Quint.

In the ending of the novel, the Governess does get her desired confirmation with Miles saying “Peter Quint – you devil”! (James 93). The attainment of the confirmation she craves so badly is ironically subsequent with Miles’ demise and Peter Quint’s last appearance. Peter Quint was in a way able to win, and claim Miles for himself, and with that, he no longer has a reason to appear again. At least that is how the Governess would see things, given that she was convinced that Peter Quint came for Miles and not her.
Peter Quint as the imaginary Real is grounded on the fact that ghosts are beyond the rules of physical world, and to an extent the Symbolic world. The horrible specter is the closest the governess can get to the Real and for her, it is the unattainable Lacanian Real. For us, the readers, we are left with a trace of the Real. Paradoxically, the real is impossible to be signified or represented. As the Governess is continually frustrated with the inability to attain her object of desire, she is unconsciously forced to be content with beings that are within her grasp, which is Miles, who exists in the Symbolic Order and is properly signified and thus, he becomes the appropriate substitute for the impossible desire the Governess has. She does not however accept the reality that she must be content with a partial satisfaction for Miles. The governess is then driven by the futile and impossible task of gratification by attempting to love and obtain the specter – Peter Quint.

This powerful frustration perpetuated by the evil gaze of Peter Quint successfully enslaved, seduced and conquered the Governess. Her perceived delusions and psychological disorders is the result of this very Gaze. Again, most critics would argue that even before hand she is already a sexually depraved being. If so, then the gaze of Peter Quint greatly exacerbated these problems. One thing is for certain, this gaze has driven the Governess to do seemingly illogical actions throughout the novel as she attempts to reconcile the conflicting Symbolic Order and the Imaginary Real.

Works Cited:


