

The Haunted Theater of Fiction: Silence and Sound in “The Turn of the Screw”

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One of Henry James’s most critically debated tales, “The Turn of the Screw” (1898), has given rise to diverse interpretations related to ghosts, psychoanalysis, and ambiguity. Throughout its critical history, Marxist, gender-based, and postcolonial interpretations amongst others have been applied to the novella.¹ Since the tale was adapted as an opera by Benjamin Britten (1954) as well as a film, *The Innocents* (1961), directed by Jack Clayton, one can also assume that these renditions contain textual richness, especially in their audio-visual aspects. “The Turn of the Screw” is filled with sounds, from the natural (including rain, wind, and birdsong) to the artificial (such as pianos and bells). James seems mainly to use such sound effects in scenes that take place under ordinary circumstances. Unlike Clayton’s film adaptation, which effectively uses eerie sound effects in the ghostly scenes, silence dominates the novella’s uncanny scenes. Why does James emphasize silence instead of sound during these ghostly moments? One answer to this question lies, I argue, in James’s deep interest in theater.

¹ For a concise critical history of “The Turn of the Screw,” see Beidler, section 3; Cornwell and Malone, introduction.

Although James called “The Turn of the Screw” “a potboiler,”² he wrote the tale after his disastrous experience of staging the play *Guy Domville* in 1895. At this crucial time, the author took up his “own old pen again” (*Notebooks* 179) and put all of his energy, effort, and playwriting experience into his prose fiction.³ James did not wholly abandon his playwriting but made another attempt, with a favorable reception, in the British theaters in his later years (Edel, *Complete Plays* 66-68). His central concern immediately after *Guy Domville*, however, was focused more on fiction than drama. By focusing on the aural dimension of “The Turn of the Screw,” I hope to shed new light on this challenging text.

My approach will unfold in four parts. The first comprises an analysis of James’s use of silence and sound in “The Turn of the Screw”; section two focuses on the human voice, in particular; and section three considers the aural and other dimensions of the story in the context of James’s ambitions and disappointments in the theater. My discussion in these sections focuses primarily on the unnamed governess’s ghostly account, which is the story within the narrative frame that James uses to structure the novella. In my final section, I consider the narrative frame itself and its implications. Where relevant, I compare and contrast the published story with the film adaptation, *The Innocents*. As is often noted by literary or film critics, this version cleverly reproduces the ambiguity of the original text, and it seems worthwhile to examine its sonic effects among the many film and television adaptations.⁴

² He does so in a letter to Howells, dated January 28, 1898 (see Anesko 306).

³ This episode is well-known to Henry James scholars. Novick, in particular, elaborates on the details in “Closing the Chapter” (217-28). See also Kaplan 375-79 and Edel *Life*, 414-29. Novick also writes about the positive side of James’s theatrical experience, suggesting that he was not downhearted by the reception of *Guy Domville* (“Henry James on Stage” 6-9). Richard Ellmann mentions that James was perfectly collected after the opening night. He offered dinner to the cast and attended the performance of *Guy Domville* on the second night (40). This time the play was received with respect.

⁴ J. Sarah Kock compiled “A Henry James Filmography,” where she mentions 16 total adaptations into TV, film, and opera (351-54). Some of the criticism of the film version is cited hereafter in my discussion.

SILENCE AND SOUND

Criticism of “The Turn of the Screw” has long focused on James’s use of silence. In her essay “Henry James’s Ghost Stories,” Virginia Woolf writes: “Perhaps it is the silence that first impresses us. Everything at Bly is so profoundly quiet” (159). By means of silence, Woolf argues, James makes his readers afraid of something that is “unspeakable” or “unnamed.” Woolf describes this “unspeakable” feature as a sense of “obscenity” (292). Led by Edmund Wilson, psychoanalytic critics have supported Woolf’s insight by highlighting the former governess’s illicit relationship with the valet.⁵ Similarly, Dídac Llorens Cubedo stresses that the tale “can be said to revolve around a nucleus of silence” (101).

Silence features prominently in James’s treatment of the ghosts in “The Turn of the Screw,” who seem to haunt the text itself. Except for the governess, the characters at Bly hardly speak of them, and so their presence itself remains ambiguous. The housekeeper at Bly, Mrs. Grose, whose lack of imagination arguably makes her a reliable witness,⁶ endorses the governess’s account in two respects. First, she acknowledges the governess’s detailed descriptions of Peter Quint and Jessel. Secondly, she witnesses Flora’s vehement condemnation of her present governess during the lake incident, in which the latter tries to force the girl to admit that she has seen Jessel’s ghost. After this incident, although we do not know what Flora specifically says in the course of her feverish breakdown, Mrs. Grose suggests that the little girl’s “appalling” language reminds her of Jessel (*TS* 74). As she says: “Well, perhaps I ought to also—since I’ve heard some of it before! Yet I can’t bear it” (*TS* 74).

Despite the close relationship they shared with the dead servant and governess, Miles and Flora are strangely reluctant to speak of them. According to Mrs. Grose, “for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together,” and when “they had been about together quite as if Quint were his tutor—and a very grand one—and Miss Jessel only for the little lady” (*TS* 34–35). Do they keep silent because of their ghostly communion or is there no ghost at all? As some scholars have argued, what is left silent in

⁵ Wilson introduced this argument in “The Ambiguity of Henry James” (1934).

⁶ Concerning this point, James writes that she “was a magnificent monument to the blessing of a want of imagination” (*TS* 43).

the work means much.⁷ If we trust the governess's view, the peculiarly angelic children could be hiding their secret communion with their demonic friends, though this remains a mystery.⁸

In the governess's descriptions of her encounters with the ghosts, the silence in her ghostly confrontations can be recognized both during the day and at night. Although Fred L. Milne points out that the governess experiences "trouble" at "transitional moment[s]" like "dawn" or "twilight," when "silence gives way to sound," the ghosts, on the other hand, appear at any time (295). They are literally speechless, only exchanging glares. When the governess encounters Quint, she notes that "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" (*TS* 16). When she first notices Jessel across the lake, the dead governess and Flora are both very quiet: "all spontaneous sounds from [Flora] had dropped" (*TS* 29). There seems to be a silent communication between Jessel and the child into which the governess can never intrude. Silence dominates these scenes, and the governess is overwhelmed by what she sees. Her logic fails to grasp the meaning of her vision. Her paralysis can be relieved only by using her voice—the power of sound. This leads to a kind of exorcising power on the part of the governess in the story, as Jessel vanishes when she shouts at her: "You terrible miserable woman!" (*TS* 57).⁹

By contrast, Mrs. Grose does not articulate her experience of the ghostly presence, requiring the reader to make inferences based on her statements. The dialogue between the governess and the housekeeper comes to resemble that in a play, because there is significant room left for interpretation. For

⁷ In his monograph *Silence in Henry James*, John Auchard argues that "the more developed modernist consciousness reads legitimate evanescence in the air—call them ghosts, metaphoric or liberal" (45). Another essay on this theme is Bruce E. Fleming's "Floundering about in Silence," which suggests that the governess is forced to be silent by her employer (137). Kimberly C. Reed discusses the significance of textual "silence" in association with the governess's vision (109-17).

⁸ To the governess's eyes, the children "were like those cherubs of the anecdote..." (*TS* 19).

⁹ In discussing *The Innocents*, Edward Recchia also uses the word "exorcise": "[Miles] then collapses and dies, either because the governess has exorcised his evil companion or because he has been terrorized by a strange woman..." (33). Similarly, James W. Palmer refers to the governess as a "sincere and much-needed exorcist" (206).

example, after she confesses to witnessing Quint, the governess discusses it with Mrs. Grose, who asks:

“Have you seen him before?”

“Yes—once. On the old tower.”

She could only look at me harder. “Do you mean he’s a stranger?”

“Oh, very much!”

“Yet you didn’t tell me?”

“No—for reasons. But now that you ’ve guessed—”

Mrs. Grose’s round eyes encountered this charge. “Ah, I haven’t guessed!” she said very simply. “How can I if *you* don’t imagine?”

“I don’t in the very least.” (*TS* 21)

These textual riddles and the use of pauses in this exchange suggests that James may have had theatrical dialogue in mind when writing the story. Here, what I mean by “silence” is what is left unsaid by the speaker. In other words, while the governess assumes Mrs. Grose can “guess” what she has witnessed and might even know the identity of the stranger in question, the housekeeper naturally denies that possibility. James masterly creates a dialogue out of the blanks in their conversation.

Although Mrs. Grose identifies Quint and Jessel from the governess’s description of them, she does not see them herself; indeed, she even contradicts the governess when the latter sees Miss Jessel across the lake: “Where on earth do you see anything?” (*TS* 69). Mrs. Grose’s lack of commentary on witnessing the former governess or the dead valet—her silence—does nothing to endorse the governess’s claim or the ghostly presence. Nonetheless, there is much meaning in her inarticulacy. Conventionally, sounds accompany the appearance of a special entity, like a ghost.¹⁰ In the movie adaptation of the story, for example, sound effects (e.g., ominous sounds or Flora humming her melody-box tune) are produced before the ghosts appear. James’s fiction, however, highlights these ghostly appearances through the use of a pregnant silence—another sound effect. In addition to James’s emphatic use of stillness,

¹⁰ Dorothy Scarborough mentions the use of sound effects in gothic fiction such as the sound of an owl, of a bat, a raven, or music from a violin or a harp. What she emphasizes is “vocal” sound (42, 45). She points out that while “the early ghosts were for the most part silent,” gothic ghosts were “sometimes vocal and sometimes silent” (97). Melissa Kendall Mcleod covers a similar theme in her dissertation and focuses on the “aural representations” in James’s ghost stories.

therefore, he employs Mrs. Grose's verbal inability to express herself to suggest the presence of the ghosts within the text itself.

The ghostly, unspeakable elements in "The Turn of the Screw" are thus expressed via silence rather than the human voice. The children's intentional silence, for example, could be interpreted as some kind of conspiracy with the ghosts. In particular, when Flora slips out of her bed and stays near the window on a moonlit night, the governess searches for her brother and finds him outside on the lawn. Miles stands "there motionless as if fascinated, looking up" to "a person on the tower" (*TS* 43).

If James uses silence evocatively in the scenes of confrontations with the ghosts, "The Turn of the Screw" is also full of sounds, as Llorens Cubedo indicates (100-01). We hear everything from the cawing of rooks, piano melodies, church bells and footsteps, to human voices—talking, laughter, singing, whispers, sobbing and cries. What are the functions of these natural and artificial sounds? Are there differences between the two? In the first instance, it is notable that these sounds are usually described under ordinary (that is, not supernatural) conditions in the story, like in the opening scene, when we hear the carriage's "wheels on the gravel" and cawing rooks (*TS* 7). While riding in the carriage and entering the magnificent mansion with a courteous welcome from the servants, the governess feels as if she is becoming the mistress of Bly. The auspicious sound of rooks¹¹ seems to herald a bright future, and she is delighted to be surrounded by the merriment and laughter of angelic children.

Some sounds, however, have uncanny effects: on her second day at Bly when "the first birds began to twitter" at dawn, the governess hears "a sound or two, less natural" in the mansion (*TS* 7-8). She also recognizes "faint and far, the cry of a child" and a "light footstep" before her door (*TS* 8). Since she suggests that these could be her fancies, it is unclear whether the sounds are real. In the film, Clayton effectively uses the sound effect of a female voice calling, "Flora," when Miss Giddens arrives at Bly, creating an uncanny atmosphere. James G. Palmer suggests that Clayton skillfully mixes the "subjective" sounds that the governess hears and the "objective" sounds of the outer world to recreate the original text's sense of ambiguity (202).

In the text, natural and artificial sounds belong to the normal condition of real life, so when the sounds disappear from the scene—like the cessation

¹¹ James uses "rooks," which has positive connotations, instead of "crows."

of church bells or the rooks' cawing—silence becomes dominant, suggesting the appearance of a ghost. As in *Roderick Hudson* and *The Wings of the Dove*, James stages a dramatic storm before the climactic scenes of “The Turn of the Screw.”¹² The governess describes how “The weather had changed back, a great wind was abroad... I sat for a long time before a blank sheet of paper and listened to the lash of the rain and the batter of the gusts” (*TS* 60). The following day there is an eerie, quiet scene in which the two governesses confront each other when the governess searches for the missing Flora at the lake: “Miss Jessel stood before us on the opposite bank exactly as she had stood the other time” (*TS* 68). By skillfully using the dramatic device of a storm, James heightens the effect of the mute confrontation in which the innocent living and the evil dead encounter each other. In other words, highlighting the ghostly presence by contrasting sound and silence creates certain theatrical effects and adds a melodramatic note to the story.

VOICE

Of all the sounds in “The Turn of the Screw,” human voices are the most important. Indeed, the narrative primarily proceeds through the dialogue between the governess and the housekeeper, by which the tale comes to resemble a theatrical two-hander. The children do not speak until Chapter 10. It is only then that readers finally hear Flora's precocious diction teasing her governess: “You naughty: where *have* you been?” (*TS* 40). Before this, however, readers have already grasped Bly's mysteries through the exchanges between the governess and Mrs. Grose, due to the former's probing questions and the latter's evasive answers. There remain, for example, the mystery surrounding Miles's expulsion from school, the boy's personality, and why the ghosts appear before the children, as well as what the four's relationships at Bly were like. The governess, perhaps out of a sense of rivalry, is curious to learn about her predecessor and the cause of her death, to which Mrs. Grose

¹² In *Roderick Hudson* a storm erupts before Roderick's death in the Alps, just when Rowland Mallett and the others are beginning to worry about the missing sculptor (*Roderick Hudson* 381). In *The Wings of the Dove*, during a violent storm in Venice, Lord Mark breaks to Milly the devastating news that Kate and Merton are lovers. We then learn that, as a consequence, Milly “turned her face to the wall” (*Wings* 413, 415, 421).

replies: “[the master] never told me! But please, Miss,... I must get to my work” (*TS* 13).

James repeatedly contrasts the characters’ voices with their silence. Here, silence, including muteness, tends to confirm the existence of the ghosts. By contrast, as previously mentioned, the governess’s verbalizing the ghosts’ presence leads to an exorcism. Indeed, speaking itself is associated with risk: if the characters even discuss something unspeakable, it results in a kind of retribution, such as Flora’s feverish over-excitement and Miles’s subsequent cardiac arrest.

Verbalizing any ghostly phenomena is a taboo and the governess is keenly aware of “the old tradition of the *criminality* of those caretakers of the young who minister to *superstitions and fears*” (*TS* 45; my italics). In other words, especially because of her employer’s insistence on never troubling him, the governess considers that raising “the question of the return of the dead” is “forbidden ground” (*TS* 49). The unspoken taboos also include other kinds of boundary-breaking, involving the former valet and governess, and the children. Millicent Bell argues that the story not only involves a cross-class non-marital sexual relationship between Quint and Jessel, but also implicitly refers to homosexuality and pedophilia (“Class” 91-119). However, the heroine’s pseudo Jane Eyre fantasy (which will be discussed in more detail later) is perhaps her gravest sin which she dares to articulate only to herself in her manuscript. In short, the governess’s romantic wish to be united with her master may be the cause of all her ghostly encounters, which in themselves are hard to prove.

On the other hand, what is spoken remains within the realm of logos, so the message cannot reach the story’s core. As Llorens Cubedo similarly suggests, the “crucial enigmas” of the story concern Miles’s dismissal from school and what kind of relationship the children had with the dead employees (102). We never know the truth: the realities of Quint and Jessel are provided as fragments by Mrs. Grose. (Likewise, the children never ask why, on one occasion, the governess does not attend church.)

Although key enigmas are left untouched and unspoken, when the governess dares to name “Miss Jessel” to Flora, Mrs. Grose utters “the shriek of a *creature* scared, or rather wounded” (*TS* 68; my italics). Moreover, when she compels Miles to name the ghost, we hear the boy’s similar “cry of a *creature* hurled over an abyss” (*TS* 85; my italics). On both occasions, those who are forced to face the taboo are presented as *creatures* who can make only

frightened sounds, thereby suggesting the power of the supernatural to strip the human of its defining characteristics of rational language.

In short, it seems that speaking about or trespassing on forbidden ground goes against the natural law and its result are horrors. Rather than the human voice, silence dominates not only the scenes that precede a ghost's appearance but the entire tale itself. The stillness expresses ghostly elements, or taboos, while breaking the silence exacts a heavy price. Thus, James successfully creates a singular tale located between the physical realm and the supernatural world: in-between worlds.

THEATER

If we consider James's use of silence as a kind of sound effect, we may characterize "The Turn of the Screw" as a hybrid work inspired by both fiction and drama, representing another example of Jamesian "in-betweenness."¹³ As we observe in the governess's description, she and the children live "in a cloud of music and affection and success and *private theatricals*" (TS 38; my italics). There are repeated references to the theater in "The Turn of the Screw" and the text often utilizes theatrical similes. For example, according to the governess, the "Remarkably" handsome Peter Quint looks like an "actor," who is "tall, active, [and] erect" (TS 23). Furthermore, in autumn, "with its grey sky and withered garlands, its bared spaces and scattered dead leaves," Bly "was *like a theatre after the performance*—all strewn with crumpled playbills" (TS 50; my italics). Based on this observation, the governess might have foreseen the tragic ending in store. On happier days, however, the governess and children enjoy singing and performing various plays, featuring the children as "tigers," "Romans," "Shakespeareans," "astronomers," and "navigators" (TS 37). They also hold a poetry recital. (This part is well-developed in *The Innocents*, where Miles reads a poem, suggestive of his hidden desires for Quint.)

The reason why this work becomes a hybrid of fiction and drama can be linked to the author's dramatic experiences in London. Because of his long-term interest in playwriting as well as his financial need, James ventured on

¹³ David McWhirter discusses James's attempts in "The Turn of the Screw" to present "the experience of in-betweenness for which our language and culture, and all the genres of genre they entail, possess no adequate terms" (142).

his dramatic career (Edel, “Dramatic Years” 45-51; Novick, “Henry James on Stage” 2-6). Unlike his smooth career in fiction writing, however, the dramatic path was thorny due to various factors. Although James was the very same author, in writing a drama, he could not always have his own way and had to compromise with the actor-manager as well as the actors. He also had to think about his theatrical audience or “the public” and the reviewers (Edel, “Dramatic Years” 52-56). One such change was the case of rewriting a happy ending for *The American*.¹⁴ The theatrical power balance, accordingly, subverted James’s expectation of what the author and his art meant. James had to resign his authorial privilege to some extent for commercial success—to please a mediocre audience and actor-manager who did not fully appreciate his artistry. In one of his letters to his brother William, James comments: “[W]ith all usual theatrical people [of *Guy Domville*], who don’t want *plays*... of different kinds, like books and stories, but only of one kind, which their stiff, rudimentary, clumsily-working vision recognizes as the kind they’ve had before. And yet I had tried so to meet them! But you can’t make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse” (*Notebooks* 181; my italics).

James’s difficult struggle with theatrical projects, especially *Guy Domville*, just before writing “The Turn of the Screw,” likely resulted in a turning point where he wanted to reclaim his authority as an artist of prose fiction. Upon this ghostly story, James seems to project his theatrical trials and grope for meaning in the figure of the governess with her singular experiences at Bly. In this sense, the governess, whom it is hard to place within her surroundings, is one side of James himself. At the same time, the governess’s imagination and behavior could suggest something different, which will be analyzed later.

Peter G. Beidler aptly points out that “The Turn of the Screw” is one of James’s “most theatrical” works, as it has “a single setting in a mysterious mansion, pale faces at windows, strange figures appearing and disappearing, dramatic scenes and dialogue, a melodramatic interplay of innocence with the haunting forces of darkness” (14). I agree with most of his points concerning the setting, characters, scenes, and dialogue. For instance, the singular positioning

¹⁴ Novick mentions this in “Henry James on Stage” (4). In the same context, Matthiessen and Murdock note this point, writing that after “... [James’s] bitter experience with the current standards of the stage [*Guy Domville*] made him take it for granted that he would have to sacrifice much of his essential theme for the sake of a happy ending” (174).

of the governess and the ghosts as well as the limited number of characters and the probing dialogue are all suggestive of the theater stage. The vertical or horizontal positioning of the governess and ghosts also creates certain stage-like effects. For example, when the governess sees Quint from the ground, he “[does] stand there!—but high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower” (*TS* 15). The heroine also notices the former governess at the bottom of the stairs: “Looking down it from the top I once recognised the presence of a woman seated on one of the lower steps with her back presented to me” (*TS* 41–42). In another very theatrically staged scene, the two governesses face each other from across the lake. For a work of fiction, moreover, the number of central characters (the governess, the children, and Mrs. Grose) is relatively small, though there are many employees at Bly. Thus, James guides the reader to focus on a small group of characters, who endure exceptional hardships “onstage.”

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the key dialogues that occur between the governess and either Mrs. Grose or Miles are characterized by inarticulacy or hesitation; they often stop midsentence when hinting at the enigmas surrounding Miles, such as his expulsion from school and his relationship with the ghosts. The governess and Miles discuss his return to school:

“Were you very happy at school?”

He just considered. “Oh, I’m happy enough anywhere!”

“Well, then,” I quavered, “if you’re just as happy here—!”

“Ah, but that isn’t everything!” Of course *you* know a lot—”

“But you hint that you know almost as much?” I risked as he paused.

“Not half I want to!” Miles honestly professed. “But it isn’t so much that.”

“What is it then?”

“Well—I want to see more life.... I want my own sort!” (*TS* 54)

Here, Miles avoids answering what exactly had happened at school. The dialogue continues like this until the climactic scene, where the governess forces Miles to confess that he had stolen her letter, as a proof that theft is her presumed reason for his having been expelled from school. Accordingly, the audience must guess what is on the characters’ minds.¹⁵ By using this type of dialogue—that contains pauses and blanks—James provides his readers, or

¹⁵ At this point, Novick mentions James’s exploration of human perception and writes that his readers “appeared not to notice that James had deployed all the devices of his

virtual audiences who would expect a staged performance, with more room to imagine the horror.¹⁶

Why does James allow his narrators to repeatedly refer to the theater in the story? Curiously, the governess writes: “with the word [Miles] spoke, the *curtain rose* on the last act of my dreadful *drama* and the catastrophe was precipitated” (*TS* 53; my italics). Since she calls her life at Bly a “drama,” it seems natural that she would consider herself the leading figure of this performance. Aside from being the captain of “a great drifting ship” (*TS* 9), the “heroic” governess also intends to be a “screen” between her innocent pupils and the evil spirits (*TS* 27). This kind of confrontation between goodness or innocence and evil places the tale firmly within the genre of melodrama.

James hints at the governess’s romantic inclinations, noting that she is an avid reader of sentimental and gothic novels such as *Amelia* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, respectively. As Bell points out, even though she does not bring up the title of *Jane Eyre*, the heroine has probably read this governess novel and fancies for herself the same romantic ending (*Meaning* 226–28). She tends to be intoxicated by a sense of her own heroism as the protector of the children and tacitly expects a reward in the form of a prince charming—her employer at Harley Street—who will appreciate her performance and ask for her hand. This daydream happens just before her first ghostly encounter. When she strolls the garden at Bly, she imagines: “Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve” (*TS* 15). In this sense, Clayton’s film is highly suggestive, as the dandy in Harley Street clearly says, “Give me your hand. Give me your promise” (Archibald and Capote). Furthermore, the location is transferred from London to the countryside. Being entrapped in a mysterious, gothic mansion, confronting the evil enemies that try to “corrupt” the innocent and take them away to Hades, the “pretty” governess becomes a suitable heroine for a melodrama (*TS* 12). The ending of this melodrama, however, deviates from convention since there is no poetic justice at work.¹⁷

new style, and that considerable conscious effort was required from the reader” (*Mature Master* 280).

¹⁶ T. J. Lustig examines this point in his *Henry James and the Ghostly* (115–25, 271–72); the argument reappears in the essay “Blanks in ‘The Turn of the Screw.’”

¹⁷ Peter Brooks explores this dynamism in his *The Melodramatic Imagination* (198–206).

Although I have referred to the tale as resembling a two-hander, one might also consider the children to be the true lead actors who only pretend to be clever and innocent in the haunted theater of Bly. Seen this way, the story offers us a different view of power subversion. That is, as James as a dramatist experienced it, the governess (or one side of the author) faces the subversion of power, just like that between the author and the audience. In this sense, the governess would be the audience, who gradually becomes aware of the situation: “the real account, I feel, of the hours of peace I could still enjoy was that the immediate charm of my companions [the children] was a *beguilement* still effective even under the shadow of the possibility that *it was studied*” (TS 37; my italics). It seems that the governess is watching a mime with four performers—the children and the ghosts. It is no wonder that spoken words are unnecessary, since the performers can silently communicate with each other.

The self-appointed protectress of the innocent, the governess regards her own behavior as sacred and just, because she believes that she is helping the children—and thus her adored employer. Nevertheless, it is difficult to consider the governess’s true motivation as selfless or sincere. Figuratively speaking, her behavior is like breaking onto the mime stage, and then joining and meddling with the performers. As her behavior disturbs the dramatic order, her manners are reminiscent of the vulgar audiences that James encountered at the St. James’s Theatre on the first night of *Guy Domville*. The governess’s statement, “the curtain rose on the last act of my dreadful drama and the catastrophe was precipitated,” may refer to James’s personal experience (TS 53). Naturally, then, the show must conclude without a satisfactory ending.

From this perspective, one can assume that there is continuity between *Guy Domville* and “The Turn of the Screw.” It is well-known that James was an avid theatergoer since childhood, and he had hoped to find success in the theater during the middle of his career (Kaplan 22-25, 373-79). The consequence of his ambition, however, was the failure of *Guy Domville*: “hoots & jeers & catcalls of the roughs” during its opening night in 1895 (Novick, *Mature Master* 219). This was three years before the serialization of “The Turn of the Screw.”

Leon Edel proposes an insightful connection between the author’s traumatic experience of staging *Guy Domville* and the writing of “The Turn of the Screw” as well as his other stories about children, such as *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Awkward Age* (1899). Edel writes:

The violence of the *Guy Domville* audience had revived the violences and dramas of childhood—and James would embody portraits of himself as a little boy and a little girl in the succeeding novels from *What Maisie Knew* to *The Awkward Age*—and above all in ‘The Turn of the Screw.’ (*Life* 452)

In these stories, the young characters are thrown into the manipulative, selfish world of adults. As Edel suggests, the “innocent” author, “the little Henry,” was brutalized by the vulgar audiences at *Guy Domville* performances (*Life* 480), and projected these and his own childhood traumas onto his stories of innocent children versus evil forces. It must be added that before this drama, James does portray young, vulnerable characters, such as Isabel Archer and Catherine Sloper, who seem to reflect the author himself. Considering the long hesitation and high expectations to move onto the playwriting project, it is not difficult to imagine the author’s disappointment at the audience’s response at the St. James’s Theatre on the first night. In “The Turn of the Screw,” the governess is the egoistic adult, while Miles and Flora mirror the author in his inexperienced youth. It is therefore not an exaggeration to suggest that the trauma of James’s failure in the theater helped give birth to “The Turn of the Screw,” or that writing it may have been a form of self-healing that allowed him to reflect on and analyze his serious theatrical project. Through the act of the governess’s exorcism, that is, James may himself have exorcized his personal demons so that he could regain a sense of integrity.

Given these resonances with James’s own biography, it is no coincidence that we find several theatrical references in the story. Edel pertinently writes that James “imported the stage into his novels” (*Life* 434).¹⁸ While Edel suggests that James became downhearted after the *Guy Domville* incident, Novick points out that he was not that psychologically damaged, but rather the incident helped him to set his mind in the direction of his talent (Edel,

¹⁸ In another biographical interpretation, Edel points to James’s potential fears about owning Lamb House in relation to his writing of “The Turn of the Screw.” Citing James’s repressed memories of his elder brother, moody mother, and charismatic aunt, Edel suggests that James projected his self-assertive wish to seek masculinity onto Miles (Edel, *Treacherous Years* 200-14). Similarly, Kaplan indicates that “The Turn of the Screw” is the “nightmare variation on James’s own sense of his helplessness” in his household as well as his “artistic rendering of homosexual panic” (414). Novick mentions James’s positive departure from his experiments with commercial playwriting to the art of writing prose fiction (*Mature Master* 224-25).

“Dramatic Years” 61; Novick, “Henry James on Stage” 6-9). Considering James’s stunning productions during his major phase, perhaps the Novick-thesis is convincing enough; however, I do not reject Edel’s ideas completely. Being as he was a shrewd author, therefore, one can say that James never failed to learn from his bitter experiences and probably transformed his traumatic experience at St. James’s Theatre into a kind of fable, in the guise of a ghost story, about writing and authorship by repeatedly interweaving theatrical aspects into the story.

FROM POLYPHONY TO MONOLOGUE

Lastly, I would like to point out the structural framework of “The Turn of the Screw,” which resembles the act of raising the curtain in a theater performance. (In the movie version, Clayton boldly cuts the frame, so that audiences can concentrate on the heroine’s psychology.) In the narrative frame, Douglas, the unnamed narrator, and other guests gather around the hearth, telling ghost stories during the Christmas season. Conventionally, the purpose of using a narrative frame in a ghost tale is to generate ambiguity about the story’s authenticity. That is, the frame effectively heightens the reader’s disbelief about the supernatural incident narrated in the story, and the governess’s account. This doubt is reinforced at the beginning of “The Turn of the Screw” by the fact that Douglas may have been infatuated with the governess, and the unnamed narrator withholds judgment.

Unlike the enclosed manuscript mentioned by Douglas, where only four characters speak, in the narrative frame of James’s tale, the reader hears several characters’ remarks on the ghostly subject matter and on Douglas’s romantic feelings. The voices of the guests, represented by the Griffins, create certain polyphonic effects in the opening scene. The ladies, in particular, seem to represent the worldly curiosity of general audiences, and barely understand the subtle beauty of Douglas’s narrative. On being asked if they will not depart, they reply: “Everybody will stay!’ *I will—and I will*’ cried the ladies whose departure had been fixed” (*TS* 3). When Mrs. Griffin asks who the governess is in love with, Douglas flatly explains that “the story *won’t* tell... not in any literal vulgar way.” Mrs. Griffin complains, “More ’s the pity, then. That’s the only way I ever understand” (*TS* 3). Impatient for the manuscript’s arrival, however, the whimsical ladies depart before the story begins.

Intriguingly, we notice a theatrical situation similar to what we have already observed in the discussion of the “inside” story. The frame (i.e., the introduction) offers a vision of the two main narrators and a mediocre audience. From the viewpoint of Douglas, only the main narrator (nameless and of unknown gender) is the sole trustworthy audience member. As Douglas calls him/her “acute” (*TS* 3), he eventually entrusts this person with the governess’s manuscript. Hence one may picture Douglas reading aloud while facing a select audience.

What does James wish to express by this delineation of a “compact and select” audience (*TS* 4)? I submit that this can be understood as reflecting James’s ideal audience. In his theatrical endeavors, the author likely confronted the incompatibility of his desires for both popular and artistic success. For James, the chatter of the nosy ladies and their vulgar reactions to the romantic episode may echo the behavior of his unappreciative theater audiences. Read in this way, we may understand why the frame narrator, who is a kind of surrogate author, disapproves of the ladies’ clamorous, polyphonic voices.

James the author favored a more monological discourse, channeling the chaotic voices of others through a single narrator. At first, the polyphonic voices crowd the scene, but once the noisy characters exit, Douglas and the narrator are spotlighted. By reducing the polyphony of intrusive voices in the narrative frame to the dominant voice of Douglas allows James finally to let a sensitive, decent man deliver his monologue “with a fine clearness” after having remained silent for decades (*TS* 6). In other words, James’s art requires that mediocre and vulgar voices be subdued. In this way, “The Turn of the Screw” reflects the author’s concept about the ideal audience for his miniature drama. Moreover, by establishing his narration in the monologue, we can foresee James’s development of imaginative reflectors, such as Lambert Strether, in *The Ambassadors*.

To summarize, the introductory pages of “The Turn of the Screw” function similarly to raising the curtain in a theater and introducing the “inside” story. In this context, James used both the thematic and formal features of “The Turn of the Screw” to communicate his ideas about art and his concept of the ideal audience that might appreciate it. Although the author was challenged by his dramatization of *Guy Domville*, he transformed his bitterness into a unique psychological drama of silence and sound, and thus created a “haunted theater” of fiction.

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