ANOTHER READING OF HENRY JAMES'S "THE TURN OF THE SCREW": THE INFATUATION OF THE GOVERNESS

Antonio Sanna
Teaching Assistant
Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures
Cagliari, Italy

As in all Gothic novels and short stories, in late-Victorian ghost stories feelings are central as regarding the authorial intentions of stimulating the emotions of the readers, and particularly their fears and terrors. However, feelings are central also in the themes of such narratives. The writer is always attentive to the description of the ghost-seers' feelings at the moment of the apparition, especially if we consider that "the emotive responses of the audience [should run] parallel to the emotions of the characters" (Carroll 17). Particular relevance is given, on the one hand, to the ghost-seers' initial perturbation or utmost fear, terror and anguish. On the other hand, many stories of the period underline the importance of love for the characters. Such a feeling is represented in several ways: from the intimate union of a couple of lovers to parental love for the children as well as from a simple and pure familial community of affections to a love which is actually a part of what many late-Victorians saw as a perverted sexuality. Specifically, many stories also represent love in the form of an affection surpassing bodily death and allowing a couple to be eternally united.

All of these varieties of the feeling of love were used by ghost story writers in a more or less explicit way in their texts. Certainly, these visions of love were influenced by the actual conception of death held at the time. Indeed, during the late-Victorian age, the public attitude concerning death was forged especially around the concepts of love and the family. Death was greatly "celebrated" and treated theatrically through a series of highly conventionalized social customs and funerary rituals (especially for the middle classes), through the ostentatious display of grief and particularly the social obligations of a deep and prolonged mourning (Joseph 119; Jalland *Death in the Victorian Family* 37; Wheeler 30). Moreover, heaven was often considered as a place where families could reunite and love could be plainly and widely shared, and as the site where lovers would have been eternally together (Wheeler 120-21; Jalland "Victorian Death" 236). Indeed, especially from the 1860s, the idea of the afterlife comprehended "domesticated images of happy families" (Jalland *Death in the Victorian Family* 271).

In late-nineteenth-century ghost tales, love and death came to be coupled as they were in the contemporary conception of heaven as a place of reunion and eternal love. This is exemplified in ghost stories of the period by the reunion of lovers after the death of one of them. In the case of Arthur Conan Doyle's 1883 "The Captain of the 'Pole Star'", for example, Captain Craigie loses all of his rationality and abandons his ship in order to be reunited with the ghost of his lover. Love guides him to a death which is actually a happy reconciliation: "[he] ran into the darkness with outstretched arms and loving words" (Doyle 301). Similarly, in Edith Nesbit's 1891 "John Charrington's Wedding", the promise of love beyond death is fulfilled by means of May Forster's marriage with the departed soul of the

protagonist and by means of her death soon after: "before a week was over they laid her beside her husband in our little churchyard [. . .] thus was accomplished John Charrington's wedding" (366).

On the other hand, love and death are united in such narratives also by means of the ghost seers falling in love with the spirits. In Nesbit's 1893 "The Ebony Frame", after experiencing terror and a moment of recollection, the narrator throws himself into the hands of the ghostly woman who has come out of an ancient portrait. He says: "with a passionate cry–a sense of having suddenly recovered life's one great good, that had seemed wholly lost–I clasped her in my arms. She was no ghost–she was a woman–[. . .]'O love–how long since I lost you?'" (Nesbit "The Ebony Frame" 22). Love apparently reunites a couple separated by death in a previous life. In Vernon Lee's 1887 "Amour Dure", the historian Spiridion falls in love with the sixteenth-century countess Medea, a woman as beautiful as she is eager for power. Spiridion is shown as weak and under Medea's control: his perceptions come to be clouded by his desire for Medea. The reader cannot be sure whether the ghost is really present or only a product of the historian's imagination or obsession. Spiridion's love for the man-acting woman comes to be the cause of his death. He is conscious of the deadly attraction for Medea and says that "only death … can at all make a man worthy of being her lover" (Lee "Amour Dure" 102-03) and therefore seems to already know that a union with Medea would couple love with death. Nevertheless, he does not reasonably act against the guidance of his love and is finally "discovered dead of a stab in the region of the heart" (Lee "Amour Dure" 123).

Death and love are coupled also in Lee's 1886 "A Phantom Lover". This could be suggested by the title of the story itself, but it is more particularly evident in its finale. The character of Oke, whether driven mad by his wife's ravings about the past history of the family or sure of having seen her in love with a ghostly visitor, shoots her in a moment of jealousy and homicidal lunacy. In this moment she is dressed in her ancestress' wedding gown. As Catherine Ruth Robbins has underlined, "the perverse relationship between desire and death is dramatized in the soaking of a wedding gown in blood" (220-21). This image unites the ideas of death (Alice's dead body) and love (the gown representing union of a couple and marriage).

In the 1895 story "The Roll-Call of the Reef" by Arthur Quiller-Couch, two male friends (a drummer and a trumpeter) who first met during a storm which caused the shipwreck of the two ships they were respectively journeying on, become very fond of each other. At the moment of the drummer's death, his ghost appears to the trumpeter who then dies. A witness to the scene of this last encounter sees them leaving together, before discovering the dead body of the trumpeter. The two ghosts are shown to walk away together–a couple moving together towards their eternal union, as in the case of Nesbit's "John Charrington's Wedding", as we saw before. Furthermore, what is specified is that the narrator hangs on his house's wall both the trumpet and the drum and then says: "till the lock [holding them hung] is broken by force, nobody will ever separate those twain" (Quiller-Couch 148-49). I would interpret this as a metaphor for the love uniting the two men, which was at the time considered as a sinful perversion and a psychic disease of the instinct, and was severely punished by Victorian law (Davidson 22-23). In this case, the theme of love is used in order to represent the subject of homosexuality, an alternative code which was controversially treated at the time.

Another treatment of the theme of love is however offered in Henry James' 1898 novella "The Turn of the Screw". This is a story set in the mid-Victorian age, in which a governess is charged with the duty to care for and instruct two children (Miles and Flora) by their uncle (the momentary hereditary and

administrator of the children's own goods) in the solitary location of Bly. The governess soon starts seeing the apparitions of her predecessor (Miss Jessel) and the house's valet (Peter Quint). She believes the spirits to be communicating with and corrupting the innocent children. What apparently worries and troubles her most of all is the possibility that the children know of the ghosts' presence and cherish a diabolical communion with them. The possibility of different readings of the text is manifest and firstly epitomized by the main character's attitude towards reality and her analysis and interpretation of it, the governess being "one of the most characteristically 'unreliable' of narrators" (McRae ix). Indeed, in this novella, the governess' descriptions and narrations about the encounters with the ghosts are never certified by the other characters of the narrative. Readers and critics have been repeatedly divided between two main possible readings of the tale by wondering whether the ghosts actually appear or if they are the result of the governess' hallucinations. "The Turn of the Screw" has therefore been defined as "a work that incorporates such a wealth of gentle ambiguity, a work in which the ghosts are also demons, in which their victims are both innocent and corrupt, in which the narrator is both accurate in her descriptions and inaccurate in her explanations" (Beidler 241). This is all the more true if we also consider that Henry James never offered any precise explanations or explicit readings of his own work, thus leaving responsibility for a final interpretation of it to the single reader.

As I have argued before, the theme of love is crucial in many ghost stories of the late-Victorian age because love is the cause of the apparition. This is the case of James' novella as well. Indeed, Douglas (the character presenting the story of the governess in the framing prologue) introduces the reader to a narrative of love by specifying that its protagonist "was in love" ("Turn" 117). This is one of the few pieces of information Douglas delivers about background to the story. From him we know only that it is a ghost story and that it involves two children, which particularly stimulates the attention of the other people present during Douglas' mention of the tale. The attention of the reader is, at this point of the story, much focused in getting hold of all the initial details of the narrative. In this moment the reader is located in a similar position to that of Douglas' circle of listeners. The importance of the fictive listeners' and actual reader's attention is underlined by the fact that the story's narrator uses exactly such a term when saying that Douglas gave "a reply that had the interesting consequence to which I call attention" ("Turn" 115). We know then that this is a ghost story about love. We know that the main character of the story was in love. We do not even know her name, which generically remains "the governess" throughout the narrative, nor anything about her appearance or the details of her previous and following story. Nevertheless, we know about such an important feeling she felt.

However, what is not specified is the addressee of the love felt by the governess. This could be the children's uncle or, as I will argue, the child Miles or even Quint himself. The feeling of love towards the Master is almost openly stated during the tale, and certainly not repressed: "it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone. Someone would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve" ("Turn" 135). This has been also recognized by several critics such as Robert B. Heilman, who affirms that "the governess' feelings for the master [. . .] are wholly in the open and are joyously talked about (178). However, this love is actually never reciprocated by the gentleman in Harley Street. As Ronald Knowles has argued, indeed, this ghost story by James is characterized by the fact that "wherever you turn, love is unfulfilled, absent or denied" (171).

Many critics have proposed a reading of "The Turn of the Screw" involving the idea of adults erotically attracted to children. Eric Haralson, for example, argues that the profile of Quint "corresponds with the construct of 'sexual deviant,' and particularly of 'pedophile,' generated by the schizophrenic Victorian imagination of the bourgeois child" (137). Similarly, according to Millicent Bell, Quint could be suspected of molesting Flora and Miles "either homosexually or heterosexually" (107), and of coming back from death in order to perpetuate such a corruption. This would be confirmed in the tale by the fact that Mrs. Grose (the housekeeper) specifies that, when at Bly, "It was Quint's own fancy. To play with him [Miles], I mean–to spoil him. [. . .] Quint was much too free. [. . .] Too free with everyone" ("Turn" 150).

What I would argue, instead, is that it is the governess herself who could be read as erotically attracted to the children. This is in full agreement with George E. Haggerty's affirmation that Gothic fiction has offered from its beginning in the eighteenth century a "ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities, including sodomy, [. . .] incest, pedophilia, sadism, masochism" (2). Indeed, the governess is immediately bewildered by the beauty of the two children, who are described as "those cherubs" ("Turn" 140), and particularly by Miles' juvenile charm. In her words, Flora possesses "an angelic beauty" and is "a creature too charming not to make it a great fortune to have to do with her" ("Turn" 124). Miles is described as "incredibly beautiful … [with a] little air of knowing nothing in the world but love" ("Turn" 132). Specifically, the governess appears to be clearly describing her feelings towards him when saying: "I was under the spell, and the wonderful part is that, even at the time, I perfectly knew I was" ("Turn" 141). This definitely seems the reaction to a love at first sight, to an infatuation. We could say that the governess is here describing the beginning of her love towards Miles. She also states that Miles "'had' me indeed" ("Turn" 178). She could be seen as in love with him, who, in terms of romantic language, possesses her and keeps her under the spell of love. Later in the narrative, she asks: "how can I retrace today the strange steps of my obsession?" ("Turn" 186) Is she referring to her need to protect the children, or actually to a passionate and obsessive emotion felt towards the little boy? When deciding whether to continue fighting against the ghosts for the sake of Miles, she is convinced that "to turn my back on him was to abandon or, to put it more truly, lose him" ("Turn" 203). She uses the verb "to lose" (emphasized by the fact that she specifies "to put it more truly") which could easily refer to the end of a romantic love story. In addition, in the last part of the novella, when dining alone with him, the governess compares their meeting to that of a couple on their wedding-journey: "We continued silent while the maid was with us—as silent, it whimsically occurred to me, as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter" ("Turn" 227).

During the final scene, when approaching Miles's confession, she says: "I was infatuated–I was blind with victory" ("Turn" 234). We could read "victory" as the obtainment of the child's confession and, therefore, the achievement of the knowledge and truth on the existence of the ghosts on her part. Infatuation, however, could also refer to her love for Miles. If the latter, we would read such a phrase as the union of the two contrasting impulses guiding the governess' actions. On the one hand, the feeling of love; on the other hand, her will to confirm the existence of the ghosts and need to protect the children. If we accept the hallucination theory–held by several critics who argue that the governess suffers from a nervous breakdown and therefore that the presence of the ghosts is only in her mind (Cornell 3; Felman 215; Bent 65; DeKoven 44; Goddard 162; Robbins 293)–we could say that she invents the ghostly visitants in order to impress and then attract to herself and conquer Miles. On the other hand, we could

also say that it is her love for the child which renders her mad and makes her hallucinate. Otherwise, in the case that the ghosts were really there, we could instead affirm that she is jealous of the intimate relationship between Miles and Quint, and wants to take Quint's place in the boy's heart. She fights therefore in a sort of duel against a supernatural adversary for the conquest of a partner. She resolutely struggles for the children to love and be devoted solely to her: "'they're not mine [. . .] they're his and they're hers!'" ("Turn" 180), seemingly acting as both a protective mother and a jealous lover to them.

However, another possible addressee of the governess' love could be Quint in that, according to Millicent Bent's interpretation, he comes to be the master's substitute, his negative counterpart, "a version or inversion of the owner at Bly" (70). Quint, in fact, appears exactly at the moment when the governess is tenderly thinking about the children's uncle. He is also dressed in the landlord's clothes. It seems as though it is her act of desiring which evokes the figure of the ghost. By explicitly asking the governess not to contact him, the Harley Street gentleman, it should be remembered, has, in a certain way, abandoned the children and declined any direct responsibility for them as well as any affectionate relationship with them. In this respect, he has betrayed the late-Victorian conception of the ideal family as a community of affections–the ideal family which the governess would like to have. Her hatred towards Quint, then, is the hatred she unconsciously feels for such a betrayal on the part of the children's uncle. On the other hand, we should also consider that Quint has previously managed to win Miss Jessel's love and that the governess herself describes him as "remarkably" handsome ("Turn" 146). Could we not think that the governess perhaps feels attracted by the "tall, active, erect" valet and his "straight, good features", as she defines them ("Turn" 146)? This could be confirmed by the fact that, as Paul Siegel has affirmed, "in each of the four appearances of the apparitional Miss Jessel, she faithfully and unfailingly mirrors the actions of the governess herself, a shadowy portion of her personality which she does not wish to recognize" (qtd. in Hoople 200). Could we not argue that, by repeating her predecessor's actions and gestures, the governess might be unconsciously repeating also Miss Jessel's social transgression?

I would therefore argue that the motive lying behind the governess's search for the knowledge and truth on the ghosts is love: the governess' actually is "a quest motivated by love", as only Edwin F. Block has recognized (205). Therefore, her evaluation of reality, her will to provide a rational perspective of the events is actually moved by her love (whether for the master or Miles), by her will to impress the children's uncle or by her passion for the male child. Her judgement is thus in-between rationality and feelings, it being founded on an emotional basis but attempting to be clear and dispassionately detached. Knowledge and love are coupled in this ghost story by James: each of them brings back to the other in a sort of continuous circular movement. The more the governess "learns" about the two spirits haunting Bly, the more she is passionately motivated to protect the children, just as if they were her lovers. The more she loves the children, the more she needs to know about the two ghosts supposedly threatening them in order to repel them.

However, the governess' feeling for Miles can be openly accomplished only at the moment of the child's death, when she passionately embraces him after the surrender of Quint's name. If we think of the governess' passion for the child as erotic, we could interpret this embrace as motivated by her joy in taking the place of Quint as the child's lover. Nevertheless, this is too passionate an embrace. The little child could be seen as being killed by it, according to critics such as Shoshana Felman (qtd. in Hoople 214). It is only in the moment of Miles' death that the governess is able to simultaneously have and lose

him: "'I have you' [. . .] yes, I had him–it may be imagined with what a passion … [but] his heart, dispossessed, had stopped" ("Turn" 236). The term "dispossessed" could indicate several things. C.S. Wiesenthal indicates that it is referred to Quint's diabolic possession on the child's mind (211). The behavior of the children as well as their lack of memory of what they say or do would then be due to the possession by a spirit, a notion which was well known at the end of the nineteenth century (Beidler 169). The governess is thus actuating a literal exorcism. Once Quint is exorcised by means of Miles openly pronouncing his name, the child is free, but he dies as the result of the violence of dispossession from the spirit. However, the term "dispossessed" could also refer to the governess's possession. Once Miles dies, he cannot be possessed by her anymore. This interpretation is given by Leon Edel's argument that it is the governess who is diabolically possessed (192). If this is the case, the exorcism of Miles would be against the evil possessing the governess: by dying the child would seem to avoid being contaminated or possessed by the woman whom he calls "you devil" ("Turn" 236). Miles would then die in order to be saved from the devil who is the governess and not Quint. Nevertheless, we could also interpret the term "dispossessed" as referred to the governess' love and therefore argue that the very possession of the governess avoided by Miles is of an erotic nature. The evil would then be that of an adult attempting to possess a child physically and erotically. Such a kind of transgression, repeating the alleged violence and abuse perpetrated by Quint and Miss Jessel, is therefore demonized as much as finally exorcised in the end of the narrative. Love is thus clearly linked with the idea of death in this ghost story by James as in many other late-Victorian tales of the supernatural.

Works Cited:

Beidler, Peter G. *Ghosts, Demons, and Henry James: The Turn of the Screw at the Turn of the Century.* Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1989.

Bell, Millicent. "Class, Sex, and the Victorian Governess: James's 'The Turn of the Screw'." *New Essays on Daisy Miller and The Turn of the Screw.* Ed. Vivian R. Pollak. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. 91-119.

Bent, Millicent. "The Turn of the Screw and the Recherche de L'Absolu." *Henry James: Fiction as History.* Ed. F.A. Bell. London: Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1984. 65-81.

Block, Edwin F. Jr. *Rituals of Dis-Integration: Romance and Madness in the Victorian Psychomythic Tale.* New York: Garland Publishing, 1993.

Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart.* London: Routledge, 1990.

Cornell, Neil and Maggie Malone (ed). Introduction. *The Turn of the Screw and What Masie Knew.* London: Macmillan, 1998. 1-18.

Davidson, Arnold I. *The Emergence of Sexuality.* London: Harvard UP, 2001.

DeKoven, Marianne. "Gender, History and Modernism in *The Turn of the Screw.*" Eds. Neil Cornell and Maggie Malone. *The Turn of the Screw and What Masie Knew.* London: Macmillan, 1998. 142-63.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Captain of the 'Pole-Star'." *Dreamland and Ghostland: An Original Collection of Tales and Warnings from the Borderland of Substance and Shadow.* Vol. 3. London: G. Redway, 1888. 183-224.

Edel, Leon. Introduction to *Tales of the Supernatural. The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text Contexts Criticism.* Eds. Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 191-92.

Felman, Shoshana. "Henry James: Madness and the Risks of Practice (Turning the Screw of Interpretation)." *The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text Contexts Criticism.* Eds. Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. 196-228.

Goddard, Harold C. "A Pre-Freudian Reading of 'The Turn of the Screw'." *The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text Contexts Criticism.* Eds. Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 161-68.

Haralson, Eric. "'His little heart, dispossessed': Ritual Sexorcism in *The Turn of the Screw.*" *Questioning the Master: Gender and Sexuality in Henry James's Writings.* Ed. Peggy McCormack. London: Associated University Presses, 2000. 133-48.

Heilman, Robert B. "The Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw.*" *The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text Contexts Criticism.* Eds. Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 177-84.

Hoople, Robin P. *Distinguished Discord: Discontinuity and Pattern in the Critical Tradition of The Turn of the Screw.* London: Associated University Presses, 1997.

Knowles, Ronald. "'The Hideous Obscure': The Turn of the Screw and Oscar Wilde." *The Turn of the Screw and What Masie Knew.* Eds. Neil Cornell and Maggie Malone. London: Macmillan, 1998. 164-78.

Jalland, Pat. "Victorian Death and Its Decline: 1850-1918." *Death in England: An Illustrated History.* Eds. Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999. 230-55.

---. *Death in the Victorian Family.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

James, Henry. "The Turn of the Screw." *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories.* Ed. T.J. Lustig. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. 113-236.

Joseph, Gerard and Herbert F. Tucker. "Passing On: Death." *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture.* Herbert F. Tucker (ed). Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. 110-24.

Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka." *The Snake Lady and Other Stories.* Ed. Horace Gregory. New York: Grove Press, 1954. 88-123.

---. "A Phantom Lover." (1886) *Five Victorian Ghost Novels.* Ed. Everett F. Bleiler. New York: Dover Publications, 1971. 297-340.

McRae, John (ed). Introduction. *The Turn of the Screw.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001. vii-xi.

Nesbit, Edith. "The Ebony Frame." *Grim Tales.* London: A.D. Innes & Co., 1893. 11-35.

---. "John Charrington's Wedding." *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology.* Eds. Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991. 360-66.

Quiller-Couch, Arthur. "The Roll-Call of the Reef." *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories.* Eds. Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986. 137-49.

Robbins, Bruce. "Recognition: Servant in the Ending." *The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text*

Contexts Criticism. Eds. Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 238-40.

Wheeler, Michael. *Heaven, Hell & the Victorians.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Wiesenthal, C.S. "Anti-Bodies of Disease and Defence: Spirit-Body Relations in Nineteenth-Century Culture and Fiction." *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 22 (1995): 187-220.