

## THE FANTASTIC MODERNIST; OR HENRY JAMES'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*, REVISITED

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### Abstract

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is defined by its ambivalence, as well by the coalescence of apparently contradictory realities. It is, to all extents, an *ambiguous* text, which has generated a deeply controversial critical debate over the decades. The aim of this article is to reappraise James's novella from the paradigm of the 'fantastic' as formulated by Tzvetan Todorov in 1970, so as to integrate traditionally opposed viewpoints. For the characteristics of the fantastic that Todorov identifies are usually understood as cognate with the more common traits of gothic fiction; yet this article argues that the fantastic elements that Todorov ascribes to *The Turn of the Screw* are in fact simultaneously gothic and *modernist*, and thus allow for establishing a continuum of meaning that might actually assimilate critical approaches that have conventionally been deemed divergent and irreconcilable.

*Keywords:* Modernism, Ambiguity, The Fantastic in Literature, Gothic fiction, Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, Tzvetan Todorov.

### Resumen

*The Turn of the Screw* (1898) es un texto marcado por la ambivalencia, así como por la confluencia de realidades aparentemente contradictorias. Se trata de un texto *ambiguo* a todos los efectos que ha generado un debate crítico muy controvertido a lo largo de décadas. El objetivo de este artículo es reevaluar la *novella* desde el paradigma de lo 'fantástico', tal y como éste queda formulado por Tzvetan Todorov en 1970, para así integrar puntos de vista tradicionalmente opuestos. En efecto, las características de lo fantástico identificadas por Todorov se asocian generalmente a los rasgos más comunes de la ficción gótica; sin embargo, este artículo arguye que los elementos fantásticos que Todorov atribuye a *The Turn of the Screw* son simultáneamente góticos y modernistas, y por tanto establecen un continuo de significado que puede de hecho armonizar acercamientos críticos que, convencionalmente, se han considerado no ya divergentes, sino irreconcilables.

*Palabras clave:* Modernismo, ambigüedad, literatura fantástica, literatura gótica, Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, Tzvetan Todorov.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James, 1898) has traditionally produced an intense and often controversial critical debate between the supporters of the “so-called apparitionist and non-apparitionist approaches” (Reed 2008:103; Jang 2007:22-3). For decades the apparitionists argued that the governess is truly haunted by ghosts, while the non-apparitionist, advocating a psychological reading of the novella, claimed that the ghostly apparitions are in fact nothing but the delusions of a paranoid, deranged narrator. Yet, as Kimberly Reed has recently explained, “in the 1970s, however, critics began to move to a more postmodern approach, one that no longer automatically opposed the apparitionist/non-apparitionist viewpoints” (2008:103). According to Reed (2008:103), the first of these critics is Tzvetan Todorov, who, by ascribing fantastic features to *The Turn of the Screw* in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), allowed for a new reading of the text that integrates both traditional perspectives.

On the one hand, taking James’s novella at face value for a terrifying ghost story means reading the text as a nineteenth century well-crafted gothic narrative. On the other hand, interpreting the tale as the psychological exploration of an unstable mind implies understanding *The Turn of the Screw* as a modernist tale, and thus concerned with, in Virginia Woolf’s words, “the dark places of psychology” (Woolf 2008:11). Consequently, an integrated reading that “embraces both ghostly hauntings and neurotic imaginings” (Reed 2008:100) cannot but regard James’s novella as simultaneously partaking of both the gothic genre and literary modernism. The aim of this article is precisely to explore such a reading—described by Reed as “postmodern” (2008:103)—by means of reassessing Todorov’s definition of the fantastic genre. For the characteristics of the fantastic that Todorov identifies are usually understood as cognate with the more common traits of gothic fiction; yet this article argues that the fantastic elements that Todorov ascribes to *The Turn of the Screw* are in fact simultaneously gothic and *modernist*, and therefore allow for an integrated interpretation of James’s novella that aims at reconciling the aforementioned traditionally opposed viewpoints.

## HESITATION, AMBIVALENCE, UNCERTAINTY

In *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970),<sup>1</sup> Tzvetan Todorov defines the 'fantastic' as the genre that "occupies the time of uncertainty [...]. The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by someone who only knows the laws of nature confronting an apparently supernatural event" (1970:29).<sup>2</sup> Bearing such definition in mind, *The Turn of the Screw*, insofar as all its narrative devices are intended to evoke in the reader a feeling of uncertainty and hesitation, can indeed be identified with the category of the fantastic in literature.<sup>3</sup> In the New York's edition preface, James writes: "Only to make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough [...] and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* evil, make him think for himself, and you are released from weak specifications" (1984:42). The reader must be then horrified by the ghosts of the tale but, in fact, the text must be ambiguous enough, so fear originates in the reader's mind: "Make him *think* evil, make him think for himself" (1984:42). Terror rises thus from the ambiguity of the tale; that is to say, terror rises from uncertainty—from the time occupied by the fantastic, in Todorov's terms.

*The Turn of the Screw* is a ghost tale, but the constant ambiguity which characterizes the novella makes it impossible to fully assert whether or not there are in fact ghosts at Bly, the gothic mansion where the action takes place. As Edmund Wilson famously argued, "nowhere does James unequivocally give the thing away: everything from beginning to end can be taken equally in either of two senses" (1999:172). The reader cannot be certain that there are ghosts, but he cannot fully declare either that the lingering spirits of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the former servants at Bly, are in fact the neurotic delusions of the governess. Hence the reader is scared by the *possibility* that ghosts might be haunting Bly and disturbing the two innocent children whom the governess must protect. The true cause of terror is then *suspicion*. The reader suspects that the ghosts might be a hallucination. In fact, the reader may even suspect that the ghosts are part of an evil, sadist plot of the governess which results in little Flora's sickness and young

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970) are translated into English by me, from the original text in French. The original quotations will be added in a note.

<sup>2</sup> "Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude [...]. Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel."

<sup>3</sup> This article subscribes Rosemary Jackson's modification of Todorov's scheme so as to define the fantastic as a *mode* rather than a genre, arguing thus that the fantastic can assume different subgenres (Jackson 1981:35).

Miles's mysterious death. Whatever the case, and to all extents, doubt is transformed into fear within the reader's mind, and so the novella may be identified with a *fantastic* text.

Nevertheless, as this article argues, the significance of doubt and uncertainty in *The Turn of the Screw* transcends the issue of genre. In fact, the impossibility to clarify the essential doubt that the novella proposes –beyond standing as the most defining trait of the fantastic as a narrative mode– can as well be interpreted as an eloquent sign of literary modernity, for, as Peter K. Garret has assessed, “the work of Henry James occupies a central position in the transition from traditional to modern fictional modes (1969:76). In this view, C. Namwali Serpell has argued that the reality or unreality of the ghostly apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel can actually be assessed in ontological terms as a binary opposition between existence and non-existence, in epistemological terms as an opposition between perception and paranoia, and in hermeneutical terms as an opposition between meaning and non-meaning.<sup>4</sup> Such threefold binary opposition –existence vs. non-existence, perception vs. paranoia, and meaning vs. non-meaning– apparently takes for granted a relationship of mutual exclusion between the reality and the unreality of the ghosts. Nonetheless –and here resides the key to James's arguable modernism– existence and non-existence, perception and paranoia, and meaning and non-meaning do coexist in *The Turn of the Screw*. As Dorothea Krook argued: “the text in fact –not possibly or probably but actually– yields two meanings, both equally self-consistent and self-complete” (1962:388). Krook elaborated the hypothesis as follows:

This is what the term ‘ambiguous’ *means* when applied to *The Turn of the Screw* [...]: it means that on one reading the children are –not *may be* but *are*– corrupt, the governess *is* their good angel, and the apparitions are in some sense real, while on the other reading the children *are* innocent, the governess *is* a monster, and the apparitions are in some sense unreal or hallucinatory. (1962:388)

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<sup>4</sup> “Is she [=the governess] insane or are there ghosts? The absolute incommensurability of these narrative possibilities distinguishes mutual exclusion from the average case of unreliability in any first person or limited omniscient narrative. One does not simply doubt or question the protagonist [...] –one is flung back and forth between belief and disbelief about what exists, what is perceived, and what it all means [...]. First is the opposition between presence and absence, or we could say that between existence and nonexistence. At stake in this first binary is ontology: literally the question of whether or not something exists. Second is the binary of true perception vs. paranoia, which derives from the circumscribed viewpoint of the protagonist [...]. This second mutual exclusion [...] is a question of epistemology: how does she come to have knowledge and is that knowledge valid? Third is the hermeneutic dichotomy between meaning and non-meaning, structured within the novella[...] as an issue of interpretive coherence and significance” (Serpell 2008:229).

Here lies James's breakthrough from traditional Gothicism. As Jerold E. Hogle explains: "Gothic fictions generally play with and oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural [...] often siding with one of these over the other in the end, but usually raising the possibility that the boundaries between these may have been crossed, at least psychologically but also physically or both" (2004:2-3). In *The Turn of the Screw*, however, there are no barriers between conventional reality and supernatural reality. Conventional reality and supernatural reality exist simultaneously. The text is ambivalent and ambiguous, for in "the spectral region of the fantastic [the] imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two" (Jackson 1981:19). Consequently, inasmuch as the debate about the 'reality' of the ghosts can be expressed –from a hermeneutical perspective– as a debate about the possibility of having one single true meaning, the simultaneous existence of conventional and supernatural realities implies the simultaneous existence of (at least) two meanings.<sup>5</sup> Hence the possibility of one true meaning is denied, and the essential uncertainty of the novel makes the parameters of the fantastic mode coalesce with one fundamental concern of modernism: the ambiguity of meaning:

[Modernism] is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty principle,' [...]. It is the art consequent on the disestablishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991:27)

Indeed, in James's ambiguous novella, "all realities have become subjective fictions." Lisa G. Chinitz argues:

For if Henry James raised confusion to the level of high art, he regarded it as central to the art of the novel. Increasingly in the course of his experiments with narrative form, the familiar boundaries that govern the process of reading break down: the line dividing fact from fiction blurs in characters' minds, characters merge with one another, and narrators find themselves reflected by narratives they are supposed to be telling. When the boundary between the truth and fiction itself disintegrates, when we are ourselves unsure what is real or 'only' fiction, we, too, are drawn into the epistemological uncertainties of the Jamesian universe. (1994:264)

The "epistemological uncertainties" referred to by Chinitz are the direct consequences of the governess's first-person narration for, as Garret explains, a first-person narration immerses the reader into the character's consciousness and,

<sup>5</sup> Jackson refers to this as "the tendency of fantasy towards non-signification" (1981:69).

“as a result, the reader has no adequate means of verifying or disproving the account he is given” (1969:99). The reader can of course certify the unreliability of the governess’s tale, but he cannot state with absolute certainty that she is delusional. Uncertainty is unavoidable and overwhelming. Irresolvable doubt is so inextricable in the text as to constitute, in fact, “a by-product of James’s method: his indirection; his refusal, in his fear of anti-climax, to define evil; his rigid adherence to point of view; his refusal –amused, perhaps?– to break that point of view for a reassuring comment on those uncomfortable characters, the apparitions” (Heilman 1999:92).

## AMBIGUITY AS STRUCTURE

The enigma about the ‘reality’ of the ghosts is certainly the most significant “epistemological uncertainty” (Chinitz 1994:264) of the novella. However, ambiguity is structural in *The Turn of the Screw*, for James’s novella brings about further complexities into the familiar gothic structure of successively framed narratives.<sup>6</sup> The reader is first introduced to an unnamed narrator who is present in the scene he narrates, and therefore interacts with the characters. He is a witness narrator in the first paragraphs of the novella. This narrator is supposed to be retelling the story that his friend Douglas reads and he (the narrator) listens to. He is then a recipient narrator as well. Douglas, as far as he reads the original manuscript containing the ghost story, works as editor of the tale. But Douglas also interprets the story, adds information, and emphasizes those elements that he considers to be more relevant. By doing so, Douglas conditions both the reader and the narrator’s impressions of the story, to the extent of inserting a prologue to the governess’s tale. The (witness and recipient) narrator first transcribes such a prologue, and later on he (re)narrates it:

It appeared that the narrative he had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue. Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give. Poor Douglas, before his death –when it was in sight– committed to me the manuscript that reached him on the third of these days and that, on the same spot, with immense effect, he began to read to our hushed little circle on the night of the fourth. (James 1984:148)

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<sup>6</sup> *Vid.* e.g. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818); Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847); R.L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

There are then two manuscripts: the governess's manuscript and the narrator's manuscript—that is, the transcription of Douglas's story after it has been interpreted and read. At some point, Douglas is asked: "And is the record yours? You took the thing down?" (James 1984:146). He answers: "Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*—he tapped his heart. 'I've never lost it'" (1984:146). What Douglas means by the word *impression* is actually his personal interpretation of the governess's tale, which becomes crucial in itself for the narrator's understanding of the story and, consequently, for the reader's as well. Douglas's "impression" in fact determines the way the story is both narrated and later on received by, first, Douglas's audience, and, later, by James's readers. The choice of the word *impression* is not incidental, for it is indeed tied to Henry James's theory of fiction. In "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James writes: "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression" (1884:4). To such an impression—which, from the author's perspective, constitutes the value of the novel—"we can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes" (James 1884:4). From this notion, the true value of the governess's tale would reside in Douglas's "impression," while all narrative techniques surrounding it would constitute the execution of "a personal impression of life" (1884:4)—that is, the essence of the novel. But the essence of the novel is hidden quiet deep in *The Turn of the Screw*, for "each writing/telling, rewriting/retelling of the text [...] produces a repetition of it that differs in some significant degree from the original" (Pearson 2010:287). Douglas and the unnamed narrator then transform successively the governess's tale, hence exacerbating the uncertainty experienced by the reader and obscuring the "impression of life" held in the novella.

According to Douglas—who claims to be in possession of the impression at the core of the story—the governess's tale is, first and foremost, a love story. Indeed, Douglas's prologue to the governess' tale tells the story of how she met the children's uncle and immediately fell in love with him. This event—elided in the governess' manuscript—determines (according to Douglas and to the narrator) every choice the governess makes along the story. Douglas assures: "Yes, she was in love. That is she *had* been. That came out—she couldn't tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw I saw it; but neither of us spoke of it" (James 1984:147). Such perception and inclusion on Douglas's part is not ideologically neutral, however; as Pearson explains: "Even as they signify the original power of the text by repeating it, Douglas and the narrator recover what they believe the

governess's text suppresses in order to recover the authority of patriarchal succession that her text usurps" (1992:286). The narrator makes use of Douglas's added scene between the governess and the uncle in order to introduce information about the governess's past life, so the reader can understand more easily the effects that a mansion such as Bly may have upon the governess's hypertrophied imagination:

The fact to be in possession of was therefore that his old friend, the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson, had at the age of twenty, on taking service for the first time in the schoolroom, come up to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the adviser. This person proved, on her presenting herself for judgement at a house in Harley Street that impressed her vast and imposing – this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage. (James 1984:149)

Douglas explains that the tale will not state "in any literal vulgar way" (1984:147) who the governess is in love with so, to make it clearer for his audience, he narrates the first encounter between the governess and the uncle, which is presented as a fundamental part of the tale. The novella is not only conformed by the governess's tale, then, but also by Douglas's narrative of what the governess told him but never wrote down. Douglas is therefore editor but also listener/recipient (of the governess's story), as the narrator is listener/recipient of Douglas's reading, but also an editor, for Douglas passes the governess's manuscript on to him right before he dies. Such circumstances determine, in Chinitz terms, "a conflating of the outsides and insides of narrative" (1994:265). The boundaries of narrative become blurred. The different levels of fiction merge. As Bradbury and McFarlane explain in reference to modernist literature, reality is transformed into subjective fiction. Yet such a modernist trait may as well be appraised from the paradigm of the fantastic:

That inscription of hesitation on the level of narrative *structure*, which Torodov identified as fantasy's defining feature, can be read as a displacement of fantasy's central *thematic* issue: an uncertainty as to the nature of the 'real', a problematization of categories of 'realism' and 'truth,' of the 'seen' and 'known' [...]. Fantasy's ambiguous literary effects, on the level of the form, enact its thematic uncertainties and hesitations, through a sliding of thematic into structural equivocation. (Jackson 1981: 49)

To complicate matters further, the text does not resume the frame narrative once the governess's story finishes, so, perhaps no longer aware that he is reading a story within a story within a story, the reader is forced to trust the governess's authority as narrator, even when her voice has been mediated all along. The novella



ends with young Miles's death, but the governess's narrative does not explain how Miles dies. It could be argued that he dies from fear of the ghosts, but according to the text, Miles "[had] seen but the quiet day" (1984:261), and the governess's juxtaposing narrative may induce the reader to believe that she actually asphyxiates him: "I caught him, yes, I held him –it may be imagined with what a passion" (1984:261-2). Instead of an answer, the ending of the novella offers a minute of silence, a void of meaning: "[...] but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, disposed, had stopped" (1984:262). The governess elides a minute of narration, so the novella ends with a mystery that maintains the feeling of doubt experienced by the reader till the very end of the story: "[...] the unreliability of the governess as its principal narrator and the failure of the frame story to close the narration in time and space hold the narrative in uncertain suspension" (Chinitz 1994:268). The authorized voices of Douglas and the narrator disappear, and the reader's sense of doubt is deferred beyond the ending of the story, for he only has access to a narrative that deliberately conceals information. In *The Turn of the Screw* then –resuming now Todorov's explanation of the fantastic– "hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work" (1970:37-8).<sup>7</sup>

## SUBJECTIVITY, PERCEPTION, AND THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

Hesitation, in fact, could arguably be considered the essential theme in James's novella. As previously mentioned, most critical discussions on the text seems to revolve around whether or not the ghosts are 'real.' Todorov himself refers explicitly to the novella in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*: "Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* offers [...] a variable to the singular phenomenon of perception [...] instead of revealing the matter, it[=perception] rather functions as a screen [...]. Attention is so strongly focused on the act of perception itself that we will definitely ignore the nature of what is perceived" (1970:111).<sup>8</sup> James's novella indeed focuses upon the governess's (perhaps) distorted perception of reality. In fact, the character configures her entire identity from her role as *seer*:

<sup>7</sup> "L'hésitation se trouve représentée, elle devienne un des thèmes de l'œuvre".

<sup>8</sup> "*Le Tour d'érou* de Henry James offre une troisième variante de ce phénomène singulier où la perception fait écran plutôt qu'elle ne dévoile. [...] L'attention est si fortement concentrée sur l'acte de perception que nous ignorerons toujours la nature de ce qu'est perçu."

I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most lovable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep constant ache of one's own engaged affection. We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me, and I –well, I had *them*. It was in short a magnificent chance. This chance presented itself to me in an image richly material. I was a screen –I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would. (James 1984:179)

Perception, as Todorov explains, indeed functions as a *screen* in *The Turn of the Screw*. However, the analogy that the governess composes around herself –“I was a screen”– and her function as *perceiver* in fact allow for connecting the novella with the epistemological revolution brought about by Heisenberg's ‘Uncertainty Principle,’ which preceded modernism. Daniel Joseph Singal explains: “The certainties of Newtonian mechanics, and the Euclidian geometry on which it was based, gave way to a new physics in which everything depended on the relative position and motion of the observer and the object being observed” (2010:12). As far as literary modernism is concerned, such scientific relativism has as prime consequence the already mentioned impossibility to assert one single, complete, and true meaning, since one single, complete, and true knowledge of the world is no longer possible. Such ineluctable uncertainty can be indeed traced in James's concern with the capacity of perception as an unreliable cognitive process. Miles's mysterious actions are apparently explained when he confesses: “I want to see more life” (James 1984:217). As far as Miles knows, seeing the world means knowing the world. Yet, the text constantly insists upon the deceitfulness of perception, which can only provide a subjective and distorted knowledge of reality. Yet the world can only be apprehended by attaining sensory information; hence our knowledge can only ever be subjective and distorted. As the governess herself states, “I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would” (1984:179). Definitely, the more the governess sees, the less the reader *knows*, and, as Jackson argues, “that which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes ‘I see’ synonymous with ‘I understand’” (1981: 45). In this view, the true –subversive– element of fantasy in the text is not the supernatural dimension of the tale, but the unreliable process of perception itself, as in modernist fiction, for, as previously mentioned, “for the moderns ‘that’, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (Woolf 2008:11). Once again, the fantastic and the modernist –as critical paradigms– coalesce:

The whole thing has been primarily and completely a characterization of the governess: her visions and the way she behaves about them become as soon as we look at them from the obverse side, a solid and unmistakable picture of the poor country parson's daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, her inability to admit to herself her sexual impulses and the

relentless English 'authority' which enables her to put over on inferiors even purposes which are totally mistaken and not at all to the other people's best interests. *The Turn of the Screw*, then, on this theory, would be a masterpiece –not as a ghost story, there are a great many better ones of the ordinary kind– but as a *study in morbid psychology*. (Wilson 1999:172)

As this article hypothesizes, however, the ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw* determines that James's text is both, a ghost story and a psychological tale. The novella is simultaneously two different types of narrative because, in fact, nineteenth century gothic fiction evolves into a less identifiable separate genre, for "its depths [are] less romantic chasms or labyrinthine dungeons, than they murky recesses of human subjectivity [...] signifying the alienation of the human subject from the culture and language in which s/he was located" (Botting 1996:11). Indeed, abiding by such principles, the fantastic makes an inquiry and offers two possible alternative answers:

In a world such as ours, which we know, without devils, sylphs, or vampires, something happens that is impossible to explain with the laws of such a world. Whoever witnesses such an impossible even must choose between two possible solutions: either he is experiencing an illusion of the senses, a product of his imagination, and then the laws of the world remain unchanged, or the impossible event actually took place, and therefore it is an integral part of reality, and, then, reality must be governed by rules unknown to us. (1970:29)<sup>9</sup>

From a Todorovian perspective, fantastic literature does not provide an answer to uncertainty. "Wasn't it just a story-book over which I had fallen a-doze and a dream?" (James 1984:156), wonders the governess, in a moment of the narrative when reality and unreality become undistinguishable. Chinitz explains: "At the same time that she imagines Flora as a storybook heroine –as *Alice in Wonderland* –she, too, plays Alice, reading and dreaming that what she has read has become reality. As the governess's *reality disappears into imagined experience*, she is increasingly immersed in *the world she reads into existence* until the imaginary, in fact, turns real" (1994:272, my italics). Indeed, the governess *reads* the world as if it were a fairy tale, and she does so to the extent of transforming her deluded imagination into (what she perceives as) reality. And yet, when the governess's romantic fantasies turn into perceived reality, the fairy tale she once thought she might have been living in fact becomes a gothic novel. As the governess strolls by

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<sup>9</sup> "Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons, sans diables, sylphides, ni vampires, se produit un événement qui ne peut s'expliquer par les lois de ce même monde familier. Celui qui perçoit l'événement doit opter pour l'une des deux solutions possibles: ou bien il s'agit d'une illusion des sens, d'un produit de l'imagination et les lois du monde restent alors ce qu'elles sont; ou bien l'événement a véritablement eu lieu, il est partie intégrante de la réalité, mais alors cette réalité est régie par des lois inconnues de nous."

the lake, she imagines: “[...] it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve” (James 1984:163). She is of course thinking of the uncle, but when her romantic fantasy becomes real, it also becomes perverse and terrifying: “What arrested me on the spot –and with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for –was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there!” (1984:164). The charming knight the governess was imagining metamorphoses into a stranger whose only presence incites fear, for “an unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred” (James 1984:164). Thus, it is precisely once the story focuses on the deceptive process of perception that fairy tale dissolves and horror rises from uncertainty.

## AMBIGUITY AS DEFIANCE

Very soon after arriving at Bly, the governess is shocked when she sees her own reflection upon a full body mirror<sup>10</sup> for the first time: “[...] the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot, all struck me – like the wonderful appeal of my small charge– as so many things thrown in” (1984:153). Such vision of herself “from head to foot” arguably triggers a process of identity dissociation –“le dédoublement de la personnalité” (Todorov 1970:113)– insofar as in that very moment the governess begins to construct a fictitious narrative identity for herself as the heroine of her own autobiographical text. This, in fact, is one of the first manifestations of the Doppelgänger motif<sup>11</sup> in the text, which actually recurs almost *ad infinitum*. Perhaps, the clearest examples of this motif are the ghosts, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, operating as Doppelgänger of the children, Miles and Flora. Miss Jessel always appears before Flora, while Peter Quint haunts Miles and allegedly has an evil influence upon him. Miss Jessel, as the

<sup>10</sup> “Glasses and mirrors are often the tools which make it possible to access the marvellous world” (Todorov 1970: 127); Ce sont en particulier les lunettes et le miroir qui permettent de pénétrer dans l’univers merveilleux.

<sup>11</sup> The Doppelgänger is a typical motif in gothic fiction, but as Todorov includes it as a ‘theme of the self’ pertaining to the fantastic, and as this study, following Jackson, has extended the category of the fantastic to define a *mode* (Jackson 1981:31), of which gothic fiction would be a (sub)genre, the following examining of Doppelgänger figures in the novella aims at broadening the scope beyond traditional studies of ‘doubles’ within the generic constraint of the Gothic.

former governess, is also the governess's Doppelgänger. And, on a different note, just as Douglas and the unnamed narrator are both narrators and audience to the governess's story, so are the governess herself and Mrs. Grose, the house-keeper, for Mrs. Grose narrates the story of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel to the governess. The four characters then draw a double structure of doubled characters. But as Glennis Byron explains, in late nineteenth century gothic fiction, the notion of duplicity in fact gives account of a far more disturbing concept: "a multiplicity of unstable selves" (2000:138). So the structure of doubles *multiplies* time and time again. After all, from a different perspective, it can also be argued that the illicit (and implicit) sexual relationship between Miss Jessel and Peter Quint makes these characters analogous to the governess and the uncle, inasmuch as both relationships defy the moral codes of Victorian society. In this line, adapting the patterns of Platonic and Nietzschean repetition from Miller's *Fiction and Repetition*, John H. Pearson very eloquently establishes a series of doubled characters and postulates an ideological function for them:

Platonic repetition asserts that identity and delegated authority devolve from similarity between the original and the repetition. [...] Through Nietzschean repetition, in contrast, identity and potential authority devolve from difference. This mode of repetition ultimately leads to subversion of established authority, as evidenced by the governess, who first repeats the master's power by exercising the authority that he has granted and that is entirely dependent upon his will to empower her as his ambassador at Bly, and who then distinguishes herself from him and his method of governance by establishing authority beyond his control. (1992:277)

There are thus parallel doubled structures in the novella. On the one hand, Peter Quint and Miles function as Platonic Doppelgänger figures to the uncle: they repeat his authority at Bly, but weaken it progressively. On the other hand, the governess herself operates as Nietzschean Doppelgänger to the uncle: she repeats the uncle's authority in order to subvert it. In the end, insofar as she becomes the author of her own story, she *textualizes* Miles and Peter Quint; that is to say, she enforces her own authority over the uncle's weakened authority, as it is repeated by Miles and Peter Quint. Some Doppelgänger structures are then more revealing than others. For instance: since Douglas was once in love with the governess, the relationship between the characters can be considered to mirror the unrealized love between the governess and the uncle, since both relationships –as it was also the case with Peter Quint and Miss Jessel– are forbidden by the social codes of Victorianism, for Douglas and the uncle belong to a higher social class. Even more interestingly, such a structure of doubled characters –a 'theme of the self', according to Todorov's hypothesis– does in fact articulate a 'theme of the other' in the text:

The second net [of themes (=the themes of the other)] originates in sexual desire. Fantastic literature describes its excesses, along with its different transformations or, rather, perversions. Cruelty and violence deserve special consideration, even when their relationship with desire is beyond any doubt. In the same way, preoccupations about death, life after death, corpses, and vampirism are linked the theme of love. (1970:146)<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the relationship between love and the preoccupation with life after death, it should be noted that psychoanalytical readings of *The Turn of the Screw* argue that the governess's hysteria –the alleged psychological origin of the supernatural events in the novella– is precisely a consequence of the character's suppressed libido.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the illicit sexual relationship between Peter Quint and Miss Jessel has as a consequence the demonization of both characters for, as Todorov argues, sexual desire often incarnates in the figure of the Devil.<sup>14</sup> Note the *diabolic* physical description of Peter Quint:

'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.' (James 1984: 173)

Concerning this particular manifestation of the 'themes of the other,' there is one last element in *The Turn of the Screw* which combines the traits of the fantastic mode with ideological concerns that pave the way of modernism; that is to say, the sexual dimension of the relationship between the governess and Miles, which is duplicated in the relationship between the governess and Douglas, for Douglas is the exact same age as Miles, and he fell in love her while she was working as his sister's governess. The sexual undertones in the relationship between the governess and Miles are both eloquent and disturbing:

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<sup>12</sup> "Le point de départ de ce second réseau (temas del tú) reste le désir sexuel. La littérature fantastique s'attache à décrire particulièrement ses formes excessives ainsi que ses différents transformations ou, si l'on veut, perversions. Une place à part doit être faite à la cruauté et la violence, même si leur relation avec le désir est de soi hors de doute. De même, les préoccupations concernant la mort, la vie après la mort, les cadavres et le vampirisme, son liées au thème de l'amour."

<sup>13</sup> "Her visions and the way she behaves about them become as soon as we look at them from the obverse side, a solid and unmistakable picture of the poor country parson's daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, [and] her inability to admit to herself her sexual impulses" (Wilson 1999:172).

<sup>14</sup> "Le diable et la libido" (Todorov 1970:131).

'Think me—for a chance—*bad!*' I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how, on top of it, he bent forward and kissed me. It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss and I had to make, while I folded him for a minute in my arms, the most stupendous effort not to cry [...].

'Then you didn't undress at all?'

He fairly glittered in the gloom. 'Not at all. I sat up and read.'

'And when did you go down?'

'At midnight. When I'm bad I *am* bad!'

[...] He literally bloomed so from this exploit that he could afford radiantly to assent. 'How otherwise should I have been bad enough?' he asked. Then, after another embrace, the incident and our interview closed. (1984: 204-5)

Pearson explains:

[Miles] has learned at least the outward means of dominating women: his relations with the governess are increasingly clouded by sexual innuendo [...]. Miles remains obstinately unyielding, suggesting his suspicion that the governess is seeking narrative authority over him. His charm is meant to disconcert the governess; however, as she presses him for the information she needs to write her narrative, Miles responds with more sexually forceful speech. (1992:283-4)

Pearson identifies the sexual double entendre of the previous excerpt with the power struggle between Miles and the governess. Such a notion, added to the previous explanation about how the *Doppelgänger* structure can subvert patriarchal mechanisms of power, may indeed certify the textual presence of the last characteristic of the fantastic: its social function. Peter Quint and Miss Jessel – represented as abject and diabolic for having transgressed the social norm – materialize (and sublimate) the unconsummated love between the governess and the uncle by incarnating such forbidden love within the supernatural sphere, for "sexual excesses are better accepted when they appear on the Devil's account" (Todorov 1970:167).<sup>15</sup> Thus, the relationship between Miss Jessel and Peter Quint arguably sublimates the relationship between the governess and the uncle, which, as the story is edited and retold by Douglas and the narrator, becomes the key to the mystery of the tale. And by sublimating –through the fantastic– the impossible love between the characters, the novella actually undercuts an ideological foundation of Victorian ethics: the irreconcilable dichotomy between 'human' and 'animal.' Signal explains:

<sup>15</sup> "Les déchaînements sexuels seront mieux acceptés par toute espèce de censure si on les a inscrits au compte du diable."

It was this moral dichotomy above all that constituted the deepest guiding principle of the Victorian outlook. On the ‘human’ or ‘civilized’ side of the dividing line fell everything that served to lift man above the beasts—education, refinement, manners, the arts, religion, and such domesticated emotions as loyalty and family love. The ‘animal’ or ‘savage’ realm, by contrast, contained those instincts and passions that constantly threatened self-control, and which therefore had to be repressed at all cost. Foremost among those threats was of course sexuality, which proper Victorians conceived of as a hidden geyser of animality existing within everyone and capable of erupting with little or no warning at the slightest stimulus [...]. This moral dichotomy fostered a tendency to view the world in polar terms [...] [which,] it was believed, were permanently rooted in biology and in the general laws of nature. The ‘right’ way, the moral way, was to keep these various categories distinct and segregated. (1987:9-10)

The ambiguity of James’s text thus undermines a system of values which is founded on segregated and mutually exclusive notions. The fact that *The Turn of the Screw* needs to be read simultaneously as a moral fable *and* as a psychological portrait<sup>16</sup> entails a relativistic perspective which brings down the apparently unmovable values of Victorian ethics. Indeed, modernism is defined by “the interpenetration, the reconciliation, the coalescence, the fusion—perhaps an appallingly explosive fusion—of reason and unreason, intellect and emotion, subjective and objective” (Bradbury and MacFarlane 1991:48). Signal coincides:

This ever-present drive for integration explains so much about the history of Modernism. It allows one to make sense, for example, of the predilection of twentieth-century thinkers and writers for such devices as paradox (which joins seeming opposites) and ambivalence (the fusing of contradictory emotions, such as love and hate), and for their tendency to place concepts and empirical observations along a continuum or spectrum rather than in tightly demarcated categories [...]. Modernists have demanded nothing less than ‘authenticity,’ which requires a blending of the conscious and unconscious strata of the mind so that the self presented to the world is the ‘true’ self in every respect. (1987:13-4)

## CONCLUSION

*The Turn of the Screw* is absolutely defined by ambivalence, and by the coalescence of apparently contradictory (un)realities. As this article has argued,

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<sup>16</sup> As previously quoted: “the text in fact—not possibly or probably but actually—yields two meanings, both equally self-consistent and self-complete” (Krook 1962: 388).



however, such thematic and structural ambiguity gives account of a literary mode that Todorov defined as 'fantastic.' Through the appraisal of James's novella from a Todorovian perspective, this study has aimed at exploring a reading that integrates traditionally opposed viewpoints. By arguing that *The Turn of the Screw* occupies both the textual spaces of late nineteenth century Gothicism and *fin-de-siècle* modernism, James's novella can be reassessed as being simultaneously inscribed in two different paradigms of narrative tradition. For it is both a ghost story and a psychological tale, and such claim, while subscribing the statement that the text "represents a decisive moment in the history of the Gothic" (Punter 1996:47), it also allows for a broader consideration of the text from the point of view of genre. Taking the fantastic as a literary *mode*, this article argues that in spite of traditional identifications between fantasy and Gothicism, Todorov's "postmodern" (Reed 2008:103) reading of *The Turn of the Screw* not only facilitates the interpretation of James's novella as modernist, stylistically and ideologically, but also serves to establish a continuum of (transforming) meaning in gothic fiction that, rather than appraising avant-garde literature as breaking from nineteenth century patterns, in fact hypothesizes that it is partly through the fantastic mode –of which the Gothic partakes– that modernism draws in order to take form eventually. In the fantastic, as in modernism, "the protagonist blurred vision and ignorance is the most 'objective' perspective that is possible" (Jackson 1981:30). The most objective perspective of reality is thus ambivalent, ambiguous, uncertain. And, as Todorov and Henry James both concur: from uncertainty rises terror.

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