Sex and the single girl
SEX AND THE SINGLE GIRL:  
Who's Got the Governess Figured Out? 
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All aspects of *The Turn of the Screw* have been subject to intense scrutiny since its appearance in 1898. While many subjects in the book are open to heated debate, one major bone of contention has been the presence of suggestive sexuality on the part of the governess. The affair between Quint and Jessel is not a point of argument for the purposes of this reading. It was quite obviously sexual. However, a wide range of opinions are held as to whether or not it was an extreme sexuality driving the governess or if her virtue precluded her from these baser thoughts. The main two theories of thought on this subject are the Freudians and the New Critics. While both these theories represent deep concentration, thorough thought and examination of the text, neither exhibits the concept of temperance in their own ideas. Neither Freudians' nor New Critics' portrayal of sexuality in *The Turn of the Screw* can be subscribed to because in their extremity, these views miss the more plausible subtle sexuality that exists in the middle ground, which is where the most inclusive and viable interpretation lies.

The Freudians came first, and they maintain that the governess's oversexed mind is actually what manifested the apparitions. They cite numerous instances of sexual symbolism on their behalf and reduce the story to simply the hysterics of one woman. The most remarked upon of these connotations comes from Wilson: "Observe also...the significance of the governess's interest in the little girl's pieces of wood and of the fact that the male apparition first takes shape on a tower and the female apparition on a lake" (117). The simplicity of this argument, which could be just as easily denied by saying the scene was set for aesthetics, has resounded through papers for years.

While Freudian theory maintains some credibility into the present time, it is not as acceptable as it once was. A psychoanalytic reading of *The Turn of the Screw* is powerful, but has no basis of testing and no concrete textual references. Most of the assertions
made by psychoanalysts come from inferences on the text. In one article, Sami Ludwig deciphers the following sentence fragment: “frank view of the abrupt transformation of [her] office” (James 77). She breaks it down as follows: “[It] turns into a powerful coded message, if [emphasis added] we associate ‘frank’ with licentiousness, ‘transformation’ with sexual violation, and ‘office’ with copulation or marital duty” (Ludwig 44). This critic, among others, is trying to conclusively prove that the governess was motivated by her sexual repression which has found its outlet in young Miles. While Ludwig presents nothing in this interpretation that can be proven wrong, the attachment to nearly every word of sexuality makes her theory seem less plausible. The emphasis is mine, because the “if” of it is the main fault of this argument. Would Henry James, purported by the likes of T.S. Eliot to be a master of suggestion, make his work so laden with connotations that a person could barely get through a sentence without one? (Eliot 261). No; the Freudians take the subtle and try and spin it out into the obvious, if and only if we can assume they are correct.

The film adaptation produced in 1993 is another fine example of the “oversexualization” of Freudian thought. The film takes liberties, such as making an apparition of Quint appear on the bed rather than at the window, to make their argument more apparent. Filmmakers also inserted flashbacks that are suggestive of the governess's past, which is totally absent in the novella, but would work toward their theory of the ghosts as her subconscious manifestations. However, the fact that they feel it is necessary to make these changes only proves that the original text was not written, and not meant to be read, in such an extreme format.

Freudian theory is so focused on the governess and her psychological issues that they table the idea of other characters' subconscious, or even conscious, actions. Essentially, they have whittled The Turn of the Screw into a story of psychological breakdown based on sexual repression. In doing so, they neglect to address the idea of James's intent. While that abstract idea will probably go without ever being explicitly explained, there is evidence that James had more in mind than a simple psychological study of one person. Specifically, there was a series of letters, in which The Turn of the Screw was discussed. “Both Miss Kenton and Mr. Wilson have conveniently ignored the letters, in which James made it perfectly clear that in The Turn of the Screw he was writing a tale of the supernatural” (Evans 202).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the New Critics believe that there is no such proof of sexuality in the governess's actions or speech, and therefore cannot be implied. Rather, New Critics focus on such formal issues as how things are said. This aspect can provide insight into meaning (Hall 17). This is most evident in arguments about The Turn of the Screw regarding the references to the apparitions, which are always objective. While Freudians assert that only the governess sees the ghosts, the New Critics maintain that James gives no indication that they are not separate and real entities (Heilman 178).

To many followers of the New Critic theory and theories close to it, The Turn of the Screw is nothing more than a simple allegory of good versus evil. In this reading, the
governess is seen as the epitome of protection and guidance. One critic even goes so far as to call her a “Guardian Angel” to the children she resides over. (Fagin 157) In turn to the “Guardian Angel,” Peter Quint takes on the role of the angel’s direct opposition. “Yet, Quint dominates the tower of their home, Quint who had red hair and red whiskers, the conventional guise of the Devil” (Fagin 157). The quote supports the simple allegorical hypothesis in its citation of textual references to appearance. Also, it places a different importance on the fact that Quint appears on a tower. Rather than assume the phallic reference, Fagin associates the position with having power over the household. While Freudians may suggest that is the same thing as a phallic reference, it changes the meaning from blatantly sexual to decidedly platonic.

The main problem with viewing the character as such is that she becomes less of a character, and certainly less complex than James was capable of writing. Also, a straightforward parable of good versus evil could be easily achieved without sexual themes, yet they are present, if nowhere else than in Quint and Jessel’s relationship. Quint’s crimes, in fact, are only sexual (Renner 208). The fact that Miles and Flora were touched by a relationship of this nature has obvious implications on the relationship they are forming with their new governess. Her sexuality, then, comes not only from the natural human sexuality within herself, but also in response to the experiences of the children that they show through their odd behavior.

New Critics, by definition of their analysis, also leave out authorial intent and biography. The belief behind this is that the text itself stands alone, and outcomes often diverge from intents (Hall 19). But without considering the time in which James wrote, as well as why, the context of the story, from his point of view, is lost.

When one considers the chronology of this criticism, it becomes more obvious why they function as they do. Like most things in life, criticism can be seen as a series of responses to the preceding events. As Freud became less and less popular, the concepts of psychoanalysis were taken less seriously, and in a modern light are often considered wildly over the top. Even more detrimental to the Freudian argument is the inability to test it. It becomes a battle of probability. In response to this, the New Critical form took the opposite perspective in both method, and the concept of sexuality, a topic close to Freudian’s hearts. Since one of their objectives might easily be construed as wanting to disprove the Freudians, as many articles indicate, they would, of course, have to take the extreme opposite perspective. This again allows the text no room to breathe.

How can such divergent views be held on the same text? The simple answer is that they are both wrong. By trying to hold the book true to their individual theories, they undercut the subtleties and the existence of multiple levels of meaning. As Rahv says in his 1944 introduction to the tale: “[T]he Freudian insight which this theory puts into operation is so elementary as to make the story less rather than more interesting” (624). The same can easily be said for the argument that extinguishes the sexual nuances of this piece of writing.

Instead, a more informed interpretation of the work comes from a more moderate
reading including some historical context. The psychology of the governess is important to the story, but it does not make up the text in its entirety. The governess is a young woman, one whom we gather to be attractive and affectionate. She is human—not a paragon to maternal nature or a poster woman for sexual perversion. As a young woman, she will experience periods of awareness in her own sexuality and, because of Victorian morality that ruled the time, she must suppress them. This suppression does not equate to the magnitude of Freudian thought. Many women in her position were called upon to do the same, and not all of them saw ghosts.

Miles, too, is at a critical age. His constant attendance with Quint suggests that he has a greater understanding of masculinity and therefore exudes a level a maturity beyond his age. However, he is still youthful, which results in his inner conflict that manifests itself through his strange behavior with a sexual hint because of his unusually mature knowledge of it.

What results between these two characters is a level of naive sexuality, albeit misplaced, that neither is fully aware of, and certainly not slave to. As a result, they face each other with a trepidation and shyness, and what comes out are speeches that contain innuendos. “These innuendos are fully explicable only if they are viewed as the products of the innocence and resulting confusion of two characters – Miles and the Governess – whose real complexity has thus far eluded both the Freidians and the non-Freudians” (Chase 201). Chase finally offers a middle ground on which to examine the text, although he does remain, in other parts of his argument, decidedly Freudian. The text is not only about the governess and her repression, or what is good and what is not, but it is about the characters and the relationships they build. Both characters are important to the meaning behind the work—all characters are really. Both contribute to the psychological exploration James embarks on. James, in fact, is famous for creating this psychological element to his works—an aspect not explored by the New Critics and carried too far by the Freudians. Authorial intent, although impossible to truly determine, was certainly not to create something transparently void of layers. James was not looking to tell a simple story.

Though told through the governess's perspective, James needs characters to act upon one another for the development of the plot. Regardless of the existence of the ghosts, the governess must deal with the strange relationship that has developed between herself and her charges. The relationship is a product of the Victorian sensibilities in which it is steeped, acting on the psychological state of the characters, and it is put forth by James, in part, to show the ambiguity of human relationships and concepts of good and evil.

While any work is subject to interpretation, The Turn of the Screw seems to have rated considerable attention. Perhaps because the debate became most heated after James’s death, it goes on because he cannot explain himself. However, this doesn’t seem a likely reason to the Freidians and the New Critics, since these two schools of thought never placed much value on what James had to say in the matter. It is this self-imposed
ignorance, born of righteousness, which allows Freudians and New Critics such
zealousness in their views. But, with examination and appropriation of certain aspects of
each argument, as well as searching in areas they neglected, one finds the most likely and
most sound argument, especially regarding the sexuality of James's unnamed governess.

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