Defining ambiguous language and jargon

Arguing sequentially, logically, and clearly

Adequately explaining broad ideas concisely; choosing narrow ideas

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*The Turn of the Screw*

Perspective: A Construct Of Context And Time

The interpretation of events in any story is largely dependent upon the context of a given event and the perspective of whoever documented the event. It is unlikely that a man who decides to rob a pharmacy to save the life of his sickly wife is going to have a similar perspective to the pharmacist. Likewise, if the aforementioned wife had actually developed her ailment after her husband's selfish decision to commit random pharmaceutical burglary, the significance of the robbery is changed. Both context and perspective are fundamentally important to any portrayal of events. *The Turn of the Screw* explores the idea of storytelling in the contexts of time and perspective. The novella employs an envelope narrative, presenting a story constructed from second, third, or even fourth hand information. Henry James' careful and deliberate structure of the envelope narrative (as outlined in the prologue) from which *The Turn of the Screw* is written creates a general ambiguity of time, making it impossible to discern the true events of the novel, as demonstrated in the last paragraph of Chapter Four.

The precarious structure of the novella's narration is composed through a plethora of layers of narration. These layers of narration, whose intention is to obscure the clarity of events, are in and of themselves, difficult to pinpoint. Proceeding in the order from most general (or removed from the supposed events) to most specific (or close to the supposed events), one can derive that the first level of narration is the authorial level: Henry James. At the most general level, one accepts that James wrote the text that can be read in purchased versions (e.g. the Dover Thrift Edition) of the novel today. For the purposes of this examination, the fact that the text of *The Turn of the Screw* was likely edited by staff of The Macmillan Company (which originally published the text in its publication, *The Two Magics*, in the year 1898), the staff of the publication *Collier's Weekly* (who published the text in serial format in the year 1897), and anyone else whom James commissioned to edit his work prior to its submission to be published, will be largely ignored. The sum of this editorial work, for the sake of this analysis, is fully attributed to James, who is credited as the author.

In the realm of storytelling, there are only two entities that inhabit the real world: the author and the audience. Beyond the authorial level of narration, there exist several narrative levels that can be described as existing solely within the context of the story. The narrator, although perhaps a constituent of the author's consciousness, is a fundamentally different entity than the author. The most general narrative (i.e. beyond authorial) level in *The Turn of the Screw* is the unnamed narrator who reports to listening to a story "on Christmas Eve in an old house" (1). During the section of text before Chapter One (now deemed the prologue) of the book, the reader is subjected to the narrator's account of events as transcribed by Henry James; in the prologue, there are merely two levels of narration. Because of the prologue's relative purity (insofar as the rest of the book is convoluted by multiple perspectives), one can derive the beginnings of the structure of narration from which the events of *The Turn of the Screw* are written. James' vague writing style complicates deriving the third level of narration:

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... But that only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill.

The first "he" referred to in the above citation is presumably Douglas, although the last person referenced by name is not Douglas, leaving to whom the narrator refers implied yet ambiguous. The narrator convolutes the origin of the subsequent story (i.e. the events of *The Turn of the Screw* after the prologue) in citing two different sources for its genesis; the narrator says that he commissioned the creation of his "own made much later, [which] is what [he] shall presently give" (3). However, the narrator alludes to listening to Douglas' recount of the story, suggesting that Douglas adjusted his "final little auditory" (3) to fit his audience. It is unclear from which account of events the following chapters of *The Turn of the Screw* originate, but this third level of narration will be referred to as Douglas' retelling.

When asked if the events experienced in the transcription were his own, Douglass answered with a prompt "Oh, thank God, no!" (4). Douglas went on to say that the record was not his, saying he took "'nothing but the impression. I took that here' -- he tapped his heart" (4). Douglas says that his sister's governess was the one to create a record of the events, who presumably experienced the events detailed in the manuscript. This unnamed governess -- who tasked with looking after Miles and Flora and supposedly experiences the events in the novella -- is thenceforth deemed the living governess or simply the governess. The living governess produces the fourth and fifth levels of narration; the fourth level being her recalling events that happened in the distant past so that she can transcribe them to create the manuscript and the fifth being her perception of the events at the moment that she experienced them. With these four vaguely established narrators (listed from most to least removed: Henry James, unnamed narrator, Douglas, the living governess), the prologue concludes with a sentiment that verges on ironic: "But Douglas, without heeding me, had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand" (9).

James removes the reader from the truth of the novel at least five times through the aforementioned levels of narration. At least four different people (James, the unnamed narrator, Douglas, and the governess) interact with the story in some way, which ultimately entrusts the integrity of the story to a minimum of four discrete entities of questionable trustworthiness. On top of this telephone-style of information relay, the governess' memory is suggested to corrupt the nature of time. After the appearance of Peter Quint in the novella's fourth chapter, the governess reports, "I gave him time to reappear. I call it time, but how long was it? I can't speak to the purpose today of the duration of these things. That kind of measure must have left me: they couldn't have lasted as they actually appeared to me to last" (20). When the governess refers to "today," it is assumed to be the day on which the living governess decided to document her story, supposedly long after the events originally occurred. However, it is feasible to consider that the living governess had the entirety of this thought as the events occurred and not long after when she was documenting them. Both options are tenable; the nature of today is ambiguous because of the envelope narrative and the syntax of the novella. Furthermore, when the living governess states that her measure of time "must have left" her, the believability of her story sharply decreases. If the living governess has no perception of the depth of time (i.e. she has no way of discerning distance between events; she is unable to connect spatial events to positions on a time line), there is far less importance in what she says. It is impossible to create a truthful rendition of a story from events without context or even events with questionable context. Any chronological rendition of randomly assorted events is at best, approximate and at worst, a wild fabrication of the truth. Finally, in the last section of this quote emerges the line "appeared to me to last," which raises several questions regarding exactly to whom time is appearing to last due to James' envelope narrative. Arguably, this clause about how events are appearing to last can be attributed to James, the narrator or Douglas as a remark about their perception of events. If one accepts the sentence in the simplest and most direct context, the length of events is appearing to the consciousness of the living governess in the present (i.e. after it was transcribed). This account of the events at the end of the fourth chapter displays the vague and capricious nature of perspective that is inherent in an envelope narrative. Moreover, this account questions the reliability of the governess' memory as distorted by time.

**AFTERWORD/CONCLUSION** (only grade if it will help me)

While merely perspectives, stories are powerful forms of information that outlive their characters. In *the Turn of the Screw*, we have to trust the integrity of the information to each of the four people; in the novella, truth is relative at best. Events are presented with ambiguous context, and all attempts at explanation -- at synthesis of the information into a coherent narrative -- is approximate and manmade. Furthermore, any manmade story is deemed fiction, suggesting that the verity of the events that occur in the novella is less important than the stories themselves.

When citing actions in the book, there is no way one can prove their authenticity. In a multitude of sentences, it would be more correct to have the word allegedly before every action James claims that the narrator claims that Douglas claims that the governess writes that she claims to have preformed. Everything in this essay has a questionable basis of its validity. As French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes identified, "*cogito ergo sum*," suggesting that one is cognizant only of one's existence. Everything in seeming existence cannot be finitely and definitely proven; any information one takes from others is impossibly hard to take as truth. The only truth one can claim is the existence of oneself, as even one's past experiences are corrupted by the faults of memory or more broadly, time. Sigmund Freud, with whom psychologist William James (brother of Henry James) interacted, discusses the concept of approximate truth in the context of scientific study; he states eloquently: “it is a mistake to believe that a science consists in nothing but conclusively proved propositions, and it is unjust to demand that it should… the capacity to be content with these approximations to certainty and the ability to carry on constructive work despite the lack of final confirmation are actually a mark of a scientific habit of mind." *The Turn of the Screw* questions the nature of truth in the face of time and perspective while providing James a platform to toy with various psychiatric phenomena. Both context and perspective are paramount to comprehending the significance of events; without either context or perspective, *the Turn of the Screw* suggests that stories are all fictional approximations except in the exact moment when one experiences them for oneself.