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“WHAT THEN ON EARTH WAS I?”:  
THE HYSTERIC’S DESIRE AND THE QUESTION  
OF IDENTITY IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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**“What then on earth was I?”:  
 The hysteric’s desire and the question of identity in *The Turn of the Screw***

Synopsis: Reading Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* from a Lacanian perspective, this essay examines the governess’s symbolic identity as fundamentally sustained by her desire to be the object *a* of her master in her hysterical fantasy. The novella illustrates the governess’s efforts to maintain her status as the object cause of her master’s desire by carrying out his symbolic command. At the end of the story, however, an identity crisis precipitates her into serious disorientation and threatens to break through her fantasy frame.

I.

Edmund Wilson’s Freudian reading of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* as “a neurotic case of sex repression” stirred up controversy on the ambiguity regarding the governess’s madness and the (un)reality of the ghosts.<sup>1</sup> Ever since Wilson’s provocative reading, the criticism of James’s novella has largely been divided into two camps, either for or against psychoanalytic interpretation.<sup>2</sup> This essay tackles the question of the governess’s desire once again. Instead of seeing her desire as repressed sexuality, however, I aim to examine the mechanism of her desire as a structural nexus between the subject and the Other, drawing upon Jacques Lacan’s theory of desire and fantasy.

The focus of this essay thus falls on the governess and her master. Even though the latter appears only once in the prologue and is absent in the story proper, his symbolic presence weighs heavily throughout the narrative. The prologue foregrounds the governess’s

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Ambiguity of Henry James.” *A Casebook on Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw*. Ed. Gerald Willen. New York: Crowell, 1960. 115.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise critical history of the novella, see Peter Beidler’s “A Critical History of *The Turn of the Screw*.” *The Turn of the Screw*. ed. Peter G. Beidler. . Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004. 189-222.

lovability. Introducing her as “a most charming person,” Douglass says, “She was the most agreeable woman I’ve ever known in her position; she’d have been worthy of any whatever” (24).<sup>3</sup> Douglass admits his fondness of her and agrees with the narrator on her love: “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” (24).

Douglass’s admission implies that he and the governess were in reciprocal sympathy at the least. The fact that she told him the story and eventually trusted her manuscript with him signals her affection towards him, which was probably a response to his liking. As Shoshana Felman notes, their relationship illustrates “the specular effect of the seductive *play of glances*, of the visual exchange of specular reflections.”<sup>4</sup> The mirror relationship between the two enables the one to see what the other sees. Consequently, if Douglass considers her a charming governess, it is highly likely that she also regards herself as such a lovable woman.

More important than the governess’s affection for Douglass is her love with her master. Despite Douglass’s ambiguous answer to the narrator’s question about the person she loved—“The story won’t tell, not in any literal vulgar way”—, the story clearly shows that she was in love with her master (25). It may also be said that the master has even existed in her desire before she meets him in person. Indeed her first impression of him is as much a confirmation of the anticipated image of a gentleman she has fantasized as a realistic reflection of his appearance:

This prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime 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. One could easily fix his type; it never, happily, dies out. He was handsome and bold and pleasant, offhand and gay and kind. He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid, but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she afterwards showed was that he put the whole thing to her as a

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<sup>3</sup> *The Turn of the Screw*. ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004. Hereafter abbreviated *TS* and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>4</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation.” *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*. ed. Shoshana Felman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982. 131.

favour, an obligation he should gratefully incur. (*TS* 26)

The epithets applied to his characterization are markedly colored by her imaginary world of fiction. His handsome figure renders him a materialization of a “gallant and splendid” gentleman of her dream world. What really makes her happy, however, is less his splendid image than the fact that he hired her, assigning her an obligation. In Lacanian terminology, her happiness belongs to the symbolic order as well as to the imaginary order. Certainly she takes high salary into account when she accepts the position. Yet it is significant that she takes her employment as a favor he extended to her, and this gives her courage with which she carries out her duty as a governess. Douglass agrees on the narrator’s opinion that she “succumbed to” the master’s charm and “that is just the beauty of her passion,” because there were other applicants who were deterred from taking the job by the master’s prohibition against appeal and complaint (*TS* 28).

She even feels rewarded in advance for taking the job against the odds—“a vision of serious duties” (*TS* 28) and the unusual interdiction: “She promised to do this, and she mentioned to me that when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded” (*TS* 28-29). He gives her not merely a job but a mission, encouragement and reward, qualities that motivate a person’s action and even constitute his/her social identity. In short, what happens when she accepts the position is the birth of her symbolic identity, and the story is a narrative of her performing the master’s symbolic command.

## II.

At this point, it is important to sort out the entanglement of her duty and desire at the moment when she launches her tutoring career. What does she want? Of course, she wants to be a good governess. Isn’t she thrilled by “taking service for the first time in the schoolroom”? On a deeper level, however, she regards her position as a favor given by the master.

Apparently, she sees her new position as an exchange, a quid pro quo between her future labor and reward. When he entrusts her with the job, however, he confers on her something more than it, a surplus in exchange. His favor, romantically embroidered by her imagination, carries an additional connotation of sexual attraction. And it is this favor that tips the scales toward her acceptance of the position when she hesitates.

Here the owner of sexual attraction is the governess as well as the master. She considers his favor as a sign of his being attracted to her. She wants to maintain the symbolic identity he confers on her precisely because it makes her worthy of his love and approval. In Lacanian terms, her position not just constitutes her symbolic identity but necessarily produces her fantasy beyond that identity. Lacan's third graph of desire locates fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) beyond the level of symbolic identification.<sup>5</sup> Behind her symbolic identification lies her fantasy, which is the true driving force for her performing the task he devolves upon her. What she really wants is her occupation of a status in this fantasy, rather than her symbolic position as a governess.

What does she want to be in her fantasy? The famous Lacanian formula, "desire is desire of the Other," suggests that she wants to be the person the Other wants. On the face of it, this formula seems to yield an obvious answer, because her master wants her to be a good governess. This refers to the dimension of symbolic identification by which the subject sees herself from the viewpoint of the Other. Desire targets the dimension beyond symbolic identification, however. What the Other really wants from her is this dimension, something more in her than herself, namely what Lacan calls object *a*. Object *a* is the object cause of desire, an object that makes the Other desire rather than satisfies him.

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<sup>5</sup> In Lacan's third graph of desire, fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) is situated above the dimension of symbolic identification barred subject  $\$$  has with Ego ideal I(A), and the fantasy is supported by desire. See "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious." *Écrits*. trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006. 671-702. For a brilliant interpretation of the upper level of Lacan's graph (the level beyond identification), see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.110-129.

The Freudian interpretations of *The Turn of the Screw* have focused on her repressed sexuality, reading the ghosts as her hysterical hallucinations. Seeing what other characters can't see is her hysterical symptom. In his *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud speculates that the incompatibility between unconscious sexuality and moral consciousness triggers hysterical attack. From a Lacanian perspective, however, hysteria is a variation of neurosis in which the subject takes a certain stance towards the Other. The hysterical subject posits herself as the object cause of the Other's desire. By maintaining herself as object *a* of the Other, she keeps both her desire and the desire of the Other alive, namely unsatisfied. "In the case of the hysteric, inasmuch as desire is sustained in fantasy only by the lack of satisfaction the hysteric brings desire by slipping away as its object," Lacan says.<sup>6</sup> Bruce Fink explains Lacan's hysterical fantasy as follows:

The hysteric's fundamental fantasy cannot be adequately formulated using Lacan's general formula ( $\$ \diamond a$ ). In the slot to the left of the  $\diamond$ —the 'subject slot'—the hysteric appears, identified with an object: object *a*. And the object with which she relates in her fundamental fantasy—indicated in the slot to the right of the  $\diamond$ , the 'object-slot'—is . . . the Other as lacking, which Lacan designates  $\bar{A}$  (for Other, *Autre* in French) with a bar through it to indicate that it is divided or lacking:  $\bar{A}$ . Hence, the hysteric's object or 'partner' is not an imaginary other, a person she considers to be like herself . . . . Rather, it is a symbolic Other or master: someone imbued with knowledge and/or power . . . . The hysteric's fundamental fantasy could thus be written ( $a \diamond \bar{A}$ ).<sup>7</sup>

This does not mean that the governess distinguishes her duty from her desire, for her desire exists only unconsciously in her fantasy. It means that consciously she believes she does her duty, but all the while she is unconsciously staging herself as object *a* of her master. Fink's exposition makes it clear that the hysteric's partner is not just another person, but the big Other, the lawgiver. Her master in Harley Street not only gives her a symbolic identity but

<sup>6</sup> "The Subversion of the Subject," 698.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Fink. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997. 120-21.

also prescribes rules for her, prohibiting her writing to him. He is the superego, the punishing agent as well as the ego ideal, the benign father figure. The governess loves him but also dreads his punishment, the harshest of which would be none other than her losing the status of object *a* of him. As her fantasy supports her symbolic identity and her desire sustains her duty, her failure to fulfill her duty may bring about not merely her dismissal but, more importantly, the collapse of her fantasy structure. What worries her most is her losing his favor.

Her sense of duty is unavoidably bound up with her desire to be seen and liked as a dutiful governess by the master. The first appearance of Peter Quint's apparition occurs exactly when she is obsessed with the idea of being recognized by the Other.

It was a pleasure . . . to reflect that by my discretion, my quiet good sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure . . . to the person to whose pleasure I had yielded. What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me, and that I *could*, after all, do it proved even a greater joy than I had expected. I dare say I fancied myself in short a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear. . . . One of the thoughts that . . . used to be with me in these wanderings was that 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. I didn't ask more than that—I only asked that he should know; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. (*TS* 38-39)

What is prominent in the passage is less her wish to meet the "handsome face" of the master than her desire to be approved by him. She wants to see her master but only to be seen by him. What she wants, in short, is his look of approval and recognition, which signals her worth as object of his desire. Quint's emergence, instead of the master's, throws her into consternation. Yet one element of her wish—to be the object of a male gaze—persists in her nightmarish perception. The governess wants to be seen by the master, and the apparition of Quint keeps staring at her until he disappears. She wants an approving look; instead of it, she receives a disgusting look of an "unknown man" (*TS* 40). As Albaraq Mahbobah suggests,

Quint emerges displacing the Master by prosopopoeia, a rhetorical trope that confers voice, eye and even face on an absent figure. When he appears on the top of the tower, he does so “as no mere Master, but a personification of mastery itself.”<sup>8</sup> Does this personification not embody the extreme aspect of mastery? Isn’t Quint’s gaze the obscene look of the superego, which jumps out of her unconscious sense of guilt that constantly accompanies her fanciful self-portrait of “a remarkable young woman”? (*TS* 39).

The big irony is that the governess is not threatened by the emergence of Quint’s ghost but rather welcomes it as a chance to show off her heroism: “I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me. I now saw that I had been asked for a service admirable and difficult; and there would be a greatness in letting it be seen . . . that I could succeed where many another girl might have failed” (*TS* 53). The governess’s reasoning reveals that the ghosts’ emergence enables her to fulfill an admirable service and thereby to prove that she is superior over “many another girl.” In the libidinal economy of the governess, her sacrifice for the children increases her value as object of the master’s desire. The more difficult her task is, the more competent she will prove to be, and therefore the more attractive she will appear to her master.

### III.

It is no coincidence that Ms. Jessel’s ghost first appears just after she compares herself favorably with other governesses in her introspection. When the apparition of Jessel appears on the other side of the lake, the governess’s response discloses her rivalry with it: “There was an alien object in view—a figure whose right of presence I instantly and passionately questioned” (*TS* 54). It is worth remembering that she was struck by Mrs. Grose’s remark that the master “liked everyone.” Moreover, she was shocked by this remark

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<sup>8</sup> Albaraq Mahbobah, “Hysteria, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Reversal in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*,” *The Henry James Review* 17.2 (1996): 156.



while she was thinking about her precursor's "youth and her beauty" (*TS* 35). She ostensibly accepts Mrs. Grose's observation that Jessel "was a lady" (*TS* 58). When the housekeeper accuses Quint of having done with her and others as he wished, however, she says determinedly, "It must have been also what she wished!" (*TS* 59). The implication is that Jessel was not a lady after all.

When the contestation with Miles over schooling makes her think of quitting her job, she hurries home and falls down at the staircase in the hall and realizes that she is exactly in the place Jessel appeared before: "it was exactly where, more than a month before, in the darkness of night and just so bowed with evil things, I had seen the spectre of the most horrible of women" (*TS* 87). Unconsciously, she identifies with Jessel, for she fails to fulfill her governing duty and feels she is no better than her precursor. Jessel's third appearance that immediately follows demonstrates the governess's reaction formation to her unconscious identification with her precursor as well as her rivalry with and contempt for her. The governess finds a figure of a housemaid in the middle of "apply[ing] herself to the considerable effort of a letter to her sweetheart," sitting in her "own table" and using "[her] pens, ink, and paper" (*TS* 88). When the governess recognizes the figure as Jessel, she feels dispossessed of her position by the latter: "she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. While these instants lasted indeed I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was I who was the intruder" (*TS* 88). No wonder she makes "a wild protest against it" by shrieking "You terrible miserable woman!" (*TS* 88).

The governess's conversation with Mrs. Grose over the matter of writing to the master provides another ground for locating her ultimate desire in winning his favor. To Mrs. Grose's suggestion that the governess should write to the master, she asks back, "By writing to him that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad? . . . That's charming

news to be sent him by a person enjoying his confidence and whose prime undertaking was to give him no worry” (TS 77). What worries her so much is not her incapability of carrying out her duty but her being degraded in his favor: “As a woman reads another—she could see what I myself saw: his derision, his amusement, his contempt for the breakdown of my resignation at being left alone and for the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms” (TS 78). She even interprets his not writing to the children as a way of man’s honoring a woman: “He never wrote to them—that may have been selfish, but it was a part of the flattery of his trust of myself; for the way in which a man pays his highest tribute to a woman is apt to be but by the more festal celebration of one of the sacred laws of his comfort” (TS 82).

#### IV.

The only way for the governess to avoid being held responsible for her failed tutorship is to justify her behavior in the presence of the master. In her dialogue with Mrs. Grose she ascribes the fault not only to Miles but to the master: “After all . . . it’s their uncle’s fault. If he left here such people” (TS 91). The master’s culpability undermines his authority as the Other. The debasement of the master illustrates the Lacanian formula, “The Other does not exist.” The Other, as a complete entity without lack, does not exist. As Žižek notes, “The Other itself doesn’t possess what the subject lacks, and no sacrifice can compensate for this lack of the Other.”<sup>9</sup> The Other always lacks something, and is therefore always barred ( $\Theta$ ).

What then does the governess want? The hysteric’s desire is making the Other neither complete nor incomplete. On the one hand the hysteric “reduces herself to that which fills up his lack,” while on the other she “refuses to be reduced to that which fills up the lack of the other.”<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, the governess wants to ascertain the children’s involvement

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Verhague, *Does the Woman Exist? From Freud’s Hysteric to Lacan’s Feminine*. trans. Mar du Ry. New York: The Other Press, 1999. 158-59.

with the ghosts and then heroically save them from evil, without informing her master of it, abiding by the terms. This will prove her successful fulfillment of her duty and guarantee her symbolic identity. Yet the upshot will be that the master should remain ignorant of the children's fall and her heroism, which will in turn reduce her value as object of his desire. On the other hand, she wants to be recognized by her master as a competent governess and thus an object worthy of his love. In order to be recognized by her master, however, she has to let him know about the children's corruption, for which she will be held accountable. This will also debase her status as object of his desire. By giving him knowledge she can complete the Other; but then, the master will no longer need her service at all. In short, she can no longer be the object *a* of his master. What does she want her master to be? A perfect Other who knows everything and therefore lacks nothing? Or a barred Other who is ignorant and unable to recognize her?<sup>11</sup>

The governess never solves this question, and this is demonstrated by the fact that her letter to the master, intercepted by Miles, contains nothing but "the bare demand for an interview" (*TS* 109). The only way available to her is to stick to her symbolic identity, and her attempt to force a confession from Miles is her last desperate effort to maintain that identity. At this point Mrs. Grose has already left with Flora to the master, and it is a matter of time that Flora will tell on her. Therefore his confession is the only way to save her from her being disgraced in the master's eyes. His confession, however, throws her into a serious identity crisis. When Miles reveals that he said things to those he liked in the school, the governess comes to the brink of the collapse of her identity: "Those he liked? I seemed to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure, and within a minute there had come to me out of my very

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<sup>11</sup> According to Lacan, the hysteric refuses to be the object of desire of the Other and thus challenge its authority: "She, in her own way, goes on a kind of strike. She doesn't give up her knowledge. She unmask, however, the master's function, with which she remains united, by emphasizing what there is of the master in what is the One with a capital 'O,' which she evades in her capacity of as object of his desire." *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII*. trans. Russell Grigg. New York: Norton, 2007. 94. The secret of the father, the exemplary Other/master, is castration: "the master is castrated." *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* 97.

pity the appalling and bottomless, for if her *were* innocent, what then on earth was I' (*TS* 119).

If Miles was innocent, all her assumptions and beliefs about the children's corruption crumble, and this incurs doubt about her identity as a good governess. Her question concerns not simply her mistake in judgment but her very identity. This doubt forces her to glimpse into the "bottomless" abyss beyond her identity. Her symbolic identity and her fantasy structure that sustains it are almost disintegrated at this crucial moment. She needs to hold something very hard to prevent it. When she sees Quint and grasps Miles to protect him, she is indeed protecting herself from the horrible abyss of the real that her symbolic identity has covered so far, what Lacan calls "subjective destitution." The governess is thus left in a kind of limbo, a border between symbolic identity and its beyond, a space where she is experiencing her symbolic death in the form of Miles's dead body.