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# REPRESSION, MADNESS, AND THE DEATH DRIVE: A FREUDIAN STUDY OF THE GOVERNESS IN THE TURN OF THE SCREW

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**Abstract**
This article applies a Freudian framework to the figure of the governess in The Turn of the Screw by Henry James, exploring how repression, madness, and the death drive converge in her psyche. It argues that the governess's sexual and social repression generate a neurotic anxiety that manifests in hallucinatory visions of spectral figures and in her destructive relationship with the children, Miles and Flora. Drawing on critic Edmund Wilson's Freudian reading, namely, that the governess is "a neurotic case of sex-repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations" (Wilson), the article situates her behaviour within classical Freudian concepts of the death drive (Thanatos) and the return of the repressed. The analysis addresses two major interlinked dimensions: how the governess's refusal or inability to articulate her latent desires leads to escalating madness and destabilisation of identity, and how her attempts to assert mastery over the children paradoxically enact the death drive in the obliteration of innocence, culminating in the boy's death. The article also identifies conceptual confusion in existing criticism, particularly regarding whether the ghosts are literal or symbolic, and argues that such ambiguity reflects the very structure of the drive in the unconscious, where repression, repetition and return collapse. In doing so, it shows that the governess is not simply a victim of external spectral forces, but an agent through whom Freud's dynamic of repression and destruction plays out in narrative form.
**Keywords:** Freud; repression; death drive; madness; governess; Henry James; The Turn of the Screw; psychoanalytic criticism.

## INTRODUCTION

Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (1898) has long been the locus of a critical debate that pivots on the governess's reliability and mental stability. From its earliest reception, critics have oscillated between reading the tale as a supernatural ghost story and as a psychological case study of hysteria and repression. Edmund Wilson's seminal essay, "The Ambiguity of Henry James," provided one of the first psychoanalytic readings of the novella, arguing that "the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations" caused by "sexual repression" (Wilson 118). This interpretation redirected the focus of Jamesian criticism from the external to the internal, from the spectral to the psychic.

Freud's theories on repression and the death drive illuminate the destructive logic that structures the governess's behaviour. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud describes the death drive as an unconscious compulsion "to return to an earlier state" and a movement "towards destruction and regression" (Freud 43). The governess's obsessive need to protect the children, coupled with her fascination with them, mirrors the neurotic oscillation between Eros and Thanatos, between care and annihilation. Moreover, Freud's notion of repression as "the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests" (The Unconscious 148) clarifies the psychic mechanism by which forbidden desire manifests in hallucinatory form. The governess's visions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel thus represent the return of what her conscious mind refuses to acknowledge, her repressed erotic and social anxieties.

James himself cultivates this ambiguity deliberately. In his preface to The Turn of the Screw, he refers to the tale as "a piece of ingenuity pure and simple," suggesting that its effect depends on "the strange and sinister forms taken by the imagination under stress" (James, Preface xix). The governess's madness is therefore not a deviation from the text's logic but its organising principle—a dramatisation of the Freudian unconscious. As Shoshana Felman argues, "the story is not about ghosts, but about interpretation itself, about the impossibility of distinguishing between inside and outside, reality and fantasy" (Felman 125). The governess's repression, her madness, and her death-driven compulsion to 'save' the children are interdependent forces that turn James's narrative into what Peter Brooks calls "a theatre of repetition" where the repressed perpetually returns (Brooks 23).

The article situates the governess within this Freudian framework, exploring how repression and the death drive coalesce into madness, and how her psychic turmoil enacts the mechanisms Freud theorised. By synthesising

textual evidence and psychoanalytic theory, the article aims to move beyond the binary of innocence and guilt to reveal the unconscious economy at work in James's most enigmatic heroine.

**Analysis**

The governess in The Turn of the Screw embodies what Freud terms the **return of the repressed**, wherein suppressed impulses resurface in disguised, distorted form. Freud writes that "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious" (The Unconscious 148). The governess's narrative reveals such repression through her increasing fixation on the children's purity and the supposed corruption by the ghosts. Her insistence that "the children are not merely playing; they are lost!" (James 59) illustrates a projected anxiety, one that externalises her own repressed erotic and moral fears. As Edmund Wilson famously argued, "the ghosts are not real; they are hallucinations emanating from the governess's neurotic sense of sex repression" (Wilson 118). The haunting, then, becomes a dramatisation of her psychic conflict between moral duty and forbidden desire.

Freud's **death drive** (Thanatos) provides another key to understanding the governess's descent into madness. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud observes that "the aim of all life is death," and that this drive manifests through compulsions to repeat traumatic situations (Freud 32). The governess repeatedly reenacts her confrontation with Peter Quint, as though compelled to stage her own psychic breakdown. Her obsessive need to control Miles and Flora, under the guise of protection, aligns with what Peter Brooks describes as "the narrative of repetition compulsion" that seeks closure through destruction (Brooks 23). Her efforts to "save" Miles culminate paradoxically in his death, a fulfilment of the death drive's logic of return to inorganic stillness. The final scene, in which she cries that Miles is "with me," can be read as the consummation of her unconscious desire for possession through annihilation (James 84).

The governess's **madness** thus emerges not as a clinical aberration but as a structural necessity of repression. Shoshana Felman asserts that James's tale "transforms the Freudian concept of hysteria into a literary form," whereby the governess's narration itself becomes a symptom (Felman 123). Her alternating tones of authority and terror demonstrate the unstable oscillation between superegoic control and id-driven fantasy. This instability is mirrored in the narrative's ambiguity: whether or not the ghosts exist, the text continually stages the limits of perception and interpretation. As Freud maintains in The Interpretation of Dreams, "the dream-thoughts are not communicated as they are, but are subjected to a process of distortion" (Freud 178). Similarly, the governess's account distorts reality, translating repressed wishes into the symbolic language of haunting.

Henry James's own framing of the tale reinforces this psychoanalytic reading. In his 1908 preface, he described the governess as "a fluttered, anxious, self-deceived young woman," whose perception "creates the very evil she imagines" (James, Preface xix). This statement anticipates the Freudian insight that repression generates the phenomena it seeks to avoid. The governess's madness, therefore, is not a collapse of reason but the narrative consequence of repression's failure. The ghosts, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, serve as the external projections of the unconscious drives she cannot name: desire, guilt, and death.

Through this lens, James's novella enacts what Freud would call the "theatre of the unconscious," where the repressed returns in symbolic form and the death drive manifests as an impulse toward possession, control, and annihilation. The governess's tragedy is thus not that she sees ghosts, but that she cannot see herself as the origin of the haunting.

## CONCLUSION

The governess in The Turn of the Screw stands at the intersection of repression, madness, and the death drive, three central Freudian dynamics that together define the text's psychological and narrative complexity. Through her, Henry James transforms the ghost story into a site of psychoanalytic inquiry, where desire and death, control and collapse, exist in uneasy proximity. Freud's concept of repression clarifies the mechanism by which forbidden impulses are displaced into spectral visions, while the death drive explains the self-destructive trajectory that culminates in Miles's death. As Freud notes, "repressed instincts never cease to strive for complete satisfaction, which can be attained only by hallucination or by the return of the repressed" (The Unconscious 153). The governess's hallucinations, therefore, are not aberrations but symptomatic fulfilments of this psychic law.

Critical responses to the novella, from Wilson's reading of sexual repression to Felman's emphasis on interpretive instability, demonstrate that James's ambiguity is not a flaw but a reflection of the unconscious's indeterminacy. The narrative's refusal to resolve whether the ghosts are real or imagined mirrors Freud's own insight that "the unconscious does not recognise the distinction between truth and fiction" (The Interpretation of Dreams 231). The governess's perception operates within this same logic: what she represses returns in phantasmatic form, rendering the boundaries between external and internal indistinguishable.

In this sense, The Turn of the Screw dramatises not merely the breakdown of an individual mind but the workings of the Freudian unconscious itself. Madness becomes the narrative grammar of repression; death becomes its ultimate resolution. The governess's tragedy lies in her failure to recognise that the horror she battles originates within her own psyche, a truth that aligns with Freud's claim that "the ego is not master in its own house" (Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis 143). Henry James's tale thus remains an enduring literary enactment of the Freudian dilemma: the more one attempts to repress the forbidden, the more forcefully it returns, driving the subject toward destruction.

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