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# Haunting the House, Haunting the Page: The Spectral Governess in Victorian Fiction

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HAUNTING THE HOUSE, HAUNTING THE PAGE: THE SPECTRAL GOVERNESS  
IN VICTORIAN FICTION

by

SHANE G. MCGOWAN

Under the Direction of Michael Galchinsky

ABSTRACT

The Victorian governess occupied a difficult position in Victorian society. Straddling the line between genteel and working-class femininity, the governess did not fit neatly into the rigid categories of gender and class according to which Victorian society organized itself. This troubling liminality caused the governess to become implicitly associated with another disturbing domestic presence caught between worlds: the Victorian literary ghost. Using Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* as a touchstone for each chapter, this thesis examines how the spectral mirrors the governess's own spectrality – that is, her own discursive construction as a psychosocially unsettling force within the Victorian domestic sphere.

INDEX WORDS: Governess, Ghost, Supernatural, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Villette*, “At Chrighton Abbey,” Henry James, Charlotte Brontë, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Victorian literature, Spectral, Liminality, Cultural materialism

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SHANE G. MCGOWAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## Chapter 1

### *The Turn of the Screw*, Victorian Genre Fiction, and the Governess Problem

#### Introduction

Few texts from the Victorian period have inspired as much simultaneous fascination and frustration as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Since its initial publication in 1898, James's novella has prompted a number of polarized interpretations. Some critics have viewed the text as an exquisitely crafted ghost story in the Victorian tradition, while others have regarded it as a landmark proto-Modernist study in psychological interiority. In other words, critics have asked continually whether the sinister apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are truly present at Bly or merely delusional products of the governess-narrator's hysterical melancholy. However, the response to this question is in fact as compelling and vexatious as the novella itself, for it is ultimately "both and neither."

This answer may seem at first to differ very little from that of many recent critics, who have argued that James deliberately crafted his novella in such a way as to cause the hermeneutic process to founder constantly upon the multitude of ambiguities embedded within the text. However, unlike these critics, I do not regard all the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the text as entirely James's doing. Clearly, James consciously intended there to be some ambiguity, as he insists in the preface to the 1908 New York edition of the text that "[t]here is not only from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values are positively all blanks save so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness...proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures" (186). Yet it is important to situate James within his proper socio-cultural



context and not read him (or any author, for that matter) as a fully autonomous subject with complete control over and awareness of his speech's depth, breadth, and significance. Both James and the text must be regarded as a simultaneous products and agents of the discursive formations in place within the Victorian period. Therefore, I make no claims about what James consciously or unconsciously intended in *The Turn of the Screw*, but focus instead on how the novella textualizes certain ideological conflicts present within the dominant culture of the period. Particularly, I am interested in the juxtaposition between the governess-narrator and the seemingly supernatural presences of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. While I maintain that treating these apparitions as the actual ghosts that they appear to be yields the narrowest and least critically penetrating reading possible, I also acknowledge that they cannot be properly dismissed as simple delusions, either. The apparitions in *The Turn of the Screw* are indeed real insofar as their appearance and behavior index a number of socio-historically situated concerns about the status and significance of the governess-narrator, who is herself a kind of spectral figure.

For James's novella participates in a period-spanning discourse that associated governesses with ghosts both real and imaginary. Throughout the Victorian period, governesses found themselves implicitly allied with the legions of the unquiet dead. Like a ghost trapped between the land of the living and the land of the dead, the governess found herself caught up in the interstices between a wide variety of Victorian subject positions. The governess's status as a genteel woman who had to seek employment outside her father's or husband's home meant that the governess inhabited an indefinable space between categories of class and gender identity. This resistance to subjective definition in terms of recognizable categories thus transformed the governess into a kind

of ghostly figure within her employer's home. Again like a ghost, the governess's presence within the genteel Victorian home threatened to disrupt the image of domestic order so integral to the construction and reproduction of normative social relations throughout the Victorian period. By foregrounding this discursive relationship between governesses and ghosts, *The Turn of the Screw* aligns itself with prior Victorian literary texts such as Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1854), Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's ghost story "At Chrighton Abbey" (1871), which all establish similar connections between spectral phenomena and governesses or governess-like figures. While I do not intend to argue that James consciously drew upon these texts in the composition of *The Turn of the Screw*, I wish to emphasize the strong intertextual relationship between these earlier texts and James's fin-de-siècle novella in order to show how James and other authors used the discourse of the supernatural in order to engage with the social problem of the Victorian governess.

### **The Liminal and the Spectral**

The social liminality of governesses provides the key to understanding their discursive association with ghosts. Richard Dilworth Rust's "Liminality in *The Turn of the Screw*" (1988) and the chapter on *The Turn of the Screw* in T.J. Lustig's *Henry James and the Ghostly* (1994) have already touched upon liminality's importance within the text. Both Rust and Lustig draw upon the symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner's account of the liminal in his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1965). The liminal, according to Turner, is that which exists "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and the ceremonial" and

therefore defies “the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (95). Proceeding from this definition, however, neither Rust nor Lustig has observed the precise discursive association between governesses and spectral phenomena that I will be focusing on here and in subsequent chapters. Although Lustig does actually address at some length the governess’s liminal socioeconomic position within Victorian society, he ultimately downplays this type of liminality as just one instance among many within the text. Like Rust before him, Lustig concludes that James consciously gathered as many forms of liminality into *The Turn of the Screw* in an effort to disrupt the act of interpretation and create a truly ambiguous text. Yet it is worth noting that Lustig seems to have developed his reading of the novella completely independent of Rust’s, as he does not cite Rust or use any of the argumentative strategies that Rust used to reach the same conclusion. Where Lustig differs from Rust is in his insistence that the creation of such a text attests to James’s lifelong fascination with crafting literary art that self-consciously tests the limits of ontology, epistemology, and narrative. Rust, by contrast, discusses the motivation behind the text’s creation in terms of James’s desire to obtain a vicarious mastery over the instability of his personal life through the construction of “an indeterminate world” entirely under his artistic control (446).

My own approach to this issue of liminality within *The Turn of the Screw* offers a more sociohistorically sensitive alternative to Lustig’s more philosophical perspective and Rust’s more psychological one. The ambiguity within James’s novella depends almost entirely upon the socio-culturally indeterminate referent of the pronoun “I” in the governess’s narrative. Diegetically speaking, that “I” writes the text into being; it is our

sole means of gaining access to Bly and uncovering the secret of what really happened there. All other ambiguities in the text therefore originate with this initial ambiguity, this one unresolved question regarding the governess-narrator's "true" identity. Is she, as Douglas claims in the frame narrative, "the most agreeable woman" ever to occupy her position (James 24)? Or is she a duplicitous madwoman who has already fooled Douglas and now wishes to make dupes of the rest of us? How one interprets *The Turn of the Screw* depends largely upon how one responds to this issue of the governess-narrator's identity. And it is only in the realm of the social that one may find any answer to this question. The network of social relations present during Victorian period provides the context for not only our understanding of the governess-narrator, but also her own understanding of herself. But the answer that we receive from that network of social relations is nothing more than another of James's "blanks" – to wit, the largest and most problematic one of all. The governess-narrator's liminality within the context of Victorian society causes her identity to become a troubling enigma that haunts the text, generating further instances of ambiguity.

Numerous recent studies of the governess's standing in Victorian society have discussed the complex array of interstitial subject positions that the governess occupied by virtue of her status as a genteel working woman.<sup>1</sup> But the Victorians themselves were well aware of the governess's liminality and the problem that it posed. Indeed, the inability to situate the governess within the contexts of a clearly defined subjectivity figured prominently in Victorian discourse about her. The didacticist Elizabeth Sewell, for instance, remarked that for the governess, her employer, and society at large, "the real discomfort of a governess's position in a private family arises from the fact that it is

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<sup>1</sup> See Peterson; Poovey 126-63; Hill; and Brandon.

undefined. She is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant – but something made up of all” (412). While the governess’s role as a caregiver and educator positioned her as an intimate of her employer’s family, the financial compensation that the governess received in exchange for performing this role recast her relationship to the family in strict terms of economic necessity and made her seem like a servant. Yet, because the governess was by birth and education of the same class as the mistress of the house, she could not be considered “just a servant.” But there was also difficulty in identifying the governess with a higher socioeconomic class. Because of her genteel background, the governess was expected to model herself after the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House. This ideal, epitomized and popularized by the title character in a mid-period narrative poem (1854-1862) by Coventry Patmore, defined the proper Victorian lady as a selfless caregiver who maintained the domestic sphere as a safe and secure haven from the predations of an alien and enervating public sphere. M. Jeanne Peterson and Mary Poovey have noted that the governess met this expectation insofar as her work with children inside the home aligned her with that central figure in the Angel in the House ideal, the nurturing mother (Peterson 6; Poovey 127). However, the economic exchange predating the governess’s relationship to “her” children rendered a complete and unproblematic identification with the Angel in the House impossible. Unlike the Angel in the House, who devoted herself to her children freely and unconditionally, the governess received monetary compensation in exchange for the time and energy that she devoted to the children in her care. This crucial difference made the governess less like a proper Victorian lady and more like a middle-class man or a member of the working class. Indeed, as Peterson has pointed out, genteel women who

commodified their labor in the marketplace ceased in some sense to be proper ladies, for “work for pay brought down the judgment of society and testified to the inferior position of both the wage-earner and her family” (5). As a consequence, the governess eluded definition according to the ideology of any one particular class or gender, and became, like a ghost, a being trapped between worlds, an entity without a stable form or identity.

To get at the greater significance of this comparison between the governess and the spectral, it is necessary to consider the integral role that genteel domesticity played as a site for the construction and perpetuation of hegemonic social relations in Victorian Britain. Nancy Armstrong has shown that by the Victorian period, the genteel home had become “the context for representing normal behavior,” for articulating and endorsing normative standards of subjective identification (24). These operations were in turn predicated upon the maintenance of an ideological distinction between a feminized domestic sphere and a masculinized public sphere. The public sphere, the domain of masculinity and commerce, appeared in conventional Victorian representations as a source of enervation and alienation. The domestic sphere, the space overseen by the feminine ideal of the Angel in the House, then appeared as a shelter from the debilitating effects of the public sphere, a wellspring of all that was nurturing, comforting, and familiar.<sup>2</sup>

The governess’s presence within her employer’s home automatically disturbed this prevailing account of genteel domesticity in two ways. First, her lack of any stable,

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<sup>2</sup> See Hall for an extremely influential early analysis of the ideology of separate spheres, particularly as it related to the construction of female identity. The ideas present in Hall’s essay are developed a greater length in Hall and Davidoff. For a discussion of the pre- and early-Victorian foundations of the public/domestic, masculine/female distinction, see Wahrman 381-400. For more on the specific role of gender in this distinction throughout the Victorian period, see Poovey 1-24 and Armstrong 59-95.

recognizable class or gender identity constituted her as a source of absolute and irremediable otherness, something that was immediately discomfiting and unfamiliar. Second, the governess's inability to be defined as a subject threatened to disrupt the process of normative subject formation localized within the Victorian domestic sphere. In signifying the possibility of a subjectivity for which the process could not account, the governess implicitly undermined genteel hegemony's authority to identify, inscribe, and police forms of subjectivity. This situation then grew all the more problematic in light of the fact that the governess, as the educator and moral guardian of future wives and mothers, was actually expected to help oversee the process of normative subject formation. Her pedagogical responsibilities required her to reinforce the public/domestic, masculine/feminine distinction and uphold the categories of class and gender identity organized around it. The governess, however, blurred these spatial and subjective boundaries by virtue of her liminality. Thus, as Poovey has pointed out, "the very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of separate spheres threatened to collapse the difference between them" (127). Confronting Victorian society with a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction, the governess merged the public/masculine and the domestic/feminine in a way that dominant ideology could not account for or even acknowledge as possible.

Spectral phenomena exhibited an almost identical psychosocial effect during the Victorian period. As Lara Baker Whelan has observed, Victorian literary and social texts typically depicted the spectral as "a threat to the middle-class conception of order, either as a criminal or as an unstable element" within the context of genteel domesticity (78).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Whelan limits her observation to Victorian ghost stories with suburban settings. However, her argument remains valid for texts throughout the genre, regardless of setting. Victorian ghost

The manifestation of the spectral within the domestic sphere enacted the same sort of unsettling blurring of boundaries as the governess's presence did. The spectral represented the intrusion of an otherness from a terrifying outside, a realm seemingly beyond not just the world of the living, but the very realm of the possible and the conceivable. Yet the spectral typically took the form of the familiar, of that which had once belonged within the space that it haunts: a former owner or occupant, a lost loved one, a deceased servant. The liminal states that the spectral then assumed in terms of ontology, biology, and corporeality only intensified this resemblance to the governess even further. Neither present nor absent, real nor unreal, living nor dead, embodied nor formless, the spectral displayed the same resistance to subjective definition that made the governess such a troubling presence within the domestic sphere. An ineffable and irreducible unknown, spectral phenomena shared with the governess an inherent power to destabilize the process according to which mainstream Victorian society constructed, interpellated, and policed identities.

### **“The Question of the Return of the Dead”**

The connection between governesses and spectral phenomena then becomes all the more appropriate when one considers that some form of death defines each term in the discursive relationship. With spectral phenomena, of course, the death in question is a literal one. After all, a specter is nothing more than the real or phantasmal appearance of someone who has died. Governesses, by contrast, attested to a much more figurative kind of death. Their death was social in nature.

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stories with both urban settings (e.g., Sheridan Le Fanu's "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street") and rural ones (e.g., virtually all of Elizabeth Gaskell's ghost stories) portray ghosts in a fashion similar to those set in the suburbs.



The concept of social death first surfaced in the sociological scholarship of the 1960s as a way of referring to the desubjectified status that societies often foist upon terminal, vegetative, and senescent patients long before any formal declaration of clinical death. Since that time, scholars in the fields of ethnic and gender studies have appropriated the term “social death” in order to describe the condition of a minority’s *de jure* or *de facto* exclusion from mainstream society because some objectionable attribute or behavior that it exhibits or is said to exhibit. Those who suffer social death typically find themselves disenfranchised and denied access to many or all the institutions, rights, and privileges typically accorded to full-fledged, socially “vital” members of society. Notable instances of the practice throughout history have included Anglo-American pro-slavery rhetoric, scientific racialization, the Jim Crow laws in the post-Emancipation American South, the categories of essential impurity or untouchability in caste societies, and the Jewish ecclesiastical practice of *cherem*.<sup>4</sup>

What theorists have not acknowledged sufficiently is the extent to which socioeconomic characteristics and behaviors may serve as causes of social death. It seems that for those who find the concept of social death useful, decreased socioeconomic status is not an etiology, but merely a symptom. Yet, as Deborah Epstein Nord has pointed out, Victorian social writers often characterized destitution in terms highly suggestive of death and burial: a “descent into the netherworld,” a “plunge into an abyss,” a “fall into a gaping hole at the edge of society” (231). From the perspectives of

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<sup>4</sup> See Glasner and Anselm for the first account of social death in the field of sociology. The first application of “social death” to the field of ethnic studies appeared in Patterson. Since then, sociologists and ethnic scholars working in the field of Jewish studies have examined the function of social death both as a mechanism of the Holocaust and as a punitive mechanism within Orthodox Jewish communities. For a recent discussion of social death and the Holocaust, see Card.

aristocratic privilege and bourgeois prosperity, to become one of the Victorian working poor, to find oneself forced to labor for a wage, was to slip beyond the threshold of respectability (“the edge of society”), to enter both materially and discursively a space occupied by what Julia Kristeva has termed the abject (a “netherworld,” an “abyss”).

Closely related to the concept of social death, the abject signifies that which a subject or society, reacting against the perception of radical and irreconcilable difference, casts off from itself in order to create and maintain the boundaries of its definition. Abjection defined the position of the Victorian working classes in two significant ways. First of all, the Victorian working classes often lived amidst abjection; garbage, filth, and effluent – the detritus cast off by individuals in the course of their daily lives – collected in the areas that the working classes typically inhabited. But secondly and most importantly, the Victorian working classes themselves appeared as abjects in the eyes of the genteel classes. For the “utmost of abjection,” according to Kristeva, is not refuse or excrement that surrounded the working classes, but the human cadavers that they seemed to resemble. A cadaver inspires that special kind of simultaneous uneasiness, disgust, and fascination peculiar to the abject, for while a cadaver appears to be both a subject (a person) and an object (a thing), it displays the previously discussed tendency of the liminal to resist identification according to either category. Derived, as Kristeva points out, from the Latin verb for “to fall” (*cadēre*), a cadaver represents the “falling away” of the world and the subject, the fatal propulsion of the “I” beyond the corporeal limits that give the phenomenological categories of subject and object their definition. A cadaver is therefore the symbol of an eradicated subject, an “I” that has been forced out, dissolved, and wiped away, leaving behind only a morbid trace in the form of inanimate

flesh. For the genteel classes of Victorian Britain, this description could apply just as well to members of the impoverished working classes. The “fallen” of society, those who dwelled in the abysmal underworld of poverty, were nothing more than depersonalized bodies, collections of flesh, blood, and bone devoid of the markers of wealth, status, and privilege that the genteel classes typically used to identify individuals as living, breathing, fully dignified human subjects.<sup>5</sup>

Bruce Robbins has already discussed how *The Turn of the Screw* bears witness to this Victorian tendency to abjectify the underclasses in this manner. Citing instances such as Miles’s dismissive assessment of the servants at Bly as not “count[ing] much,” Robbins rightly point out that the text reproduces the Victorian tendency to conceive of those who must work for a living in the abject terms of death and desubjectification (Robbins 200; James 117). One might add to Robbins’s example the governess-narrator’s description of the hatless Peter Quint as “like nobody” (James 48). On the one hand, the remark signifies Quint’s spectacular peculiarity, but, on the other hand, it points toward the formerly genteel governess-narrator’s classist judgment of Quint as looking like a “nobody,” a person without social standing. That the governess-narrator describes Peter Quint in such terms before ever learning of his death suggests that the intractable prejudices of her former class lead her to think of him *as if* he were dead, a “no-body,” a body with none of the redeeming social qualities that constituted human subjectivity from the perspective of dominant Victorian culture. The subsequent revelation that Peter

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the genteel “humanistic code for the subject” and the Victorian dehumanization of the poor, see Bivona and Henkle 22. Bivona and Henkle focus specifically on the Victorian construction of a privileged masculine subject, but their observations about the relationship between genteel class identity and perceptions of the working poor are also applicable to the contemporaneous construction of a feminine counterpart. Bivona and Henkle also discuss conventional Victorian attitudes toward the working classes in terms of abjection.

Quint is already dead in a clinical sense only creates a further, deeper level of associated meaning for the term “nobody.” Peter Quint then becomes a “no-body,” an entity whose lack of a body precludes all possibility of inscribing any meaningful form of subjectivity. Yet, contrary to Robbins’s further assertion, the governess-narrator in *The Turn of the Screw* is not just a passive agent and observer of these class dynamics. As a governess, a genteel woman who must act contrary to the expectations of her status and work for her living, she is herself abjected by those very same dynamics.

Few people during the Victorian period appear to have understood this fact better than Charlotte Brontë. Writing to her sister Emily in June of 1839, just two months after accepting her first position as a governess, the future author of the most famous governess novel of all time had already begun to express discontent with the profession. “[A] private governess” remarked Brontë, “has no existence, is not considered a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill” (191). The terms that Brontë uses here to describe the governess’s situation suggest a condition of complete abjection. The governess’s financial dependency meant that she had “no existence.” Because she had to earn a living through her own labor, she was as much a “nobody” as Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw*. Inside most employers’ homes, she would have found herself excluded from both daily family life and special social functions. But the governess’s status as a “nobody” did not just describe genteel perceptions of her unsuitability as a casual companion. She was not even regarded as a “living and rational being” because of her working-class socioeconomic behavior. Her need to work for a living transformed her into something dead and unthinking, a body without a subject. Yet, as Brontë’s qualifying comment “except as connected with the

wearisome duties she has to fulfill” suggests, the nature of the governess’s work made her different than regular members of the working classes like Peter Quint. Unlike with normal, working-class jobs, the “wearisome duties” of the governess’s position paradoxically restored some semblance of “life” to the laborer. The governess’s position required that at least the illusion of respectability, of being a “somebody” rather than a “nobody,” persist when it came to her responsibilities to her employer’s child(ren). In this manner, the governess became a kind of ghost herself, a spirit that had returned from “death” in order to haunt the “land of the living” symbolized by genteel domesticity.

A look at Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake’s 1848 review of the governess novels *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre* may help to clarify this matter and bring the problem that it posed into greater focus. Interspersing social commentary with her literary criticism, Lady Eastlake’s review laments not only the miserable conditions of the governess’s employment, but also the tragic circumstances that lead her to pursue that employment in the first place. “Take a lady, in every meaning of the word, born and bred,” says Lady Eastlake, “and let her father pass through the gazette, and she wants nothing more to suit our highest *beau ideal* of a guide and instructress to our children” (176). Clearly, the “poor parson’s daughter” who narrates *The Turn of the Screw* does not enter into her profession in this precise manner. It is not her father’s financial dissolution (“pass[age] through the gazette”), but the meager compensation of his clerical office, that limits her marriage prospects and forces her to seek a position as a governess. Nevertheless, Lady Eastlake’s remarks attest to the extent to which the Victorian public saw governesses in general as inhabiting a kind of deathly space outside the boundaries of “respectable” society. A public advertisement of bankruptcy in the *London Gazette* served as a kind of

obituary, a ceremonial announcement that a once-reputable family had succumbed to financial ruin and departed the land of the propertied “living” for the realm of the penniless, disenfranchised “dead.” But a mere servant, a common “working stiff,” simply would not do when it came to cultivating future generations of genteel wives and mothers.<sup>6</sup> That task, which Lady Eastlake calls “far too precious...to have any stated market value,” required a “somebody” rather than a “nobody,” an individual who possessed not only the education, but also the appearance and bearing of someone from the genteel classes (179). Her employers had to see “nothing on the face of the thing to stamp her as having been called to a different state of life that in which God has seen fit to place [them].”<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, Lady Eastlake tells us, “[t]he line which severs the governess from her employers is not one which will take care of itself, as in the case of a servant” (177). When a daughter from a destitute but formerly genteel family entered into a genteel home in the role of a governess, a kind of unsettling “return of the dead” occurred. A socially dead entity, an individual whose existence is ultimately defined in terms of so many pounds’ worth of labor, reentered the world that she had once inhabited, and through the nature of her new function within that world, she regained some fleeting measure of “life.” Yet this measure of life extended only so far as her

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the term “working stiff” is somewhat anachronistic in this context. Although the *OED* shows that the Victorians revived the pre-modern use of “stiff” to describe a corpse (def. A2b and B3a), the use of “stiff” to refer to “a man, a fellow, an ordinary working man” came about in late-nineteenth-century America (def. B4b). However, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the use of this term resulted from some contact with the contemporaneous British tendency to associate the working classes with death and abjection.

<sup>7</sup> The ambiguity of Lady Eastlake’s phrasing reveals the singular awkwardness of the governess’s status within mainstream Victorian society. The phrase “the face of the thing” at first seems to refer to “the appearance of the situation,” but the phrase’s proximity to the pronoun “her” generates a degree of semantic slippage within the sentence. As a consequence, it reads as if Lady Eastlake were saying that there is nothing immediately in the appearance of the *governess*, who is in fact not a person but a “thing.”

duties were concerned; once her work ended for the day, “life” fled from her, and she became as abject as the other servants in the household. Thus the governess was neither “living” nor “dead,” but, true to her socially liminal society, “undead” – a being trapped between two biosocial states, a ghost haunting the rooms and corridors of her employer’s home.

### **An “Unhomely” Presence**

The Freudian concept of the uncanny offers another useful way of understanding the governess’s “ghostly” position within her employer’s home. Somewhat related to the previously discussed concept of the abject, the uncanny describes a person, object, or event that engenders a strange mixture of unease, revulsion, and fascination. As with the abject, the uncanny involves a blurring of boundaries that threaten not only one’s sense of reality, but also one’s sense of self. Yet, whereas the abject always strikes us as nothing more than revolting otherness, the terrible power of the uncanny lies in its ability to reveal a strange repugnance lurking behind those things that simultaneously strike us *heimlich* (“homely”). As Freud tells us in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, this phenomenon occurs when the perception of something “familiar and agreeable” suddenly triggers the recollection of something “that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (132). In other words, the uncanny marks the return of the repressed, of that which is most threatening and unacceptable, in the form of that which ordinarily gives us no cause for alarm.

A prominent example of the uncanny that Freud discusses at some length is the figure of the double or *doppelgänger*. Encounters with *doppelgänger* figures, as Freud

notes, typically involve the very same blurring of phenomenological boundaries typical in instances of the abject as well as the uncanny; “the subject,” presented with what appears to be an internal or external mirror-image come to life, “identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own” (142). As in the case of the abject human cadaver, an experience of self-alienation occurs in the presence of one’s double. Yet, whereas the self-alienation caused by the cadaver results from the perception of a state so far beyond self and subjectivity that it defies representation, the feeling instilled by the sight of one’s double arises from the perception of an other that appears to be the most homely, the most “familiar and agreeable” thing in the world: oneself. Although Freud finds the *doppelgänger* initially serving a self-affirming, narcissistic role in the process of psychic development, this aspect gradually becomes supplanted by something more sinister and threatening. Appearing either as a superior figure with “the power of observing and criticizing the self,” or as an abject figure exhibiting one’s darkest proclivities, the *doppelgänger* eventually comes to represent an antagonistic force, a “harbinger of death” and a “thing of terror” (Freud 142-3).

The governess embodied just such a figure within mainstream Victorian society. As we have already seen, it was of paramount importance for the governess to appear not as she was, but as she once (at least theoretically) had been. Insofar as the duties of her position were concerned, there had to be, to recall Lady Eastlake’s words, “nothing on the face of the thing to stamp her as having been called to a different state of life that in which God has seen fit to place” the mistress of the house where she was employed. Thus the governess became a kind of uncanny *doppelgänger* haunting the ideal of the



proper Victorian lady. A figure both the same as and different from the proper Victorian lady, the governess brought the “unhomeliness” of the uncanny *doppelgänger* into the midst of the genteel Victorian home.

Here, of course, we may encounter that uncanny feeling that Freud informs us often accompanies those moments when we find ourselves retreading familiar ground. The effect of the governess’s uncanniness upon the Victorian domestic sphere is identical to the previously discussed effect of the ghostliness or “spectrality” produced by the governess’s social liminality. Indeed, the former effect may be regarded as just a reformulation of the latter effect. Nothing more than a special instance of the liminal, the uncanny is something that refuses strict identification in terms of either self or other. And this special instance of the liminal has a ghostlike effect upon the stability of the domestic sphere. The uncanny, as Nicholas Royle has observed, “is a crisis of the proper; it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin *proprius*, “own”), a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property.” In other words, the uncanny disturbs the peace and propriety of the domestic sphere in the exact same manner as those spectral presences that haunted the pages of Victorian ghost stories. But this similarity is hardly surprising. As Royle also points out, the uncanny “is concerned with the strange, weird, and mysterious, with a flickering sense...of something supernatural” (1). For what, after all, is a ghost, if not a metaphysical instance of the uncanny, a deceased individual who (to recall Freud’s basic definition of the uncanny) “ought to have remained secret and hidden” within her grave, but “has come to light” as a ghostly revenant? The uncanny is thus inextricably connected with the spectral and its perturbing psychosocial implications.

It then comes as no surprise that as someone who had metaphorically returned from the dead, the governess would exist as an uncanny presence within her employer's home. Through her return as a ghostly double of the proper Victorian lady whom she once was, the governess signified to genteel Victorian society a number of troubling social facts that the dominant ideologies of the period attempted to repress (i.e., keep "secret and hidden"). For one, the governess's uncanny resemblance to a member of the genteel classes undermined the very basis of Victorian class ideology by calling into question the presumed naturalness of class distinctions. The discourses of Victorian class identity naturalized the separation between servant and master such that the line dividing the two "took care of itself." The line dividing employer and governess, by contrast, presented something far more problematic, for it appeared to result from an arbitrary distinction rather than anything justified by natural decree. Such appearances in turn posed serious challenges for Victorian class ideology. By drawing attention to a socioeconomic position arising purely from arbitrary convention, the governess's situation raised the troubling possibility that all such class distinctions in fact resulted from social contingency rather than natural necessity.

Additionally, the governess's uncanny presence served as a constant reminder to the genteel Victorian family who employed her that their status and lifestyle depended entirely upon the misfortunes of others. This fact often figured quite prominently in contemporary discussions of the governess's plight, with social critics like Lady Eastlake observing that "[t]here is no other class of labourers for hire who are thus systematically supplied by the misfortunes of our fellow creatures" (176). Obviously, statements of this sort completely ignore the fact that Victorian industrial capitalism relied upon a

workforce “supplied by the misfortunes of our fellow creatures.” But therein lay the traumatic effect of the governess’s presence within the genteel Victorian home. As we have already seen, the governess’s social liminality threatened the Victorian distinction between public and private spheres. The governess’s uncanny doubling of the proper Victorian lady only unsettled that distinction further by making the everyday reality of capitalist exploitation not only prominently visible, but virtually unavoidable. Victorian domestic ideology constructed the genteel home as a space screened from the everyday realities of the marketplace and capitalist exploitation. While it may seem that the necessary presence of servants within the genteel home would make those realities at least somewhat visible, it is important to recall once again what Miles says of Bly’s servants in *The Turn of the Screw*: “they don’t count much.” The discursive constitution of the working classes as social objects, as “dead,” depersonalized bodies of little or no consequence, ensured that the issue of capitalist exploitation did not arise each time a servant entered a room. The governess, however, could not be dismissed in this manner. Because she appeared to her employers at least fleetingly as someone “living,” somebody who was “one of us,” the issue of capitalist exploitation suddenly could not be ignored. The object of exploitation was no longer a *something* that did not “count much,” but a *someone* who possessed some social significance, however relatively small.

Consequently, as Ruth Brandon has noted, the governess burdened her employers with a certain moral liability (15). By employing a governess, it felt as if one were exploiting “the misfortunes of our fellow creatures.” But perhaps even more importantly, the employment of a governess implied the possibility that all instances of capitalist labor might carry with them the same moral liability. The period-spanning issue of the

governess's plight, as Poovey has pointed out, frequently "dovetailed" (in some Victorian commentators' minds, quite dangerously) with the related issues of women's rights and workers' rights (127). Through her ghostly doubling of the proper Victorian lady, the technically working-class governess made it possible for the genteel classes to see some measure of humanity within all members of the hitherto depersonalized working classes. In this manner, the "unhomely" ethico-economic reality of the public sphere infiltrated the cultural *sanctum sanctorum* of the genteel Victorian home and revealed capitalist hegemony's dependence upon the exploitation of living, breathing human beings.

The governess's uncanny resemblance to the proper Victorian lady also held troubling implications for the ideological definition of genteel femininity. Just as the governess's presence pointed towards the arbitrariness of class distinctions, it also suggested the arbitrariness of class-inflected gender distinctions. Throughout the Victorian period, genteel femininity relied heavily upon the ability to articulate key differences between itself and a working-class counterpart. The governess's liminal status as a genteel working woman significantly impeded the ability to distinguish between genteel and working-class forms of femininity. By exhibiting both genteel and working-class characteristics, the governess collapsed the supposedly inherent differences between those two prevailing images of Victorian womanhood. Such an unthinkable and seemingly impossible commingling of class traits then entailed the equally unthinkable and impossible proposition that no innate qualities separated the genteel lady from the working-class woman.

The governess's resemblance to the genteel lady proved especially unsettling when it came to maintaining the genteel lady's "proper" place as a wife and mother. As

we have already seen, dominant Victorian culture held up the Angel in the House, the graceful and selfless wife and mother, as the ideal that the women of the genteel classes should emulate. And this ideal served in turn as a kind of focal point for the conceptualization and organization of the Victorian domestic sphere. A comforter, a caretaker, and a nurturer, the proper Victorian lady embodied everything that the domestic sphere should be. That the governess's duties also required her to exemplify those very same qualities made her appear as a sinister, scheming rival in the eyes of more than a few household mistresses. Contemporary governess literature like Mary Maurice's sensationalistic exposé *Governess Life* (1849) often gave voice to such concerns, warning of governesses who become "instrument[s] for destroying the peace of families" through various means including furtive efforts to usurp the position of the lady of the house (14).<sup>8</sup> Clearly, not every single governess during the Victorian period entered into her employer's household with his family's best interests at heart; more than a few likely played out Maurice's depiction of them to some extent. Yet it is important to understand this depiction less as the product of an all-too-common reality and more as a symptom of the socio-cultural anxieties raised by the governess's uncanny resemblance to the proper Victorian lady. By doubling the latter in terms of the performative acts constitutive of her identity, the governess made it more difficult for an actual genteel wife and mother to assert that identity. The ensuing crisis in the construction and maintenance of such an ideologically crucial identity then played out at the level of contemporary cultural semiotics through depictions like Maurice's, which calls into question the nature and the motives of most if not all governesses. Through such depictions, there emerged a

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<sup>8</sup> See Rivers for an excellent overview of Victorian writers who characterized the governess in this manner. I discuss more specific textual instances of this characterization in chapters three and four.

stereotype of the governess as the shadowy and menacing reproduction of some original and “authentic” genteel femininity embodied by the lady of the house.

Furthermore, this stereotype suggested that as a reproduction, the governess coveted the position of the original and sought to supplant it within her employer’s household. My analysis of the governess’s characterization here adapts the insights of queer theorists like Judith Butler. In particular, I have in mind Butler’s assertion in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that forms of identity such as gender are “imitative” insofar as they exist only through a subject’s performance of them. This performance, according to Butler, *purports* to be an imitation of an unadulterated, “original” identity that the individual performance copies. Yet the “original” imitated through performance is in fact only an imitation itself. Butler argues that “[i]n the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause,” it is more accurate to conceptualize identity as a “personal/cultural history of received meanings subjective to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior...self” (175). In other words, the models for our identity performance are themselves only performances concatenated in an endless chain of still earlier performances. Yet the dominant ideology of capitalist heteronormativity obfuscates this fact by privileging certain forms of identity as essential and originary, and branding alternative forms of identity as unsettling, deviant imitations of those originals. Thus, as Butler has pointed out elsewhere, heteronormativity treats the concept of the lesbian phallus as a “spectral representation of a masculine original” – a conceptualization that in turn translates into a further framing of LGBT identities in general as perverse reproductions of a heterosexual original (63).

Similarly, middle- and upper-class Victorians tended to regard the governess as a “spectral representation” of some specifically genteel feminine “original.” From the perspective of mainstream Victorian culture, the governess haunted the lady/wife/mother as her uncanny spectral double, a derivative that covets the privileged status of the original.

One consequence of this cultural perception was the development of what might be called, for lack of any better term, the stereotype of the “homewrecker governess.” Appearing not infrequently in Victorian discourse about governesses and their proclivities, the homewrecker governess represented a much darker and infinitely more threatening version of the social-climbing governess stereotype that Thackeray drew upon for the character of Becky Sharpe in *Vanity Fair*. The homewrecker governess was an outright sociopath, a devious femme fatale in spinster’s clothes whose scheming “to catch a husband and an establishment of one or another degree of value,” according to an 1860 essay by Harriet Martineau, “might furnish as much true material for domestic tragedy as any number of oppressed governesses” written about in sympathetic governesses novels (269). Typically, as Mary Maurice elaborates, the homewrecker governess’s scheme involved her “mak[ing] herself necessary to the comfort of the father of the family in which she resided, and by delicate and unnoticed flattery gradually to gain her point, to the disparagement of the mother, and the destruction of mutual happiness.” Other times, Maurice adds, sons might become “objects of notice and flirtation” for the homewrecker governess, who, perhaps having failed to seduce the family patriarch, endeavored to obtain wealth and status as a lady by inuring herself to a family’s heir (15). In all cases, the homewrecker governess played out the image of the

governess as the double intent on supplanting its original. No matter the moral cost to herself or the emotional cost to the family whom she destroyed in the process, the homewrecker governess was determined not just to imitate the role of a lady through the labor she performed, but to become one through marriage to a man of property.

In one sense, the emergence of this stereotype speaks to the additional cultural problem of the governess's sexuality and desire. The Victorian idea of the lady emphasized the rigid and precise regulation of libidinal economy. The performance of that identity, as Phillip Mallett has pointed out, involved the guarded containment of sexual desire, with women of the genteel classes being expected "to repress [sexual desire] before marriage, and sublimate it fully to family and children afterwards, so that it never expresses itself in an unregulated form" (96). The proper Victorian lady had few outlets for her desire, and those few available to her were incredibly suffocating and restrictive, yet she possessed them nonetheless through her roles of wife and mother. The governess's social liminality, however, meant that she escaped inscription within the prevailing discourses of female sexuality, genteel or otherwise. Due to her singular circumstances, the governess had no immediate, socially acceptable outlet for her desire; she would likely never be a wife, and her role as a mother would likely always be limited to the care of children who belonged to another, and to whom she was forbidden from becoming too attached. Consequently, the governess's sexuality remained largely unregulated, and thus contributed in part to the widespread associations that Mary Poovey has observed in Victorian cultural discourse between governesses and such subversive, libidinally disordered figures as prostitutes and lunatics (129).



At the same time, however, the homewrecker governess stereotype constituted dominant Victorian culture's effort to smooth over another, even deeper ideological contradiction that the governess exposed through her mere presence within the genteel home. As noted earlier, the governess threatened the ideologically central identity of the genteel lady by destabilizing the class boundaries from which that identity emerged, and by serving as a reminder of the genteel classes' dependence upon the dead labor of the lower classes. But the governess also threatened the identity of the genteel lady in another way, through her existence as a constant reminder that the genteel lady's identity actually depends upon that of the governess for its own definition. Again, Butler's observations about the relationship between hetero- and homosexual identities proves helpful. As Butler has argued in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination,"

[I]f it were not for the notion of the homosexual *as* copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality *as* origin. Heterosexuality here presupposes homosexuality. And if the homosexual *as* copy *precedes* the heterosexual *as* origin, then it seems only fair to concede that the copy comes before the origin, and that homosexuality is thus the origin, and heterosexuality the copy.

But simple inversions are not really possible. For it is only *as* a copy that homosexuality can be argued to *precede* heterosexuality as the origin. In other words, the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term. (379)

The existence of homosexual identity renders the logic of heteronormativity dangerously unstable. By initially raising the possibility that heterosexual identity is not the original, default category, but is in fact the derivative, homosexuality exposes the rabbit hole down which one discovers the complete dissolution of the original/copy binary upon which all forms of identity in heteronormative society depend. Similarly, the idea of the Victorian lady presupposes the governess; the lady relies upon the governess to care for and educate her children, thereby providing her with the time and energy necessary to serve in her primary capacity as the ornamental, moral and emotional center of the genteel Victorian home. In this way, the governess's presence within the home conjured up the specter of not just the lady's practical dependence, but also her ideological dependence, upon the governess. And while the logical implications from this point did not entail the same initial inversion of the original/copy binary that seems to result from the existence of homosexual identity, the ultimate effect upon dominant ideology was nonetheless the same: the governess called into question the primacy and the "naturalness" of the genteel lady as a category of female identity. The stereotype of the homewrecker governess was thus a way for the Victorians to articulate this threat and mobilize socio-cultural forces against it without directly acknowledging precisely what it was that made the governess so subversive. By conceptualizing the governess as someone who wishes to destroy the lady of the house and take her place, mainstream Victorian culture was able to present the governess as a threat to the lady's status without actually addressing the real reason why she posed such a threat.

### “At Chrighton Abbey” with the “Homewrecker Governess”

As the story of one lowly governess’s mad, murderous transformation into a titled lady and, ultimately, an asylum inmate, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s phenomenally successful sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) furnishes perhaps the most culturally prominent literary representation of the homewrecker governess stereotype during the Victorian period. Yet, within the context of the present discussion, it is not *Lady Audley’s Secret*, but Braddon’s little-known Christmastide ghost story, “At Chrighton Abbey” (1866), that merits closer attention. In the first place, “At Chrighton Abbey” exemplifies the principle of realism, of having the fantastic and the sensational “connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life,” that James himself praised in Braddon’s work, and later followed to masterful effect in *The Turn of the Screw* (“A Review,” 99). Moreover, in following the same “governess meets ghost” plot structure as James’s novella, “At Chrighton Abbey” deploys a similar strategy for representing the governess’s unsettling effect upon Victorian society and its microcosmic counterpart, the genteel home.

On first glance, “At Chrighton Abbey” actually appears to be Braddon’s attempt to get away from the homewrecker governess stereotype altogether and present governesses in a decidedly more positive light than she did in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. The story’s governess narrator, Sarah Chrighton, is not a predaceous vixen in search of some widower or son to seduce, but an accomplished professional of “three-and-thirty years,” a “confirmed old maid” who has come back to England for a Christmas visit to her wealthy cousins after years working on the Continent (Braddon 11). Her arrival at the family’s ancestral home, Chrighton Abbey, however, coincides with the awakening of a

mysterious generational curse. As Sarah explains, “The family had not been altogether a lucky one, in spite of its wealth and prosperity. It was not often that the goodly heritage had descended to the eldest son. Death in some form or other – on too many occasions a violent death – had come between the heir and his inheritance” (Braddon 19). The portent of this impending doom is the appearance of a ghostly hunting party, which Sarah is the first and only person to see before the current Chrighton family heir, Edward, meets his untimely end in a hunting accident, just short of the marriage that would have allowed him to escape the curse.

The homewrecker governess, with all the peripheral anxieties associated with that stereotype, does not appear until one examines the story’s underlying commitment social commentary more closely. The setting and publication of “At Chrighton Abbey” during the Christmas season occasions the typical English Christmas story theme of charitable giving to the poor, needy, and disenfranchised, which Braddon stresses through the inclusion of a scene in which the Chrighton family go about their estate distributing gifts to their impoverished tenants. But Braddon also makes it a point to imply to the reader that Sarah herself is a charity case. Left unemployed after her most recent charges came of age, Sarah has no home, little money, and no immediate prospects for her future. Sarah’s place among the poor, needy, and disenfranchised becomes especially clear in a scene shortly after her arrival at the abbey, when her cousin, the lady of the house, says to her, “Remember, Sarah, this house is always to be your home, whenever you have need of one” (Braddon 15). This friendly declaration, which ties in with the story’s other quintessential Christmastime theme of family togetherness, unwittingly underscores the

fact that Sarah has availed herself of her cousins' hospitality in part because she has nowhere else to turn as winter sets in.

The abjectness of Sarah's condition also becomes clear through various allusions to the disgracefulness of her situation as a genteel working woman. At the beginning of the story, for instance, Sarah mentions that working for a living was "a dreadful thing for a Chrighton to be obliged to do," and her decision to "seek employment abroad" stemmed from the fact on the Continent, "the degradation of one solitary Chrighton was not so likely to inflict shame upon the ancient house to which I belonged" (Braddon 9). And this same issue of shame occurs again just after Mrs. Chrighton extends her invitation for Sarah to return to Chrighton Abbey "whenever you have need" of a home, with Sarah asking, "And you are not ashamed of me, who have eaten the bread of strangers?" Although Mrs. Chrighton dismisses this notion immediately, stating that she is not ashamed of Sarah and in fact respects her "industry and spirit," the fact that neither she nor any other member of the Chrighton family prevented their poor cousin from journeying so far abroad into the "bleak unknown world" suggests Sarah's "industry and spirit" is in fact something of an embarrassment to the family (Braddon 15). Indeed, Mrs. Chrighton's speedy termination of their conversation immediately after the topic of Sarah's "industry and spirit" arises suggests that Mrs. Chrighton is conscious of this fact at some level, and wishes to avoid discussing the topic further at all costs.

Once invoked, though, the word "spirit" cannot be banished so easily from a ghost story such as "At Chrighton Abbey." Mrs. Chrighton's use of "spirit," of course, signifies "mettle; vigour of mind; ardour; courage; disposition or readiness to assert oneself or to hold one's own" (def. 13a). Yet this use of the word in turn creates a kind of

semantic resonance with the spirits – the group of “supernatural, incorporeal, rational being or personality...frequently conceived as troublesome, terrifying, or hostile to mankind” (def. 3a) – that Sarah witnesses foretelling Edward Chrighton’s death later in the story. In other words, the fact that the “spirited” Sarah alone sees these ghastly harbingers of doom suggests the existence of some significant connection between them. Eve M. Lynch, perhaps the only critic ever to comment on “At Chrighton Abbey” at any length, has suggested that this connection has something to do with Sarah’s career as a governess. This position between the genteel and working classes, Lynch argues, “allows her to ‘mediate,’ both supernaturally and socially, between the world of the household servants and that of the established gentry” (247). Thus Lynch appeals to the same concept of social liminality that I have been developing in this chapter. Sarah is able to see the ghosts because, like them, she inhabits an interstitial space between worlds.

However, Lynch does not take sufficient note of the form that these ghosts assume. A careful consideration of this form reveals the subtextual presence of the homewrecker governess stereotype within the story. Just as it is no coincidence that the story has the demise of the Chrighton family heir occur between his governess cousin’s arrival at the estate and the time of the socially acceptable marriage that would have spared him from his grim fate, it is no coincidence that the portent of that demise, which only the same governess cousin can see, is a hunting party. “At Chrighton Level” plays out at the level of psychosocial allegory mainstream Victorian society’s worst fears regarding the impact of the governess’s indeterminate identity and sexual desires on domestic stability. Although the story never entertains anything so absurd as the

possibility of a romance between Edward and Sarah, the ghostly hunting party, with its special connection to the dispossessed governess in need of a home, evokes the stereotype of the predatory homewrecker governess, who is also “on the hunt,” albeit for a much different type of prey. As with the ghostly hunting party’s appearance at Chrighton Abbey, the homewrecker governess’s maneuvering “to catch a husband and an establishment of one or another degree of value,” heralds the dissolution of a family line and the disruption of genteel wealth’s effective passage from one generation to the next. In this way, Braddon textualizes – perhaps without even intending to – the suspicions and anxieties that a woman of “industry and spirit” (even a self-described “confirmed old maid”) like Sarah would have raised on some level wherever she went in Victorian society.

This analysis of Braddon’s story offers a kind of template for the sort of reading that I will be pursuing in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. Although James textualizes those aforementioned anxieties and suspicions much more consciously than Braddon does, “At Chrighton Abbey” anticipates *The Turn of the Screw* in using the ghostly to signify contemporary concerns about the impact that governesses’ unstable identities and unfocused sexual desires could have upon existing relations of power. Like Braddon, James has a governess confront ghostly phenomena as a way of exploring the governess’s own spectrality, her own unsettling effect upon the successful operation and reproduction of dominant Victorian ideology. The ghostly is in James’s novella and in Braddon’s ghost story nothing more than the governess’s mirror image, a reflection of her power to embody what mainstream society wishes to repress or otherwise control.

## The Question of Genre

Essentially, then, my thesis examines how *The Turn of the Screw* and various earlier works of Victorian fiction utilize these kinds of metaphorical relationships between governesses and ghosts in order to textualize contemporary concerns about the governess's place within both the domestic sphere and society at large. Before discussing any of these texts in particular, however, it is necessary to address the hitherto unacknowledged question of genre. Specifically, it is necessary to ask why texts like *The Turn of the Screw* deal with a social issue of such magnitude through non-realist modes of literary representation. After all, virtually every one of the texts discussed in my thesis owes some debt to the mid-Victorian literary phenomenon of the governess novel, which called public attention to the "governess question" by looking at it through the generic lens of social realism.<sup>9</sup> So what accounts for authors like James taking a far more equivocal approach to the issue by introducing the matter of the supernatural into the equation?

Part of the answer to this question lies with the relatively greater degree of artistic freedom that fictional forms like the ghost story and the Gothic tale afforded authors during the nineteenth century. Ellen Moers's concept of the female Gothic has already made it clear how such literature can serve as a means of dealing with issues and themes too socially sensitive for direct, realist representation. Moers's important essay on the subject has shown that because the male-dominated publish industry of the eighteenth

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview and analysis of the governess fiction genre, see Lecaros. While the overwhelming majority of Victorian governesses belong to the category of social realism, there are obviously notable exceptions to this generalization. Mid-period novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne*, for example, may be regarded as governess novels, but they follow the generic conventions of the sensation novel far more closely than those of social realism. Similarly, *Jane Eyre* may be regarded as a governess novel – indeed, the most famous of all governess novels – yet it belongs more to the romantic tradition than it does social realism.



and nineteenth centuries privileged realism over romance, British women authors like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Emily Brontë were able to use the Gothic and the supernatural to plumb the depths of women's experience and question patriarchal values without fear of editorial censorship or public reproach. But this kind of license was not only limited to women authors or specifically feminist concerns. As Vanessa Dickerson has pointed out, texts with pervasive Gothic or supernatural elements were, generally speaking, "not...scrutinized and judged with the same strictness and wariness as were realist works" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (110). Consequently, the Gothic and the supernatural became a viable method for eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century authors of both sexes to address controversial social issues without creating the kind of public scandal that would have resulted from the publication of a realist text dealing with the same subject matter. The use of Gothic tropes and supernatural events thus made it possible for authors like Henry James to explore the frightening possibilities that the presence of a liminal figure like the governess raised within domestic spaces.

Tzvetan Todorov's observations in the book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Genre* further corroborate the above explanation. Quoting Peter Penzoldt's assertion in *The Supernatural in Literature* that "for many authors, the supernatural was merely a pretext to describe things they would never have dared mention in realist terms," Todorov argues that "the fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible" to realist modes of literary representation (158). These claims by Penzoldt and Todorov then point to the second reason why Gothic and supernatural texts offered Victorian authors like James a perfect vehicle for channeling

contemporary social anxieties generated by the governess's presence in society. As the above remarks by Penzoldt and Todorov make clear, literary genres like Gothic fiction and the Victorian ghost story concern themselves primarily with behaviors, events, and identities that transgress against the subjectively and socially normative. Indeed, Todorov goes so far as to posit a direct link between the fantastic and the forms of deviance now chronicled in the annals of psychoanalysis when he states that "the very themes of fantastic literature have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the past fifty years" (161). Rather than trading in the strange and the unusual simply for the sake of entertainment, the literature of the fantastic and the supernatural symptomatizes sociohistorical unrest by concerning itself with what the dominant ideology of a given period constitutes as abnormal, monstrous, intolerable, or unthinkable.

This preoccupation with transgression stands as a legacy of romance, the literary mode from which the literature of the fantastic and the supernatural developed. As I have already discussed, the trappings of the Gothic and the supernatural have traditionally afforded authors a much greater degree of thematic license than realism ever could. Such liberty resulted in large part from a dismissive critical attitude that regarded texts in the romantic tradition as nothing more than escapist flights of fancy with little or no connection to the concerns of the "real world." Although this view popularly persists to this day, Marxist and cultural-materialist critics have done much in recent decades to discredit it by suggesting ways in which romance and its generic descendants can represent significant interventions in ideological discourse. Fredric Jameson, for instance, has argued that romance serves as "an imaginary 'solution'" to the ideological

problem raised by certain forms of otherness – namely, “the perplexing question of how my enemy can be thought of as being evil (that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute difference), when what is responsible for his being so characterized is quite simply the *identity* of his conduct with mine, the which...he reflects as in a mirror image” (118). In one sense, then, texts in the romantic tradition serve as symbolic confrontations with socio-cultural forms of uncanniness. The evil knight of medieval romance, the debauched priest or aristocrat of the Gothic novel, and the spectral entity in the Victorian ghost story all operate as socio-historically determined signifiers of some otherness that haunts the domain of the ideologically familiar like an unquiet spirit or a shadowy *doppelgänger*, unsettling the very categories of identification constituting such familiarity.

With their tendency ultimately to reaffirm and reestablish those categories, however, earlier, more traditional forms of romance like the *chanson de geste* and the Gothic novel fit Jameson’s definition of romance as “an imaginary ‘solution’” to an ideological problem more closely than do later generic developments such as the Victorian ghost story. Those earlier, more traditional examples of romance belong to the literary genre that Todorov has identified as the uncanny. Closely related to the Freudian concept of the uncanny discussed earlier, the uncanny genre essentially deals with characters and events that mystify the familiar, thereby making it seem unfamiliar, threatening, and beyond the threshold of understanding or control. Of course, as I have already suggested, this confrontation with the socially and epistemologically transgressive typifies virtually all texts in the romantic tradition. What distinguishes the works of, say, Chrétien de Troyes or Ann Radcliffe from the works of a Victorian ghost

story writer like, say, Le Fanu or James (Henry or M.R.) is the question of whether the author diegetically neutralizes the threat of the unknown in the end. In the uncanny genre, according to Todorov, “events that seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at the end” (44). In other words, the forces of the unknown lose their destabilizing power and become reconciled with the pragmatic, materialist image of reality represented through the dominant ideologies of Britain during the modern period. Thus Todorov’s uncanny genre resembles Jameson’s account of the traditional romance more closely than the other two genres, the fantastic and the marvelous, that Todorov discusses in relation to the uncanny.

Unlike the uncanny text, the fantastic or marvelous text does not enact “an imaginary ‘solution’” to some ideological problem facing the dominant culture of the place and time that produced the text. The fantastic and the marvelous begin in much the same fashion as the uncanny, introducing an “uncanny or supernatural event...against the background of what is considered normal and natural” (Todorov 173). This “uncanny or supernatural event,” regardless of the genre, stages the same sort of societal transgression that lies at the heart of all texts within the romantic tradition. Yet, in the case of the fantastic and the marvelous, these apparently supernatural or otherwise inexplicable occurrences never receive the kind of rational explanation typical of texts belonging to the genre of the uncanny. In a fantastic text, according to Todorov, the equivocal manner in which the author represents aberrant characters and situations causes the reader “to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). A fantastic text does not offer any endorsement of a particular explanation and thus refuses to restore the conditions of epistemic and social normativity disturbed by what

has transpired within the story.<sup>10</sup> A marvelous text, by contrast, does in fact endorse a particular explanation of events, but, rather than restoring the conditions of normativity as texts in the uncanny genre do, the marvelous text permanently suspends those conditions by “suggest[ing] the existence of the supernatural” (Todorov 73). With the marvelous genre, then, the shocking revelation of a spiritual world in regular contact with the world of everyday experience shatters the ultimately materialist image of reality represented through the dominant ideologies of nineteenth-century British society. For while the mainstream, Broad Church religious doctrine of the period still certainly promoted belief in supernatural concepts like a personal afterlife and a personal Deity, it also insisted upon the existence of an inviolable boundary between the spiritual and the material. Ghosts and other instances of spiritual interaction with the physical world were dismissed as the superstitious delusions of bygone and far less enlightened ages.<sup>11</sup> Victorian texts belonging to the genre of the marvelous directly countered this view with their portrayal of a haunted universe in which the spiritual routinely manifested itself within the material realm, thereby calling into question both contemporary epistemological certainty and the system of sociopolitical organization predicated upon it.

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<sup>10</sup> While Todorov concedes that a reader will typically decide for himself one way or another at the story’s conclusion, the text itself never gives any clear indication supporting one interpretation above another. Todorov specifically points to *The Turn of the Screw* as a prime example of the fantastic. “The book closed, the ambiguity persists,” says Todorov, for James’s novella “does not permit us to determine finally whether ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess” (43). Of course, the persistence of such ambiguity has not prevented numerous critics over the years from attempting to claim that the text objectively supports either a rational or a supernatural explanation. I discuss this critical desire for textual stability at greater length in chapter two.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive account of nineteenth-century British society’s efforts to distinguish religious faith from “superstition,” see Houghton. A number of scholars have addressed the paradoxical rise of Spiritualism against this backdrop of anti-superstitious thinking. See, for instance, Noakes.

For this reason, the marvelous and the fantastic furnished Victorian authors with an ideal mode for the symbolic exploration of the socially problematic and its most chilling consequences. Using supernatural entities like ghosts as vessels for what the Victorians found most unsettling about their society and culture, the authors of the period found in the genres of the marvelous and the fantastic a method for letting their innermost obsessions and anxieties play in a controlled and socially acceptable manner that did not require the sort of utopic reconciliation with the normative typical of more traditional romances. In the cases of *The Turn of the Screw* and the other texts that I examine in the following chapters, the perceived socio-cultural threats posed by the texts' governess or governess-like narrators get displaced onto the spectral entities that intrude upon the domestic spaces in the texts. By analyzing the appearance and behavior of these spectral entities in relation to the working women through whose eyes we see them, it then becomes possible to give an account of how these texts engage with particular aspects of the popular discourse concerning the governess's status and significance within Victorian society.

### **(Psycho)Analyzing the Governess**

The above discussion of concepts like the uncanny raises the hitherto neglected issue of psychoanalysis's central place in the interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. The publication of Edward Wilson's essay "The Ambiguity of Henry James" in 1934 forever changed how readers and critics alike approached the novella. Although a handful of critics like Edna Kenton had previously suggested that the text should be read as something other than a ghost story, Wilson was the first to interpret it within a

distinctly Freudian theoretical framework. Wilson regards *The Turn of the Screw* not as a ghost story, but “an accurate and distressing picture of the poor country parson’s daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, her inability to admit to herself her sexual impulse, and the relentless English ‘authority’ that enables her to put over on inferiors even purposes which are totally deluded” (94-5). The apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, according to Wilson’s interpretation, are not ghosts at all, but hallucinatory manifestations of the governess-narrator’s hysterical mind. Wilson claims that the governess, reared in a sheltered, parochial household, finds herself psychologically ill-equipped to deal with not only the newfound freedom and authority of her position, but also (and more importantly, in Wilson’s estimation) her untenable desire for her socially superior employer, the gentleman in Harley Street. Consequently, the governess’s mind becomes unsettled and constructs an elaborate delusion around the notion that the specters of a dead valet and a dead governess are determined to possess her charges in body, mind, and soul.

I have chosen to reserve in-depth critical engagement with both Wilson and the psychoanalytical interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* in general until chapter two. I defer discussion until then primarily because I believe that it will prove helpful to discuss Wilson and the psychoanalytic interpretation of James’s novella in relation to Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Villette*, an earlier piece of Victorian governess fiction that exhibits some rather striking similarities with James’s fin-de-siècle novella. As I will argue, this intertextual relationship makes Brontë’s novel a useful platform for examining the merits as well as the shortcomings of the Wilsonian approach to the governess’s situation in James’s novella. I point out that Brontë’s critique of psychological interpretation in

*Villette* proves to be quite relevant to the assessment of how psychoanalytic concepts and methodologies have traditionally been applied in reading *The Turn of the Screw*. In particular, Brontë's critique of psychological interpretation in *Villette* suggests to the critic of *The Turn of the Screw* the necessity of balancing a psychoanalytic approach to the text with a cultural-materialist perspective. This combined psychoanalytic and cultural-materialist approach, as I conclude, has the virtue of recognizing not only how James's novella uses the supernatural to represent Victorian anxieties about the governess's social liminality, but also how the ideological foundations of those same anxieties have in fact informed the discourses of psychoanalysis itself.

The remaining chapter of my thesis will then build off this dual approach that I endorse in chapter two. In this third chapter, I will read *The Turn of the Screw* in relation to Elizabeth Gaskell's mid-period ghost story "The Old Nurse's Story" in order to discuss how the issues of class and gender inform the nature of the supernatural threat posed to the children in James's novella. Although Gaskell's story concerns a nursemaid's rather than a governess's experiences with the paranormal, it contains a number of significant parallels with *The Turn of the Screw*. Most notably, the working women who narrate these two texts display an almost obsessive attachment to socioeconomically superior charges, who become the targets of apparently supernatural threats. As I will argue, the specific threats posed by these persecutors from beyond the grave ultimately express the potential dangers that Victorian culture associated with governesses and nursemaids who grew inappropriately attached to their charges. The spectral apparitions in "The Old Nurse's Story" and *The Turn of the Screw* represent Victorian concerns that such



powerful and “unnatural” attachments can have adverse effects upon the moral and sexual development of genteel children.

The fourth and final chapter will then examine *The Turn of the Screw* in relation to Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s ghost story “At Chrighton Abbey.” I argue that this text, like *The Turn of the Screw*, deals on one level with the Victorian perception of the governess as a threat to masculine integrity and patriarchal inheritance. There persisted throughout the period a recurring stereotype of the governess as an opportunistic social predator whose all-consuming thirst for wealth and status left hapless young gentlemen, destroyed households, and disrupted the generational flow of capital. This stereotype, as I will show, emerges within both “At Chrighton Abbey” and *The Turn of the Screw*, with the governess-narrators in each text being symbolically linked with predatory ghosts whom they first encounter during solitary “prowls” across the grounds of estates owned by handsome young gentlemen.

## Chapter 2: Questioning Hysteria in *The Turn of the Screw* and *Villette*

### Introduction

The singular nature of a text like *The Turn of the Screw* inevitably leads one to ask what might have inspired something so remarkable and unusual. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, a small cottage industry sprang up around determining what texts James might have had in mind, either consciously or unconsciously, during the period when he wrote his most famous novella. Critics have long since agreed that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* almost certainly informed the composition of *The Turn of the Screw* in some way.<sup>12</sup> After all, the governess-narrator alludes to *Jane Eyre* when, shortly after glimpsing the apparition of Peter Quint for the first time, she muses, "Was there a 'secret' at Bly...an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?" (41) This allusion to Thornfield's own cloistered and insane denizen, Bertha Mason, makes it clear that James had read *Jane Eyre* and made some conscious connection between it and his own work. But what of Charlotte Brontë's other famous novel, *Villette*? While critics have noted the relationships between James's novella and the novels of Brontë's sisters, Anne and Emily, little attention has been paid to Brontë's own *Villette*.<sup>13</sup> Mention of the text sometimes occurs in passing, but critics of *The Turn of the Screw* seem generally to agree with Elizabeth Sheppard's assessment that James "made extensive use of *Jane Eyre*, while ignoring *Villette* (which indeed contained little to his liking)" (263).

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<sup>12</sup> For extended discussions of the intertextual relationship between *The Turn of the Screw* and *Jane Eyre*, see Tinter; Sheppard; and Petry.

<sup>13</sup> For an extended discussion of the intertextual relationship between *The Turn of the Screw* and the novels of Anne Brontë, see Banerjee 532-44. For the relationship between *The Turn of the Screw* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, see Allott 101.

However, even if James “ignored” *Villette* when he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*, the critic cannot afford to do the same when s/he attempts to interpret James’s novella. The similarities between the two texts are simply too great to be discounted. While James may not have made a conscious effort to rewrite *Villette* when he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*, the two texts inevitably invite comparisons with each other. For one thing, both texts participate in the tradition of the Victorian governess novel through their depictions of genteel working women dealing with isolation and loneliness far from their accustomed surroundings. But this link between the two texts only acts as the basis for a deeper, more meaningful relationship. Like James’s governess-narrator, Brontë’s heroine Lucy Snowe (herself a governess) must cope with not only intense anxiety and melancholy, but also the threat of an apparently supernatural menace. This parallel between *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* then becomes all the more significant in light of the psychological explanation to which each heroine’s paranormal experiences seem susceptible. In *Villette*, Lucy’s physician cousin, Dr. John Bretton, attempts to rationalize Lucy’s reports of a ghostly nun haunting the grounds of Madame Beck’s *pensionnat* in much the same way that myriad critics have sought to explicate the governess’s narrative in *The Turn of the Screw* – that is, by diagnosing the encounters as “a case of spectral illusion...resulting from long-continued mental conflict” (Brontë 278). The presence of such a close connection between the two texts suggests that we may learn a great deal more about *The Turn of the Screw* by reading it in relation to *Villette*.

In the following chapter, I pursue just such a reading. This reading foregrounds the relevance of Brontë’s critique of psychological interpretation in *Villette* to the psychoanalytical approach to *The Turn of the Screw*. In *Villette*, Dr. John’s

rationalization of the ghostly nun as “a case of spectral illusion” ultimately holds no more explanatory power than the supernatural account of the phenomenon. While the apparition of the nun is hardly a visitant from beyond the grave, it proves to be no mere figment of Lucy’s imagination, either. In a moment that underscores Brontë’s indebtedness to the Radcliffean Gothic tradition, Lucy discovers that the ghostly apparition is in fact the rakish young Count de Hamal, who has been disguising himself in a nun’s habit in order to steal into the boarding school for covert trysts with Lucy’s coquettish pupil, Ginevra Fanshawe. This revelation highlights the overall inadequacy of not only Dr. John’s psychological reading of the situation, but also any singular approach to its interpretation. Dr. John’s psychological account of Lucy’s experiences with the nun’s apparition coexists with other competing interpretations, which are simultaneously just as true and just as flawed. Something approaching a full account of what the nun’s apparition means only surfaces when Dr. John’s psychological approach is examined in relation to one or more of these competing interpretations – and, in particular, the interpretation that focuses on the apparition’s significance as a spectral, liminal figure whose ontological status parallels Lucy’s own socioeconomic position. And the same is true of the psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. In order to appreciate James’s novella in something approaching (to borrow a phrase from its governess-narrator) “the fullness of its meaning,” one must weigh the Freudian reading of the text in relation to a reading that treats the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel as ghostly reflections of the governess-narrator’s own liminal status within Victorian society (86).

### **Desire, Repression, and Narrative**

Only one Victorian text rivals *The Turn of the Screw* in terms of the amount of critical attention paid to the heroine's psychological state, and that is Brontë's *Villette*. Just as it is impossible to discuss *The Turn of the Screw* without at least acknowledging the psychoanalytic interpretation of the governess's narrative, it is impossible to discuss *Villette* without acknowledging the degree of scrutiny that Lucy Snowe's mental condition has received. Athena Vrettos's observations about the text epitomize the approach that many critics have taken towards the novel in recent years: "The correlation between narration and neurosis in *Villette* is integral to Brontë's view of her narrator/heroine. She explicitly links the symptoms of Lucy's illness to her narrative role...[F]ar from being an aberration of character, Lucy's nervous disease constitutes the fabric of her narrative consciousness" (567). Repression has become a concept central to the interpretation of the novel. In particular, it has become the most comprehensive means of accounting for the narrative gaps and displacements that occur throughout the text. "*Villette*," as Mary Jacobus has argued, "is not simply about the perils of repression. It is a text formally fissured by its own repressions, concealing a buried letter" (121). This "buried letter" of *Villette*, like the letters from Dr. John that Lucy buries in the garden of Madame Beck's *pensionnat*, contains all the facts and questions that Lucy tellingly hides from her reader's view throughout the novel. All the shocking, embarrassing, or traumatic aspects of Lucy's life – the identity and fate of her parents, her recognition of Dr. John as the Graham Bretton of her childhood, the ultimate fate of M. Paul and her relationship with him – become things that her narrative obfuscates, defers mention of, or discusses only in the most oblique terms.

Critics of *The Turn of the Screw*, psychoanalytic and otherwise, have remarked upon the presence of narrative repression in that text as well. In the words of T.J. Lustig, “*The Turn of the Screw* is repeatedly concerned with the act of telling. More often than not, however, its predicament is that of not being able to tell” (116). While Lustig does not endorse a strictly psychoanalytic interpretation of the text, his observation reproduces the insight that many psychoanalytic critics through the years have taken as their starting point. The many blanks that abound within the text, both literally (as dashes) and figuratively (as narrative gaps and inconsistencies), furnish psychoanalytic critics with what they consider to be strong evidence in support of the argument that Edmund Wilson first made in his landmark 1930 essay, “The Ambiguity of Henry James.” There, Wilson challenged the hitherto accepted literal reading of *The Turn of the Screw* as “just a ghost story” by suggesting that James’s governess-narrator is a hysteric whose repressed sexual desire for her employer, the gentleman in Harley Street, causes her to hallucinate the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.<sup>14</sup> This reading of the apparitions as neurotic delusions, according to Wilson and his followers, unearths the real “‘secret’ at Bly,” the

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<sup>14</sup> For analysis of the text’s literal and figurative “blanks,” see Robbins (“Shooting”), as well as Lustig 105-89.

Wilson’s essay provides the first complete psychoanalytic interpretation of the text ever published, but there are two earlier essays that can also be regarded as the official beginnings of the psychoanalytic approach to the text. Edna Kenton’s 1924 essay “Henry James to the Ruminant Reader” argued against a purely literal interpretation of James’s novella. While the reading that Kenton endorses instead does not conjecture about the provenance of the “maze of irresistible illusion” in which both the governess and, by extension, the reader become trapped, it does share in common with the standard psychoanalytic interpretation the conviction that the governess-narrator’s experiences at Bly are illusory rather than real (245). But an even earlier candidate for first psychoanalytic reading also exists in the form of Harold C. Goddard’s “A Pre-Freudian Reading of Henry James’s ‘The Turn of the Screw,’” which argues that interprets the specters of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are hallucinatory manifestations of “the governess’s unconfirmed love and unformulated fear” (10). Although not published until 1957, Leon Edel’s prefatory note to the essay quotes Goddard’s daughter, Eleanor Goddard Worthen, as stating that Goddard in fact wrote “A Pre-Freudian Reading” “‘about 1920 or before’” (1). If Goddard’s daughter is correct, then “A Pre-Freudian Reading,” and not Wilson’s “The Ambiguity of Henry James,” presents the earliest psychoanalytic reading.

true, buried meaning of the governess's narrative. The blanks in the text then serve as further symptoms of her hysteria, for they represent instances where the governess has repressed details that would allow her neurosis to speak for itself and bring to the surface all the things she simultaneously does and does not wish to acknowledge about her own desires.

Ambivalence toward desire constitutes a further correspondence between *Villette* and the psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. According to Wilson and his followers, the governess-narrator in James's novella suffers from "middle-class class-consciousness," which renders her unable to "admit to herself her natural sexual impulses" even as they struggle to find a way to the surface (Wilson 95). This version of events coincides with the conflict between Reason and Feeling that Lucy experiences throughout *Villette*. Lucy's practice of always writing two letters to Dr. John – one, a public missive produced "under the dry, stinting check of Reason," and the other, a private document composed "according to the full, liberal impulse of Feeling" – perfectly epitomizes this conflict. This effort to "serve two masters" offers a more overt expression of the same emotional struggle that psychoanalytic critics see at the center of *The Turn of the Screw* (Brontë 281). Yet, as with the governess-narrator in the Wilsonian version of James's novella, Lucy cannot publicize her inner longings. For most of the novel, Lucy's desire remain nothing more than subterranean murmurs, repressed drives that Lucy at one point literally buries in a symbolic act of renunciation.

This conflict between Reason and Feeling then translates into a crisis of genre that occurs in both texts. As Mary Jacobus has pointed out regarding *Villette*, "The narrative and representational conventions of Victorian realism are constantly threatened by an

incompletely repressed Romanticism. Supernatural haunting and satanic revolt, delusion and dream, disrupt a text which can give no formal recognition to either Romantic or Gothic modes” (121-22). The freedom of passion and imagination constantly undercut the restraint of reason and reality as the two principles vie for dominance within the text. This tension has led critics such as Terry Eagleton to conclude that *Villette* is a formally flawed text because of its supposed inability “to steer between the forced repression and uncontrolled release of feeling.” *Villette*’s Gothic elements – particularly, the episodes involving “the absurd nun” – represent for these critics nothing more than Brontë’s “inept” attempts to depict social reality as something dark, oppressive, and “objectively sinister” (Eagleton 90). The novel proves the most effective, these critics claim, only when the conventions of Victorian realism succeed in vanquishing the grim phantoms, suffocating shadows, and insidious cabals conjured up by Brontë’s imaginative excesses.

*The Turn of the Screw* has become a similarly contested space for critics, who wish to categorize it either as a ghost story or a masterful example of modernist psychological realism. To frame this debate about genre in terms of the Todorvian critical vocabulary introduced in Chapter 1, the psychoanalytic critics insist that it is an example of the uncanny, while the literalist critics assert that James’s novella is an instance of the marvelous. That is, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the text reads the governess’s narrative as a typical instance of what Todorov terms the fantastic-uncanny, wherein the appearance of a “supernatural occurrence” gives way to the revelation that the event depicted in the text “was only the fruit of a deranged imagination” (45). Psychoanalytic critics from Wilson onward have celebrated this fantastic-uncanny rendition of James’s novella as a triumph over the Gothic folly of a literal interpretation,



proclaiming the “true – and clearly the richer – story” behind the text to be “the dramatization of a woman’s psychosexual problem and the damage it does to the children in her charge” (Renner 175). For literalist interpreters like Robert Heilman, by contrast, this reading of the governess’s narrative not only “does violence” to the text, but debases it by transforming James’s masterful story of humanity in the face of supernatural evil into little more than a “commonplace clinical record” (433, 443). Heilman and his followers insist that *The Turn of the Screw* is a late addition to the canon of great Victorian ghost stories, which all exemplify Todorov’s category of the “fantastic-marvelous” through their depiction of “supernatural event[s]... against the background of what is considered normal or natural” (173).

Obviously, the apparitions in *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* are central to these issues of psychology and genre. As we have just seen, critical debate about the latter text focuses almost entirely upon the ontological status of the apparitions that the governess claims to have encountered. If, on the one hand, they are (as critics like Heilman maintain) real ghosts, then the governess is a perfectly sane, courageous young woman – the “perfectly charming” and “worthy” woman described by the frame narrator – who is forced to assume the role of ghost story heroine and do battle with the forces of darkness for the sake of her charges (James 24). If, on the other hand, the apparitions are (as critics like Wilson maintain) psychic projections, then the governess becomes the subject of a psychological-realist character study and stands before us as a profoundly disturbed and profoundly disturbing character whose repressed sexual desires lead to the death of one child and the severe traumatization of another.

### **Screwing with the Production of Meaning**

A consideration of the apparition in *Villette*, however, raises the possibility of another, rather more complex interpretation of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw*. Unlike James, Brontë leaves no room for doubt about the ontological status of the ghostly presence haunting her text. Initially dismissed by Dr. John as a case of “spectral illusion,” the nun turns out to be all too real when Lucy discovers that the nun is neither an actual ghost nor “a case of spectral illusion,” but Ginevra Fanshawe’s suitor, the foppish Count de Hamal, masquerading in a nun’s habit as he steals into Madame Beck’s *pensionnat* for clandestine meetings with his paramour. In addition to highlighting *Villette*’s indebtedness to the Radcliffean Gothic tradition and its technique of the supernatural explained, the revelation that de Hamal is behind Lucy’s encounters with the ghostly nun undermines Dr. John’s psychological reading of the apparition’s presence by introducing an interpretive possibility that Dr. John’s authoritative medical gaze has overlooked. Just as psychoanalytic critics of *The Turn of the Screw* claim that their theoretical framework allows them to penetrate to the hidden truth about James’s governess and her narrative, Dr. John declares that he sees the whole truth (“all that you would conceal”) about Lucy’s personality and mental state (Brontë 276). With the establishment of the nun as a real, physical presence in the world, however, we as readers and critics must question this declaration – and, with it, the similar assertion made by psychoanalytic critics of *The Turn of the Screw*. Although Dr. John’s psychological approach to Lucy’s account of the nun successfully identifies that figure as something decidedly non-supernatural, it fails to recognize that the nun’s apparition exists as more than just a simple indicator of Lucy’s own troubled psychological state. In other words,

by privileging one mode of interpretation above all others, Dr. John cannot anticipate the possibility that the apparition have any significance beyond what it supposedly reveals about Lucy's inner life.

The Freudian interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* falters in a similar manner. While it succeeds in calling attention to the fact that the literalist reading of the text is in many ways unsatisfactory, the Freudian interpretation insists on reading the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel solely in terms of what they reveal about the psyche of the governess-narrator. This insistence upon a single way of reading the text – an insistence that many Freudian critics forget Wilson himself abandoned in the revised 1948 version of his essay – leaves the Freudian interpretation unable to account fully for the elements of the text that suggest the possibility of other, non-psychological readings of the ghosts (173).<sup>15</sup> After all, as Peter Beidler's book *Ghosts, Demons, and Henry James: The Turn of the Screw at the Turn of the Century* has exhaustively demonstrated, James's inclusion of copious details culled from actual fin-de-siècle paranormal research provides sufficient evidence for a literalist reading of the text as a ghost story. Such details suggest that it is necessary to split the difference and consider how competing interpretations of the text work dialogically to create unique layers of meaning within the text.

The example of *Villette* once again helps to illuminate the interpretive problems presented by *The Turn of the Screw*. Like Brontë's *Villette*, *The Turn of the Screw* is rife with a degree of textual ambiguity that renders any one reading of the text woefully insufficient. As Sally Shuttleworth has observed regarding *Villette*, the temptation to view textual elements like the nun's apparition primarily through Dr. John's rationalizing

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<sup>15</sup> The text of the 1948 version cited here appears with the original 1934 version in the second Norton Critical Edition of *The Turn of the Screw*.

medical gaze, as reflections of Lucy's own psychological state, persists throughout the novel (221). And it is clearly necessary to give in to this temptation to a certain degree; the discourse of Victorian psychology, as Shuttleworth has demonstrated, informs Lucy's narrative from start to finish, constituting the very vocabulary through which she conceptualizes and articulates the events of her inner life (233). Yet, as Shuttleworth has also pointed out, the deliberate obfuscation of identity and meaning within the novel causes the text to resist all critical efforts to discover "a hidden unitary meaning" that conforms to the assumptions, expectations, and conclusions of any one reading (221). We must, as Shuttleworth warns, "avoid falling into the error of Dr. John in assuming unproblematic access to a realm of hidden truth" in which the nun's apparition has one absolute meaning, and Lucy's psychological state is perfectly transparent (229). The symbols within Brontë's novel signify on multiple levels, in a variety of senses, in direct defiance of any critic's insistence that a particular theoretical lens can reveal the ultimate meaning behind either the text as a whole or any individual aspect of it. Something approaching, but never arriving at, ultimate meaning emerges only when one acknowledges the multiple ways in which a single symbol can signify and then examines the further significances that arise from the interrelationship amongst those competing meanings.

Similarly, *The Turn of the Screw* eschews "hidden unitary meaning" in favor of a multiplicity of meanings, each simultaneously contradictory and complementary. Previous critics of the psychoanalytic approach have argued for the necessity of

preserving or exploring the very significance of the text's ambiguity.<sup>16</sup> However, a great many of these critics base their arguments off a view of James's novella as "a very subtle fiction about the process of fiction itself" (Cook and Corrigan 65). After all, as James stated in his preface to the 1908 New York Edition of his novella, the text is nothing but an "example of the imagination unassisted, unassociated – playing the game, making the score, in the phrase of our sporting day, off its own bat" (124). Such descriptions of the text by James himself openly invite the kinds of poststructuralist observations concerning linguistic and hermeneutic freeplay that postmodern critics like Shoshanna Felman have applied to *The Turn of the Screw*. Yet James's novella owes its ambiguity to more than just James's personal desire to make some profound metafictional statement about how the act of reading creates meaning within literary texts. The text's ambiguity also reflects the quintessentially Victorian problem of the governess as a socially liminal presence. Just as Ginevra Fanshawe's question "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?" resonates throughout *Villette* and renders the narrating "I" at the center of that text dangerously unstable, the obscurity surrounding the identity of James's heroine-narrator produces similar uncertainty the narrating "I" at the center of *The Turn of the Screw* (Brontë 341).

However, these interrogations of narrative identity are not simply Brontë's and James's prescient deconstructions of the narrative "I" as an inherently unstable linguistic signifier. Nor do these interrogations merely constitute invitations to a general inquiry into the nature of female identity during the Victorian period. Instead, in a direct reflection of contemporary anxieties about governesses and similar categories of genteel working women, the difficulties incumbent upon the narrating "I" in both *Villette* and *The*

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Beidler provides a comprehensive overview of these critics and their arguments in the "Having It Both Ways" section (197-200) of his excellent critical history essay for the second Bedford/St. Martin's *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* edition of *The Turn of the Screw*.

*Turn of the Screw* stem from the fundamental problem of their heroine-narrators' socioeconomic and gender identities. Ginevra Fanshawe's remarks immediately following her question of "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?", after all, make it clear that her inquiry primarily concerns these two forms of identity: "You used to call yourself a nursery-governess; when you first came here you really had the care of the children in this house: I have seen you carry little Georgette in your arms, like a *bonne* – few governesses would have condescended so far – and now Madame Beck treats you with more courtesy than she treats the Parisienne, St. Pierre" (Brontë 341). These comments demonstrate that what really makes genteel working women like Lucy Snowe such enigmas for members of mainstream Victorian society like Ginevra Fanshawe is the inability to identify them according to conventional ideological categories; Lucy's labor profoundly debases her, yet her breeding, education, and manners have the power to inure her to a respectable bourgeois woman like Madame Beck. And this same problem forms the crux of the narrative instability in *The Turn of the Screw*, as demonstrated by the scene in which Mrs. Grose and the governess-narrator discuss for the first time Miss Jessel, the governess-narrator's predecessor and obvious counterpart. In that scene, when Mrs. Grose "brought it woefully out" that Miss Jessel was "a lady," the governess-narrator feels the need to repeat immediately and emphatically, "Yes – she was a lady" (James 58). This curious repetition of the phrase "she was a lady" hints at an underlying security that both the governess-narrator and the text itself harbor with regard to the governess-narrator's own socioeconomic and gender identity – i.e., her status as "a lady" in the proper Victorian sense. The governess-narrator and the text must repeat the phrase,

for they are themselves each in need of reassurance that it is true of the governess-narrator.

Ultimately, the disruption of meaning's production within *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* owes more to this uncertainty surrounding the socioeconomic and gender identity of each text's narrator than anything else. By destabilizing the narrative "I" at the center of each text, this uncertainty diffuses the production of meaning throughout multiple sites within the text and thereby renders the existence of a "hidden unitary meaning" impossible. Consequently, it becomes necessary to consider multiple interpretive possibilities simultaneously. This consideration of multiple interpretive possibilities, however, inevitably highlights the role that the instability of the narrative "I," and therefore uncertainty about the narrator's socioeconomic and gender identity, played in the disruption of meaning's production within each text in the first place. This realization in turn enables a partial reconstruction of the process of meaning-production within each text, for it calls attention to the fact that each interpretive possibility will ultimately reflect in some way the instability and uncertainty caused by each narrator's social liminality. Only then, after one has examined these manners of reflection and considered the significance of the overlaps and interrelationships among them, does the slightest trace – indeed, one might say, the ghost – of a "hidden unitary meaning" emerge.

### **Specters of Interpretation**

To understand the necessity of performing the kind of interpretive double-take recommended in the previous section, it is necessary to consider the unusual predicament that faces the critic of *Villette* or *The Turn of the Screw* from the outset. More specifically, it is necessary to question in what ways the supernatural and psychological/psychoanalytic readings of the apparitions in each text prove inadequate by themselves. Asking this question then allows for the emergence of a clearer sense of how these two readings compliment manage to compliment each other and resolve each other's shortcomings.

First, let us consider the psychological/psychoanalytic interpretation. This approach to the apparition(s) in *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* has the benefit of highlighting the problem of desire for governesses and other types of genteel working women. As my discussion of "At Chrighton Abbey" in Chapter 1 pointed out, one of the prevailing anxieties associated with the liminal social status of such women centered on the destructive potential of their unregulated and unrestrained desires. The stereotype of the "homewrecker governess" symbolized by the ghostly hunting party in Braddon's story was, on one level, an expression of the Victorian cultural preoccupation with sensational tales of wanton, conniving governesses seducing young gentleman and bringing ruin to respectable, long-established families. Yet such tales, as well as the general preoccupation with them, were in turn reflections of deeper concerns about the impact that the desires of women with such ideologically unstable identities might have upon existing relations of power. Lacking any stable class or gender identity, these women had no access to the socially acceptable channels for desire that Victorian



domestic ideology afforded middle-class wives and mothers. As a consequence, mainstream Victorian culture developed an obsessive concern for the effects that such raw, unbridled female desire could have upon the reproduction of social relations. And this concern manifested itself, as Mary Poovey has observed, primarily through a tendency to link governesses and other types of genteel working women discursively with the figures of the lunatic and the prostitute (130-31). These figures, synonymous with both social and libidinal disorder, served as potent signifiers of the kinds of systemic effects that Victorians dreaded governesses and other types of genteel working women could have upon mainstream society.

Freudian critics of *The Turn of the Screw* have often cited this commonplace Victorian association between governesses and madness as evidence for their interpretation of the text. In “Ambiguity,” for instance, Wilson reminds readers of “the peculiar psychology of governesses” as well as the various accounts of crazed governesses who have terrorized their employers’ households by behaving as poltergeists, “opening doors or smashing mirrors” (95). However, the citation of such discourse in support of the Freudian interpretation only highlights one of the chief drawbacks to a strictly psychoanalytic or psychological approach to texts like the ones discussed in this thesis. Because such an approach concentrates almost exclusively upon the details and dynamics of an individual’s inner world, it performs its analysis from a perspective that cannot sufficiently address social contexts or interrogate prevailing cultural assumptions.

Freud’s analysis of the English governess Lucy R. in his Josef Breuer co-authored *Studies on Hysteria* exemplifies this problem. As Oscar Cargill has noted, the striking

parallels between this case study (first published in 1896) and *The Turn of the Screw* (first published in 1898) suggest the possibility that the former may have served as an inspiration for the latter.<sup>17</sup> Haunted by the persistent smells of burnt pudding and cigar smoke, Lucy R. is, like James's governess, plagued by the specter of something that is simultaneously present and absent. Moreover, Freud's explanation for Lucy R.'s phantasms provides a template for the Freudian reading of James's novella, as Freud interprets them as symptoms of hysteria conjured up by Lucy R.'s repressed, impossible love for her employer, a Viennese factory manager who, much like James's "Master" in *Harley Street*, is known only by the name of "the Director." Yet Freud's explanation also highlights the same critical limitation from which the Freudian interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* suffers – i.e., its tendency to uncritically reproduce or completely gloss over the socio-cultural contexts that constrain and inform the production of meaning within the text. During pivotal moments of analytical breakthrough, it seems as if a shared script guides Freud and Lucy R. toward the same interpretive conclusions. In this respect, Lucy R. represents a kind of anti-Dora, for, whereas Dora vehemently rejected Freud's findings, Lucy R. embraces them instantly and wholeheartedly. After hearing the details surrounding the emergence of Lucy R.'s olfactory hallucinations, for instance, Freud informs her that "only one conclusion could be reached" regarding her case: namely, that "you are in love with your employer, the Director, though perhaps without being aware of it yourself." The apparent obviousness of this conclusion is emphasized by the fact that within the text of the case study, Freud does not feel the need to offer his contemporary Victorian readership any explanation of the rationale behind it; the truth of the situation is evidently so intuitively present in the case that Freud expects not only

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<sup>17</sup> See Cargill.

Lucy R., but his readers, to grasp it immediately. Nor does Lucy R. request clarification for her own benefit: indeed, her response to Freud's suggestion attests to neither shock nor disagreement on her part. Answering "in her laconic fashion," the governess acknowledges without hesitation, "Yes, I think that's true." The governess then goes on to explain that she had known as much all along, but "I didn't want to know. I wanted to drive it out of my head and not think of it again." When asked whether she tried to repress her feelings because she was "ashamed of loving a man," Lucy R. replies,

Oh no, I'm not unreasonably prudish. We're not responsible for our feelings, anyhow. It was distressing to me only because he is my employer and I am in his service and live in his house. I don't feel the same complete independence towards him that I could towards anyone else. And then I am a poor girl and he is such a rich man of good family. People would laugh at me if they had any idea of it. (117)

Lucy R.'s answer here displays an incredible degree of awareness regarding not only the inner workings of her own mind, but also the personal limitations incumbent to her social position. But what is even more remarkable about Lucy R.'s case is the ease with which Freud arrives at his conclusion, and the readiness with which the patient accepts it.

Several anti-Freudian feminist critics have claimed that Freud's case studies – particularly, those involving female hysterics – attest to his role as a chauvinistic, domineering figure who insisted on his patients' absolute acceptance of his clinical authority.<sup>18</sup> Thus one could argue, as Susan Katz has, that Lucy R.'s case provides a

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<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, this critique arises most frequently in feminist discussions of the Dora case. See, for example, Moi. Moi characterizes the Freudian analyst-analysand relationship as a kind of battle for interpretive authority in which the female patient is a rival who must be subdued and

compelling illustration of “the subtlety with which [Freud] pressures Lucy (and the reader) into conforming to his interpretations” (306). But there is another, even more likely means of understanding the situation. While one cannot discount the formidable influence of Freud’s admittedly domineering personality, it is far more likely that Lucy R.’s acceptance of Freud’s “obvious” conclusion stems from the fact that analyst and analysand are both operating under the same set of cultural assumptions. As Freud and Lucy R. collaborated on the interpretive narrative that became her case history, they each took for granted a number of Victorian stereotypes about the psychological and libidinal tendencies of governesses and other types of genteel working women without ever questioning the veracity, provenance, or social significance of those stereotypes.

This same problem plagues the psychological/psychoanalytical approach to *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Because that reading focuses upon the economy of internal, subjective symbols rather than the system of external, social symbols informing the textual construction of each heroine-narrator’s supposed mental instability, the logic informing its interpretation takes on a kind of circularity. In other words, the psychological/psychoanalytic approach maintains that the heroine-narrators in both texts are obviously hysterical because, “as everyone knows,” it is simply within the nature of governesses and other types of genteel working women to be hysterical. The psychological/psychoanalytical approach lacks the critical tools or the vocabulary to question the validity or the provenance of such an assumption.

Furthermore, exclusive reliance upon this critical approach reproduces the very same ideological agenda responsible for the construction of the mad governess stereotype

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made to accept Freud’s analysis. See also the extensive critique of the patriarchal ideology underlying Freud’s interpretations in Millett.

in the first place. “Hystericization” was, as Michel Foucault observed in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, one of the chief strategies through which the discourses of Victorian gender and sexuality sought to control the female body and bring it into “organic communion with the social body” (104). In other words, by conceptualizing the psychophysiological constitution of women as inherently unstable, Victorian society actually managed to impose upon them a series of rigid and relatively stable forms of embodied identity (namely, those of the bourgeois wife and mother). This strategy of hystericization constituted, in the words of Lisa Tickner, “a reassertion of women’s essentially *biological* destiny in the face of their increasingly mobile and transgressive social roles” (196). Faced with the rise of feminism and the New Woman (of which governesses and other types of genteel working women may be regarded as a species), patriarchal culture responded by proclaiming that only the fulfillment of woman’s biological destiny as a wife and mother could prevent her body and mind from succumbing to their own inherent instability. Hence the stereotype of the mad governess, whose behavior contrary to prescribed gender norms supposedly ensured her descent into madness. The stereotyping of governesses and other types of genteel working women as inherently prone to madness or hysteria represented Victorian society’s effort to minimize the ideologically destabilizing effects of these women’s social liminality. A diagnosis of madness or hysteria equaled the imposition of a recognizable and manageable form of identity; a madwoman could be contained, understood, perhaps even “rehabilitated” in a way that a governess could not. In the same manner, a reading of *The Turn of the Screw* that insists upon the governess-narrator’s hysteria without questioning the socio-cultural context for such a diagnosis inevitably amounts to the operation of

Victorian class and gender ideology from beyond the grave. The traditional psychoanalytic critic's label of hysteric seeks to limit the ideologically destabilizing effects of the governess-narrator's social liminality by reorganizing her hopelessly ambiguous and unstable text, a true exemplar of the Todorovian fantastic, according to the thoroughly rationalized and rather more socially acceptable generic label of the fantastic-uncanny.

Only a reading that combines the psychological/psychoanalytic and supernatural approaches to the text can furnish the necessary critical tools and vocabulary to resolve these shortcomings. The supernatural approach to the text accommodates for the shortcomings of the psychological/psychoanalytic approach by calling attention to the ways in which the apparitions reflect each heroine-narrator's liminal social position, as well as Victorian society's discursive response to that liminality. Yet the supernatural approach proves inadequate as a perspective from which to provide detailed insight into the correspondence that exists between each heroine-narrator's mental state and the apparition(s) confronting her. In order to arrive at such a perspective, one must read the apparition in both texts first as ghostly signifiers of social liminality, and then as reflections of the psychological effects produced by this condition.

### **The Ghostly and the Socially Liminal**

A consideration in turn of each of the two dominant modes of reading the spectral figures in *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* should help make this point clearer. To begin, let us consider what it means to adopt a reading of those figures that privileges their supernatural aspects. As we saw in Chapter 1, the spectral offers a perfect metaphor

for the plight of governesses and other types of genteel working women during the Victorian period. These women had suffered a kind of death – social death – as the result of their families’ socioeconomic circumstances. Yet these women did not stay “buried” and out of sight like those lifelong denizens of Victorian Britain’s working-class underworld. Just as ghosts inhabit an interstitial space between the lands of the living and the dead, so these women became trapped between the worlds of upstairs and downstairs. For while these women retained traces of their former lives among the “living” (the middle- and upper-classes) and sometimes even continued to move amongst them within their very homes, these women had undergone an irreversible transformation that forever altered their relationship to the “living.” The socioeconomic circumstances that brought about these women’s social deaths necessitated that they do what no respectable Victorian lady would ever contemplate doing: entering into the public sphere and supporting themselves through the commodification of their labor. Once the exchange of money for labor had transpired, and the “dead” reappeared amongst the “living” as a governess or some other form of domestic worker, that woman forever existed a ghastly presence, a source of fear, suspicion, and anxiety, within Victorian society and its microcosmic counterpart, the middle-class Victorian home.

Both *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* speak to this metaphorical connection between ghosts and genteel working women. In the case of *Villette*, Brontë repeatedly characterizes Lucy herself as a kind of liminal, ghostly figure within Victorian society. This characterization first surfaces in the narrative with the conclusion of Lucy’s recollections about her childhood acquaintance with Polly. Brontë has Lucy employ a maritime metaphor for her adolescence, likening it to “a bark slumbering through halcyon

weather, in a harbour still as glass,” proceeding in much the same manner as a “great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives.” This image of “a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass,” firmly establishes Lucy’s upbringing as one of genteel comfort, while the use of the phrase “supposed to,” rife with connotations of moral imperative, implies that Lucy was set live a life in perfect accordance with conventional Victorian gender ideology and its notions of how a respectable woman should live her life. Lucy’s remark about how she “must somehow have fallen over-board,” however, indicates the emergence of circumstances that caused her life to begin deviating from the narrative schema of Victorian middle-class femininity. Specifically, these circumstances involved some incident in which the “the ship was lost, the crew perished.” In other words, Lucy suffered at some point in her late adolescence the dissolution and/or destitution of family which, as we saw in Chapter 1, typically marked a genteel young woman’s passage into the realm of social death. This catastrophe, then, paves the way for Lucy’s later spectralization. Utterly divorced from the network of social, cultural, and economic relations (i.e., familial domesticity and bourgeois privilege) that served as the foundation for the Victorian middle-class definition of “life,” Lucy is, for all intents and purposes, “dead.” It is only through her socioeconomic activity subsequent to the tragedy that she becomes “undead,” a ghost-like spectral figure that is neither “living” nor “dead,” genteel nor working-class.

Lucy’s initial restoration to this shadowy-kind of half-life stems from her acceptance of a position as the nurse and lady’s companion of the moribund genteel spinster Miss Marchmont, a “woman of fortune” who lives in the same neighborhood where Lucy’s family formerly lived (Brontë 30). Acceptance of this position, with the



modicum of respectability attendant to it, marks Lucy's entry into the role of genteel working woman. Her employment is not menial, as it requires a woman with Lucy's genteel background; yet, simply by virtue of the fact that she is a woman who must commodify her labor, Lucy cannot properly call herself genteel anymore. Brontë portrays the wraith-like "in-between-ness" of Lucy's life in this newfound position primarily through the attenuation of experience and desire that Lucy undergoes when she enters her role as Miss Marchmont's companion. As Lucy tells us,

Two hot, close rooms [Miss Marchmont's bed chambers and drawing-room] thus became my world...I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an ever-changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber; I was almost content to forget. All within me became narrowed to my lot. Tame and still by habit, disciplined by destiny, I demanded no walks in the fresh air; my appetite needed no more than the tiny messes served for the invalid. (Brontë 42)

Like a ghost, Lucy's relationship with the world becomes defined by her anchorage to a specific space that she "haunts," while her appetite, a traditional measure of vitality, becomes practically non-existent (a trait that characterizes Lucy for the rest of the book). Moreover, with Lucy's discovery that she "was almost content to forget" such things as her past, the outside world of the present, and all thoughts of future aspirations, she displays the detachment from all sense of space, time, and identity so characteristic of ghostly existence.

Lucy's experiences and eventual decision to leave Britain following Miss Marchmont's death only reaffirm Lucy's transformation into a ghostly presence within

Victorian society. When Lucy realizes upon her arrival in London the (un)life to which her socioeconomic circumstances have consigned her, for example, Lucy describes her position as being “like a ghost,” “[a]nomalous, desolate, almost blank of hope” (Brontë 52). This wraith-like quality of her existence then gets further emphasized in the scene in which Lucy is ferried to the ship that will bear her forever away from the world she has known. “I thought of the Styx,” Lucy remarks, “and of Charon rowing some solitary soul to the Land of Shades” (Brontë 56). Lucy, herself now a “shade” thanks to her “position,” has suffered social death, and is due to take her place in the “underworld” of Victorian society. Yet, through its name, the *Vivid*, the ship that Lucy boards, signifies Lucy’s lot ultimately lies not in that “underworld,” but amongst the “vivid” – those still possessed of “life” (i.e., property, status, and privilege). That Lucy’s fellow passengers, the Watsons and Ginevra Fanshawe, are well above Lucy’s benighted station and, with the exception of the garrulous Ginevra, seem oblivious to Lucy’s very existence, further points up this significance for the ship’s name.

However, the full signifying power of these early textual elements does not manifest itself until the nun’s apparition makes its appearance toward the middle of the book. The words with which Brontë has Lucy preface that appearance anticipate this coalescence of meaning within the figure of the nun’s apparition. The furtive intrusion of the apparition into the garret nun’s abruptly startles Lucy as she enjoys the private fantasy space created by “the blithe, genial language” of Dr. John’s first letter to her, causing Lucy to ask, “Are there wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss? Are there evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man?” (Brontë 272, 273) In their most immediate and superficial sense, these two questions refer to the fact that the

intrusion of the nun's apparition signals an end to Lucy's enjoyment. Yet these two questions also allude to certain iconic images and prevailing stereotypes associated with that most famous of Victorian genteel working women, the governess. Given that Lucy was herself employed as a governess when she first came to Madame Beck's *pensionnat*, the first question's evocation of something "not human" that "env[ies] human bliss" may have recalled for Victorian readers the images of dejected, depersonalized governesses depicted in Richard Redgrave's painting *The Governess* (1844) and Rebecca Solomon's painting of the same name (1851). Although the subjects of these paintings hardly strike the viewer as frightening or sinister, the subtle mix of melancholy and longing that plays across their faces as they sit, draped in black (much like the nun's apparition), bearing witness to the happiness of the "living" around them, suggests pangs of envy at the "human bliss" that they themselves, by virtue of their station, will likely never know.

The second question concerning the existence of "evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man," then strengthens this connection between the nun's apparition and governesses by evoking the negative stereotype of governesses as women who, to recall Mary Maurice's words from Chapter 1, are "the first to lead and to initiate into sin, to suggest and carry on intrigue, and finally to be the instrument of destroying the peace of families." While the ghostly nun is of course an "evil influence" upon Lucy herself because it transforms her pleasure into fear and anxiety, it also represents an "evil influence" akin to the nefarious governesses in the stereotype that Maurice draws when one takes into account its true nature. Just as those governesses make themselves sources of corruption and domestic intrigue, the nun's apparition ultimately indicates the proliferation of scandal and vice within Madame Beck's respectable household insofar as

it is actually the disguise adopted by Count de Hamal to facilitate his trysts with one of Madame Beck's students.

Indeed, far from inhibiting the capacity of the nun's apparition to signify the Victorian discursive connection between ghosts and genteel working women, the revelation that the nun's apparition is actually a living, breathing human being in a costume only broadens it. In employing the technique of the supernatural explained in the case of the nun's apparition, Brontë strips that figure of its ghastly power to terrorize and unsettle – but only in a limited sense. The nun's apparition may not pose any real supernatural threat, yet, in dispelling the aura of the supernatural surrounding the figure, Brontë simultaneously underscores the irreducible interpretative value of reading the nun's apparition with that aura in mind. The textual elements noted above, along with Dr. John's faulty psychological interpretation, make it clear that the nun's apparition has a symbolic function relative to Lucy within the novel. And part of this symbolic function, as we have seen, manifests itself in terms of how that figure's ghostliness reflects Lucy's own condition within Victorian society. While that ghostliness appears to dissipate when exposed to the light of rational revelation, the meaningful insights into Lucy's character and situation derived from treating the nun's apparition as an actual ghost continue to haunt the text. In this way, the nun's apparition retains the liminal, "neither/nor, yet both" quality exhibited by ghosts and genteel working women alike. While the nun's apparition cannot be a genuine supernatural entity, the significance of reading it in those terms cannot be diminished.

As I have already noted, the apparitions in *The Turn of the Screw* also exhibit this condition, which one might call hermeneutic liminality. Yet James's apparitions possess

this quality for the exact opposite reason from Brontë's nun. That is, whereas the nun's apparition in *Villette* ironically becomes a hermeneutically liminal figure *because* Brontë strictly defines its ontological status, the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel become sites of hermeneutic liminality within the text precisely because James never makes such a move. Despite psychoanalytic critics' arguments to the contrary, the text never provides any indication one way or another as to whether the apparitions are actual ghosts, the figments of the governess-narrator's imagination, or (as some critics have suggested) living, breathing individuals in on some elaborate trick being perpetrated against the governess-narrator. They are instead, as Todorov has argued, figures that "sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e., even beyond the narrative itself" (43). Thus, like the nun's apparition in *Villette*, the apparitions at Bly exhibit an essential "in-between-ness" that enhances their function as mirrors of the governess-narrator's own desperately ambiguous position within Victorian society.

The root of this function, however, lies with the reading of the text that treats the apparitions as actual ghosts. As with *Villette*, such an approach has the virtue of highlighting the manner in which the ghostliness of the apparitions reflects the spectral liminality of the text's heroine due to her status as genteel working woman. And this spectral liminality serves in turn as the basis for the text's thematic preoccupation with the threat of boundary collapse – and, in particular, the collapse of those ideological boundaries responsible for the construction and maintenance of those identity categories most essential to the stability of mainstream Victorian society. This preoccupation manifests itself most immediately through the transgression of class and sexual boundaries represented by Peter Quint and Miss Jessel's presumed illicit relationship. A

good deal of what initially makes the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel so abhorrent to the governess-narrator (and, by extension, to James's late-Victorian readership), after all, stems from the conversation that Mrs. Grose and the governess-narrator have immediately following Miss Jessel's first appearance. In response to the governess-narrator's question of whether there was "something between" Peter Quint and her predecessor, Mrs. Grose replies, "There was everything." At first, this response acts as an acknowledgment of an intimate relationship in which the two shared "everything," including each other's bodies. Yet the response takes on a double meaning when read in relation to the subsequent exchange between Mrs. Grose and the governess-narrator, which concerns how this relationship existed "[i]n spite of the difference...of their rank, their condition" (James 58). At that point, the statement "there was everything [between them]" comes to signify the fact that Peter Quint and Miss Jessel carried on this relationship even though a host of boundaries aimed at interdicting such interclass intimacy existed "between them." The revelation of such a tremendous transgression against class boundaries leaves the governess-narrator so convinced of the apparitions' absolute perversity and evil intent toward the children that she despairs of her imagined role as their protectress, exclaiming, "I don't do it...I don't save or shield them! It's far worse than I dreamed. They're lost!" (James 59)

The theme of collapsing (class) boundaries also extends to this perceived threat that the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel pose to the "innocent little precious lives" of Miles and Flora (James 52). The governess-narrator views herself as "a screen" whose duty is to "stand before [the children]" and insulate them against those malevolent specters, whose presumed intentions – to "appear to [the children]" and thereby "possess"

them are rife with connotations of child sexual predation and moral corruption (James 53, 50). I discuss how this theme of child endangerment, with its undertones of pedophilia and perversion, engages with Victorian anxieties about the role of governesses in genteel children's intellectual, moral, and sexual development in the conclusion. For now, I simply wish to point out how much of the suspense in James's novella depends on the question of whether the apparitions will be able succeed in their "deep design...to shorten the distance and overcome the obstacle" posed by the various boundaries and barriers, both literal and figurative, that stand in the way of their all-consuming desire to "appear" to the children (James 77). Throughout the novella, the apparitions appear only at some distance or behind some barrier. Peter Quint's first two appearances, for example, occur "high up, beyond the lawn at the very top of the tower," and "through the glass and across the room," while Miss Jessel's first two occur "on the other side of the Sea of Azof" (the pet name given by the governess-narrator and the children to the pond on the grounds at Bly) and with her standing far below the governess-narrator, at the bottom of the manor house's long main staircase (itself a signifier of class boundaries through the Victorian juxtaposition of "upstairs" and "downstairs") (James 39, 44, 54, 70). These distances and barriers represent the boundaries that Quint and Miss Jessel allegedly began to transgress in "those dreadful days" prior to their deaths, and now wish to shatter entirely as they strive to close the gap between themselves and the children (James 76). This reading of the apparitions and their behavior in turn helps to satisfy the question of timing that haunts the text. That is, why do the apparitions of Quint and Miss Jessel seem to begin their efforts "to keep up the work of demons" only after the governess-narrator arrives at Bly (James 76)? The psychoanalytic reading of the text, of course, explain this

coincidence by interpreting the apparitions as the projections of the governess-narrator's hysterical psyche; the resumption of their demonic "work" coincides with the governess-narrator's arrival because, in a manner of speaking, they *are* the governess-narrator. And there is a certain sense in which this response to the question of timing is correct even if one reads the text literally and regards the apparitions as actual ghosts. For, while the apparitions are not, according to that reading, psychological projections of the governess-narrator's psyche, they do act as allegorical projections of the Victorian cultural psyche. As sinister visitants from beyond the grave, the apparitions of Quint and Miss Jessel deliberately pose the same threat to ideological boundaries that governesses, as socially (un)dead, spectrally liminal figures within Victorian society, unwittingly posed throughout the period. Like the ghostly hunting party from "At Chrighton Abbey" in Chapter 1, Quint and Miss Jessel make their ghastly (re)appearance within the text following the arrival of a governess precisely because, as ghosts, they act as metaphors for the destabilizing effect that the governess-narrator's ghostly liminality has upon social and domestic order.

The governess-narrator's first encounter with one of the apparitions, after all, occurs as she contemplates her present status at Bly and fantasizes about what an excellent showing with the children might allow it to become in the future. Out walking beneath the "flushed sky" at dusk (itself a token of the liminal), the governess-narrator thinks to herself how, if she is to succeed in preparing the children for what the "rough future" will hold in store for them, she must keep everything in their lives "fenced about and ordered and arranged," much like the luxurious grounds of Bly itself. This image of genteel order amidst which the governess-narrator finds herself alone in the gloaming



then leads her to survey the grounds with “a sense of property” and consider how “by my discretion, my quiet good sense and high general propriety,” she could “giv[e] pleasure” to the gentleman in Harley Street (James 38). While this mention of “giving pleasure” to the Master immediately refers to the governess-narrator’s desire to do as his employee “what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me” during their initial interview, the accompanying “sense of property” hints at a deeper, grander desire residing in the governess-narrator’s heart: to have her “a remarkable young woman...publicly appear” to the Master, win his love, and thereby make her a woman “of property” through marriage (James 38, 39). This governess’s dream of upward social mobility through marriage (which, as we saw with in Chapter 1, became the stuff of nightmares in the Victorian popular imagination) then gives way to a further wish that “[s]ome one [i.e., the Master] would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve” of her, with his burgeoning affection for her revealing itself through the “the kind light...in his handsome face.” However, when the governess-narrator discovers “that my imagination, in a flash, turned real,” it is not the Master himself whom she sees, but the apparition of his dead valet dressed in the Master’s clothes (James 39).

The coincidence between the governess-narrator’s thoughts of the Master and Quint’s first appearance would seem to indicate a pervasive textual correspondence between these two figures (or, at the very least, between Quint and the governess-narrator’s sexual feelings toward the Master). Reading the text from a psychoanalytic perspective, for instance, this coincidence would seem to point to Quint’s function as a signifier of the governess-narrator’s “fear of male sexuality,” which rears its head when the sexually repressed governess-narrator’s “unacknowledged sexual impulses intrude

themselves into her idealized romantic fantasy of her employer” (Renner 178, 181). And there is a sense in which this reading is undoubtedly correct. Merely taking into consideration the phallic symbolism of the tower atop which the apparition first appears, along with Quint’s reputation as a “hound” who did “what he wished” with whomever he liked, it is not difficult to see how the apparition of Quint plays the role ascribed to it by psychoanalytic critics (James 58).

Yet, when one takes into consideration the apparition’s spectral nature along with the circumstances of its first appearance, there emerges another, equally plausible interpretation of the apparition as a signifier of the threat that the governess-narrator’s social liminality and dreams of upward social mobility would have posed to mainstream Victorian society. Decked out in the Master’s stolen clothes and standing imperiously atop a Puginesque “architectural absurdity” intended to make Bly look more ancient and venerable than it actually is, everything about Quint’s sinister appearance suggests the spectrality of performance, which confers upon the performer the ability to enter a liminal state in which s/he both is and is not what s/he appears to be (James 39).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this sense that Quint is performing a role – to wit, the part of a gentleman – is so strong that it causes the governess-narrator to describe him as “looking like an actor.” Only his absence of a hat and his perversely “handsome” features compromises his performance as a gentleman by betraying the fact that he is not only “like nobody,” but, socially speaking, *is* “nobody”(James 48). In this way, the apparition of Quint reflects the governess-narrator’s own imperfect performance in the role of respectable Victorian lady. For, while the governess-narrator may affect the clothes and manners of a lady, she is not quite one. Just as Quint’s hatlessness and ungentlemanly features undermine his

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<sup>19</sup> See my discussion of Judith Butler and the spectrality of identity performance in Chapter 1.

performance as a gentleman, the governess-narrator's performance as a lady is compromised by her engagement in the unladylike and singularly masculine behavior of working outside the home. (Hence the fact that the governess-narrator's ghostly double is male in this instance.) Her fantasy of being able to look upon Bly with a genuine "sense of property" then completes this parallel with Quint by recalling not only the presumptuousness with which Mrs. Grose says he lorded over Bly in the Master's absence, but also the "houndish" sexual deviance that seems to define Quint's character (James 49). The governess-narrator's secret desire to capture the fancy of the Master and become his wife would have brought to mind for many Victorian readers the stereotype of the predatory, sexually depraved "homewrecker governess" discussed in Chapter 1.

Nevertheless, the apparition of Miss Jessel remains, like the nun's apparition in *Villette*, the focal point for the text's metaphorical association between ghosts and genteel working women. Perhaps the most obvious instance of this association occurs in the previously mentioned scene in which the governess-narrator encounters the apparition of her predecessor seated at the bottom of the main staircase in the middle of the night. As I have already pointed out, the staircase represents the classic Victorian conceptualization of class divisions in terms of "upstairs" and "downstairs." Furthermore, the staircase is itself a liminal space; like a threshold, which is neither inside nor outside, the staircase is neither upstairs nor downstairs, but somewhere in between. The governess-narrator's encounter with this ghostly figure, this specter of the woman who once held the very same position that she now does, in this liminal space, calls attention to the governess-narrator's own precarious positioning between the separate spheres of "upstairs" and "downstairs." The apparition's "half-bowed" posture and "attitude of woe," combined

with her position on the lowermost step (closest to the “underworld” of downstairs), speak even more directly to the encounter’s significance in this respect. While these characteristics obviously represent the infamy that Miss Jessel brought upon herself in life through her indiscretions with Peter Quint, they also highlight the abject, seemingly hopeless state in which the Victorian governess generally found herself. Indeed, it is the recognition of this common plight that causes the figure at the bottom of the stairs to unsettle the governess-narrator so much more than the apparition of Quint, which she encountered on the stairs on a previous occasion. In the initial description of the encounter, James makes sure to have the governess-narrator specifically mention that she is “[l]ooking down...from the top,” as if to stress that the governess-narrator continues to feel a sense of accomplishment in her performance as a lady. The sight of the apparition at the bottom of the stairs, however, forces her to identify with Miss Jessel by imagining herself in the apparition’s place “below.” This thought, along with imagining “exactly what dreadful face she had to show” to anyone standing there with her at the bottom of the stairs, leave the governess-narrator uncertain “whether...I should have had the same nerve for going up that I had lately shown Quint” (James 70). On first approach, the phrase “exactly what dreadful face she had to show” seems to refer to be the governess-narrator’s acknowledgment that the face seen by someone down below would have belonged to Miss Jessel. Yet the thought of seeing the face from below elicits from the governess-narrator a disproportionate degree of terror, considering how much more demonstrably afraid she has been of Quint’s apparition thus far. Such an adverse response seems to speak to something deeper and more personal, perhaps a profound fear that if she were to stand at the bottom of the stairs, the face she would behold would not

be Miss Jessel's, but her own. In other words, the apparition at the bottom of the stairs serves as a grim reminder to the governess-narrator that, even without the added disgrace of an outright sex scandal, her position is in fact no different from Miss Jessel's.

James's return to this scene on the staircase later in the novella emphasize its importance in understanding what the apparition of Miss Jessel means in relation to the governess-narrator. Following the churchyard scene in which Miles declares his intention to have the Master "come down" to Bly and weigh in on the subject of Miles's return to school, the governess-narrator comes back to Bly in a morose state, convinced that the best thing to do in order to avoid the embarrassment of a visit from the Master is to take "cynical flight" and thereby "get off without a scene, without a word" (James 86, 87). The only issue with this plan is "the question of conveyance." Thus "[t]ormented, in the hall, with difficulties and obstacles," the governess-narrator states, "I remember sinking down at the foot of the staircase – suddenly collapsing there on the lowest step and then, with a revulsion, recalling that it was exactly where, more than a month before, in the darkness of the night and just so bowed with evil things, I had seen the spectre of the most horrible of women" (James 87). Several aspects of the narrative in this scene deserve note. First, with its occurrence on a boundary that is both physical and symbolic (the staircase), the governess-narrator's "collapsing there on the lowest step" recalls the theme of collapsing boundaries, which is itself an effect of the governess-narrator's presence within the text in the first. Secondly, the governess-narrator describes herself on the night of the staircase sighting as "bowed with evil things," a phrase that resonates with the original description of the apparition's body as "half-bowed" and thereby intensifies the link between the governess-narrator and the apparition of Miss Jessel.

Third, the “revulsion” that the governess-narrator reports experiencing bespeaks the different nature of the terror that the apparition of Miss Jessel inspires in her as a result of this link, of which the encounter on the staircase made the governess-narrator all too keenly aware. Specifically, the apparition of Miss Jessel fills the governess-narrator with abjection that she does not quite get with the apparition of Quint. Faced with the apparition of her predecessor, the governess-narrator confronts an externalized image of herself. But this image does not produce the mildly discomfiting shudder of the uncanny; instead, the governess-narrator experiences the “revulsion” incumbent to abjection, for she recognizes in the apparition of Miss Jessel all the things that her performance as a lady and her fantasy of becoming a woman of property reject. That is, the apparition of Miss Jessel confronts the governess-narrator with all the things – the governess’s social liminality, the anxiety-inducing question of the governess’s sexuality, the violence done to ideological boundaries by the governess’s resistance to class and gender definition – that make the governess-narrator herself such a fearful and an alarming presence within Victorian society.

The events both leading up to and immediately following this further scene on the staircase also bear scrutiny, for they, too, contain telling details attesting to the function of the apparition of Miss Jessel as a Gothic double through which James channels not only Victorian anxieties about governesses, but also the unease and self-suspicion that awareness of these anxieties instills in the governess-narrator herself.<sup>20</sup> First of all, it is worth noting that the churchyard conversation that precipitates the governess-narrator’s

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<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the double’s psychosocial significance with regard to governesses and other types of genteel working women, see my discussion of the uncanny in Chapter 1. For a closer examination of the double’s function in *Villette*, see DeLamotte 229-89. For an overview of the double’s function in *The Turn of the Screw*, see Losano.

resolution towards “cynical flight” takes place by “a low oblong table-like tomb” (James 85). Following Miles’s entrance into the church, the perturbed governess-narrator stays behind to “read into what our young friend had said to me the fullness of its meaning.” At this point, the governess-narrator takes a seat on the table-like gravestone, which she now tellingly refers to as “my tomb” (James 86). The inclusion of this possessive, along with the governess-narrator’s description of herself as “hovering” as she wanders amongst the other graves, evokes the classic image of the ghost haunting the churchyard and in turn points up the governess-narrator’s own spectrality (James 87). On one level, a visit from the Master unnerves the governess-narrator because it threatens to expose not only Miles’ expulsion from school, but also the governess-narrator’s efforts to conceal this fact from everyone including Miles himself. In that sense, the gravestone is the governess-narrator’s “tomb” because, since it has served as the setting for her recent conversation with Miles, it now marks the spot where her career at Bly was seemingly laid to rest. Yet, on another, deeper level, the grave signifies the tenuousness of the governess-narrator authority and status within the household by attesting to her mortification at the prospect of the Master being summoned to Bly. Although the Master, speaking of the management of Bly as it relates to the care and education of the children, may have commanded the governess-narrator “to take the whole thing over,” a visit from the Master would serve as a troubling reminder that she has no real authority or status, and is in truth a mere subordinate, a lowly servant of the Master, just the same as Mrs. Grose or any of the household’s other hired help (James 28). Plus, a meeting with the Master under such circumstances would bring the governess-narrator face-to-face with the fact that despite whatever fantasies she might entertain of “giving pleasure...to the

person to whose pressure I had yielded” (i.e., the Master) as more than just an employee, the gentleman in Harley Street will never see her as a lady of “good sense and general high propriety” whose admirable qualities recommend her as a romantic match (James 38). Instead, such a meeting would only serve to emphasize to the governess-narrator that her position as a genteel working woman rules out any possibility of the Master regarding her as a social equal, much less a viable marriage prospect.

The governess-narrator’s later encounter with Miss Jessel in the schoolroom, upon her return to Bly and after her flashback to the earlier encounter on the staircase, further accentuates this reading of the governess-narrator’s “tomb.” “Seated at my own table in the clear noonday light,” the governess-narrator recounts, “I saw a person whom, without my previous experience, I should have taken at the first blush for some housemaid” (James 88). The mention of the time of day as noon (a period that divides the day and is therefore neither morning nor afternoon) invokes the theme of boundaries and thresholds, thereby alerting the astute reader to the importance of liminality to the significance of this scene. Meanwhile, the phrase “my own table,” which resonates with the governess-narrator’s earlier description of the gravestone (“my tomb”) as “a low oblong *table-like* tomb,” then reasserts the governess-narrator’s own social “ghostliness” by reaffirming the previously established metaphorical link between her and the apparition of Miss Jessel (emphasis added). The anxieties about class and gender identity signified through this link then return to the fore with the governess-narrator’s mistaken identification of the apparition as a “housemaid,” which betokens the contested nature of the governess-narrator’s status as a lady. When afforded “rare relief from observation,” the apparition of the former governess, the Gothic double of the governess-narrator, lets



slip her mask of gentility, revealing that she is in reality no lady, but (like Quint, according to the governess-narrator's own description) a "base menial," a woman whose socioeconomic condition has worn away whatever polish, refinement, and restraint her genteel breeding may have provided her (James 62). In its place, the former governess (and, by extension, the governess-narrator) displays a debased wantonness, as suggested by the fact that she appears to have "applied herself to the considerable effort of a letter to her sweetheart." While the phrase "considerable effort" may refer to the difficulty that a poorly educated housemaid might have expressing herself in writing, it also connotes the kind of exertion ("considerable effort") applied during sexual intercourse or, to a lesser extent, masturbation. In this way, James calls to mind the sexual impropriety of not only Miss Jessel's unladylike dalliance with the "base menial" Peter Quint, but also, by extension, the equally unladylike salacious undertones of the governess-narrator's desire to "give pleasure" to the Master. Such a move on James's part in turn highlights how the text engages with the fact that the social liminality of governesses during the Victorian period carried with it far-reaching implications for the perception and representation of their sexuality. To recall the word that she uses to characterize her movement through the churchyard, the governess-narrator "hovers" indeterminately between the archetypes of lady and working girl (both in the literal and euphemistic senses) in terms of her gender identity. Appearing "at first blush" to be merely "some housemaid" because she commodifies her labor, the looming specter of her genteel background complicates this initial impression. As a consequence, there existed no single body of gender discourse through which the governess-narrator's sexuality can be defined, assessed, and positively distributed within the larger framework of mainstream

Victorian society. The possibility of that sexuality asserting or expressing itself thus became a source of great suspicion and terror within any home into which a woman like James's heroine-narrator entered. To invite her into one's home, as this scene in the schoolroom indicates, was to call forth some unfortunate's daughter from her "tomb" and permit one's hearth to be haunted by the spectral threat of her indeterminate gender and sexuality.

### **Specters of Desire**

Herein lies the value of examining the apparitions in *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* first in terms of their supernatural significances, and then in terms of the psychosexual ones revealed through the application of a psychoanalytic lens. As the preceding section demonstrates, the issues of sexuality and desire figure prominently in both *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw*. One need look no further than the fact that the apparition(s) in each text invariably appear(s) in moments when the text's heroine-narrator experiences powerful outpourings of sexually inflected emotion. A reading that focuses solely upon the significance of the apparitions as supernatural entities strains to provide a comprehensive account of this common textual feature. While such a reading helps us to understand what the apparitions signify socio-culturally in relation to the genteel working women narrating both texts, it does not fully explain the significance of the profound subjective connection that exists between those women and the apparitions that plague them. That is to say, the supernatural reading of the texts has the advantage of foregrounding the issue of the genteel working woman's social liminality, but it does

not provide the most in-depth analysis of the subjective effects that that condition has upon the women who experienced it.

For this reason, reading the spectral figures in *Villette* and *The Turn of the Screw* from a psychoanalytic perspective does have its advantages. In placing critical emphasis upon the issues of sanity, identity, and libidinal economy, the psychoanalytic approach also draws attention to the ways in which these texts use the spectral to engage with contemporary discursive concerns about the psychosexuality of governesses and other types of genteel working women. That is, building off the reading of the texts explored in the previous section, a psychoanalytic approach allows us to move on from the realm of the social-symbolic and explore how the apparitions, as signifiers of the genteel working woman's social liminality, in turn reflect not only mainstream Victorian society's concerns about the psychosexual implications of that liminality, but also the genteel working woman's own awareness of and anxiety about those concerns.

As I stated near the beginning of this chapter, the only Victorian text that rivals *The Turn of the Screw* in terms of the amount of critical attention paid to the heroine's psychological state is *Villette*. What critics of the former text often overlook, however, is that James's governess-narrator displays just as much hyper-vigilance as Lucy Snowe in terms of the amount of personal attention that she pays her own psychological state. As Sally Shuttleworth has pointed out, "Lucy, in analysis of her own history, draws on the construction of appropriate and 'insane' feminine behaviour to be found in mid-nineteenth-century psychological science" (229). Lucy monitors and reports on her mental processes with a striking degree of clinical detail. In particular, with her careful efforts to have Reason always check the outpouring of Feeling when she responds to Dr.

John's letters, Lucy displays an almost obsessive eye toward the monitoring and regulation of her libidinal economy. A telling instance of "the economic model of healthy regulation which underpinned mid-Victorian theories of social, psychological, and physiological functioning," Lucy's close attention to the give-and-take of Reason and Feeling in these instances attests to her own awareness of the anxieties surrounding the desires and the mental stability of genteel working women such as herself during the Victorian period (Shuttleworth 232). Unlike Mrs. Sweeny, the drunken, debauched, and ill-tempered Irish governess whom Lucy initially replaces at Madame Beck's *pensionnat*, Lucy aspires toward the cultivation of restraint, moderation, and sobriety as virtues that will permit her to avoid succumbing to the stereotype of the mad, libidinous governess whose excessive unbridled passions pose such a threat to Victorian domestic order. By stinting the liberality of Feeling, Reason "does right" and allows Lucy to conform her thoughts and actions to Victorian expectations of how a proper lady should behave (Brontë 282).

The chapter recounting Lucy's visit to a museum in Villette provides a compelling portrait of this pressure towards restraint and repression that Lucy experiences. Through the dreary tetraptych "La vie d'une femme" and the sensuous portrait of a Rubinesque Cleopatra, Lucy finds herself directly confronted with the classic Victorian binary of the Angel and the Whore.<sup>21</sup> The former painting, whose dutiful and virtuous subjects Lucy indeed terms "Angeles" (angels), depicts the very ideal celebrated in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (Brontë 225, 226). The women in the tetraptych exemplify not only the successful operation of Victorian gender ideology at various stages in a woman's life, but also the stultifying restraint imposed by

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<sup>21</sup> For an overview of this binary and its role in Victorian culture, see Auerbach.

that ideology's operation: the "cast down" eyes of the "Young Girl," the "plastered together" hands of the "Newlywed," the stooped posture of the "Young Mother" "hanging disconsolate" over her infant, and the black skin, evocative of oppression and servitude, exhibited by the mourning "Widow" (Brontë 225-26). Conversely, the Whore is (quite literally) embodied by the Cleopatra's corpulence, dishabille, and "wretched untidiness," which all indicate a level of licentiousness, excess, and disorderliness in stark contrast to the image of the prim, proper, and preternaturally phlegmatic Victorian lady, with her propensities for moderate appetite, perennially tactful dress, and the maintenance of clean, well-ordered household. Moreover, Lucy's use of economic language to describe the Cleopatra – her "commodity of bulk," "wealth of muscle," "affluence of flesh," "abundance of material," and sufficient strength "to do the work of two plain cooks" – attests to the Victorian tendency to associate with the image of the prostitute or fallen woman the conflicting qualities of aristocratic decadence and working-class dissolution (Brontë 223).<sup>22</sup> Lucy looks upon these possibilities between which she is positioned and finds neither tenable, let alone desirable, models for her own life. The "Cleopatra," although "very prettily painted," strikes Lucy as "on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap," while she finds the "insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities" in "La vie d'une femme" simply "too hideous" to contemplate for any extended period of time (Brontë 226). Yet, throughout most of the novel, she gives

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<sup>22</sup> The ascription of such contradictory qualities stems at least in part from the prostitute's frequent burlesquing of genteel style and mannerisms. As Hedgecock suggests, "the prostitute plays the masquerade, feigning economic independence, using her ostentatious apparel to suggest freedom from the working conditions of other women in her class...By performing the role she sees among upper class women, she constructs her own identity from the one assigned to her" (28). In other words, this "masquerade," similar to the one enacted by the governess-narrator in *The Turn of the Screw*, constitutes the prostitute's effort to pass herself off as a respectable woman of leisure and thereby elide the supposed physical and moral corruption incurred by her penury and her need to commodify her body.

in to the societal pressure to model herself publicly after the latter exemplar while eschewing the habits and manners of the former. Her internalization of the social anxieties about the feelings and desires of governesses and other types of genteel working women simply proves too strong to resist.

Viewed from a psychological or psychoanalytic perspective, then, the nun's apparition condenses the predicament of the museum scene into a single multivalent figure encompassing the novel's thematic divisions of Reason/Feeling, Realism/Romance, Repression/Desire. Brontë's Radcliffean "unmasking" of the nun's apparition may undermine Dr. John's purely psychological account of the figure as a hallucination, but, as with the supernatural significance of the nun's apparition, the effects of the initial interpretation continue to exercise an influence upon the act of reading nonetheless. Having become accustomed to thinking about the nun's apparition in terms of its psychological significance, the revelation of its true nature forces the reader to go back and reevaluate what the figure actually means on a textual level, as a literary symbol that Brontë deliberately chose as a means of representing some quality or aspect of Lucy's existence. The nun exists first and foremost as a figure of local legend, a bride of Christ who, like the character Agnes in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, is buried alive for yielding to desire and committing "some sin against her vow" (presumably, that of chastity) (Brontë 118).<sup>23</sup> In other words, the nun is identified with illicit desire and deviant femininity from the outset. The circumstances surrounding Lucy's encounters with the nun's apparition echo this origin and lay the foundation for the apparition's enduring significance as a token of Lucy's struggle to resist succumbing to the stereotype

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the subject of *Villette*'s relationship to *The Monk* and the theme of forbidden desire, see Weil.

of the mad, libidinous governess. Lucy's sightings of the nun's apparition, after all, occur invariably in moments of heightened sexual desire (typically, whenever she has occasion to contemplate her feelings for Dr. John), in the "dismal, perishing sepulchral garrett" where M. Paul sequestered her when he forced her to rehearse for his play (Brontë 277). This recurring setting of elevated passion in the midst of Gothic confinement thus underscores the apparition's role as a persistent symbol of the emotional and personality crises that Lucy, as a genteel working woman in Victorian society, confronts both externally and internally throughout most of the novel. On the one hand, the apparition represents to Lucy her own yearning to express her feelings and desires. The nun possesses a certain heroic allure by virtue of her willingness to embrace a life of passion and free expression in defiance of all social mandates and expectations. Yet, on the other hand, the apparition represents the cultural imperative to sublimate or otherwise repress those feelings and desires, as well as the consequent threat of punishment for failing to do so. As evinced by Lucy's decision to bury her letters to Dr. John in the same place where the nun was buried alive for her transgressions, the apparition signifies Victorian society's insistence that a woman must relinquish all desire for a life of passion and self-determination and become one of the "insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities" in "La vie d'une femme," lest she suffer the kind of punitive confinement ("live burial") that the madwoman and the prostitute experienced within the walls of the Victorian asylum (Brontë 226).

Lucy's eventual destruction of the nun's habit thus signifies her transcendence of not only the Victorian Angel/Whore binary, but also her social liminality and the state of psychological crisis that it engenders. Following her successful resistance of the junta's

attempt to “cure” her love for M. Paul by shipping her off to a convent, Lucy declares that “my nerves disdained hysteria” and “defied spectra.” In other words, she refuses to let herself be goaded by fears of madness and confinement or treated as some spectral presence in society. Consequently, when she returns from her triumph to discover the nun’s habit lying on her bed, she does not tremble, but feels herself restored to life: “all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt.” These words indicate Lucy’s self-actualization, her transformation from a mere specter into a living, breathing human being with agency and autonomy (“substance” and “force”) and the determination to act for herself (“as my instinct felt”) rather than according to any abstract ideal or in opposition to some one-dimensional stereotype. Lucy then consummates this transformation with a cathartic orgy of violence against the deflated phantom lying on her bed: “I tore her up – the incubus! I held her on high – the goblin! I shook her loose – the mystery! And down she fell – down all around me – down in shreds and fragments – and I trode upon her” (Brontë 519). With these triumphant words, Brontë signifies Lucy’s liberation from the hystericizing and spectralizing effects of the discourses according to which she has allowed herself to be defined throughout the novel. Having symbolically exercised the nun’s apparition, Lucy declares her intention to cease living in the shadow of that specter and no longer fear the consequences of yielding to desire.

*The Turn of the Screw*, however, lacks such a definitive statement of liberatory transcendence. In keeping with the trap-like nature that James himself ascribed to the text and the scenario it presents, James appears to offer his governess-narrator no escape from her social liminality or the psychological pressures that it produces (“Preface,” 185).



As previously noted, the governess-narrator proves just as obsessively concerned with the details of her mental life as Lucy in *Villette*. The text constitutes nothing if not a detailed record of that life's minutiae while at Bly. And the exacting nature of this record stems from the fact that, like Lucy, she has internalized Victorian society's anxiety about the discursively unchecked desires of socially liminal women such as governesses. Yet her consequent fear of unrestrained desire as a pathway to madness within herself does not manifest itself explicitly in the text; her "story *won't* tell" of such a thing "in any literal vulgar way" (James 25). Indeed, like the subject of the dead in the presence of Miles and Flora, that fear becomes for the governess a part of "the element of the unnamed and untouched" within the text (James 78). After all, the single convention of the Victorian ghost story that James fails to follow in *The Turn of the Screw* is the moment when the character who has had contact with the spirit world questions his/her sanity or doubts the testimony of his/her senses. The governess-narrator never acknowledges the slightest hint of personal incredulity, for such is her terror of succumbing to the governess stereotype that she dares not give voice to skepticism lest the implication of madness rear its ugly head. In this sense, the traditional Freudian reading of the text is correct: repression and madness are the key to the text. But it is not simply her own sexuality or desire that the governess-narrator represses; it is the very possibility of madness. All of the anxieties about her class and gender identity and the persistence of desire that emerge through her interactions with the apparitions of Quint and Miss Jessel must remain buried just beneath the surface of the text, latently expressing themselves through the very same details that also speak to the condition of her social liminality. And perhaps this is the reason why James's governess-narrator cannot find the same sort of liberation from fear,

anxiety, and the menace of the spectral that Lucy ultimately experiences. Her degree of repression surpasses Lucy's, encompassing not just her reluctance to acknowledge desire, but also her unwillingness to speak of madness.

## Conclusion

If anything, *The Turn of the Screw* teaches the student of literature the difficulty of arriving at conclusions. There is always some piece of unfinished business, some unexplored avenue, some unanswered question. And this study is no exception. As we saw briefly in chapter two, the governess-narrator's social liminality also creates anxiety about her relationship to the children in her care. The issue of how the novella textualizes this anxiety certainly deserves a closer, more detailed examination. Unfortunately, given the length constraints of a master's thesis, there is no more room to pursue this investigation here. A proper consideration of the issue would undoubtedly bring the present study closer to the minimum length of a doctoral dissertation.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to sketch out here in closing the shape that this further discussion might take. Chapter two dealt largely with the impact of Edmund Wilson's psychoanalytic reading upon criticism of *The Turn of the Screw*. But this impact has waned considerably over the past decade. Having realized that the critical paradigm of the Wilson-Heilman debate is an interpretive dead end, critics have begun to shift their focus away from the ontological status of the ghosts and ask, in the words of Ellis Hanson, "Why...is it the children who are thought to turn our screw?" (368) Many Victorian texts that incorporate the supernatural no longer have the same ability to terrify and repulse as they did when they were first published. *The Turn of the Screw*, on the other hand, continues to be unmatched for the "sheer terror" and "dreadfulness" that readers discover in it. The text overwhelms even the most jaded postmodern reader's defenses and instills the kind of fear and uneasiness that many have not experienced since childhood. And this enduring power to chill and unsettle seems to have something to do

with the fact that James makes children the target of whatever evil, supernatural or human, haunts the rooms, corridors, and grounds of Bly. As the text's frame narrative makes clear, the prospect of even one child, much less two, making contact "at so tender an age" with what Catherine Crowe famously termed the "night side of nature" constitutes a "turn of the screw," a heightening of the exquisite sadomasochistic enjoyment that readers or listeners inevitably derive from tales of terror and the supernatural (James 23). But why should this be the case? Why should we find the prospect of ghosts, real or imagined, interacting with children so delightfully unbearable and horrific?

The psychoanalytic approach to James's novella makes it clear that sexuality is a central concern within the text. But this concern extends beyond the bourgeois prudishness that supposedly causes the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel to manifest in the first place. As the psychoanalytic reading indicates, the text is also preoccupied with children's exposure to adult sexuality. The governess-narrator, according to the psychoanalytic reading, imagines that the apparitions wish to "appear to" Miles and Flora because, having hysterically rejected her own sexuality, she now wishes to protect the children from the supposedly corrupting influence of adult sexuality. Yet, in the midst of their own prudishness and implicit homophobia, psychoanalytic critics like Wilson have overlooked the text's preoccupation with more than just adult *heterosexuality*. The text also articulates Victorian anxieties about children's exposure to various forms of queer sexuality.

The application of queer theory to *The Turn of the Screw* over the past decade has breathed fresh life into criticism of the text. In fact, the application of queer theory to the

text is largely responsible for the formulation of the question that critics like Hanson have posed about the children's role in making James's novella such an enduringly chilling and unnerving text. Perhaps the most shockingly compelling observation to emerge from this new queer approach involves the intimations of pedophilia within the text. As countless queer critics have noted, the unnaturalness that the text ascribes to Quint's relationship with Miles seems to derive from more than just class incongruity. The cryptic yet scandalized manner in which Mrs. Grose describes their relationship, combined with the implicitly sexual nature of the words that Miles supposedly learned from Quint and subsequently got him expelled from school, points toward a pedophilic relationship that in turn has its counterpart in Flora's relationship with Miss Jessel. When read in this context, the concern with sexuality that critics since Wilson have found takes on a sinister new dimension, and the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel become something far worse than any Victorian literary ghost or hysterical delusion. Instead, *The Turn of the Screw* becomes a text in which the threat of the supernatural and the demonic is used to represent an array of contemporary fears about the social effects of queer (i.e., non-normative) forms of sexual behavior and identity ranging from pedophilia and homosexuality to working-class sexuality. Consequently, the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not manifestations of the governess-narrator's hysterical rejection of her own sexuality, but rather of mainstream Victorian society's rejection of all forms of sexuality that resisted inscription, definition, and regulation by the discourses of genteel sexuality and gender identity.

Furthermore, this rejection encompasses the problematic sexuality of the socially liminal governess-narrator as much as it does the polymorphous perversity of Peter Quint

or Miss Jessel's transgressions against both class boundaries and genteel sexual morality. The governess-narrator is herself queer insofar as her social liminality places her sexuality and desire beyond the pale. For this reason, she appears in the eyes of mainstream Victorian society to pose as much of a threat to the children as Quint and Miss Jessel ever did. Thus, as we have already seen, the ghosts of the children's former caretakers become the doubles of the governess-narrator and act as allegorical projections of the threat that she poses simply by existing and being present within the household. Yet, whereas chapter two located the nature of this threat in the danger that the governess's social liminality posed to the maintenance of class boundaries, it becomes much more than just that when we take the governess-narrator's relationship to the children into account. While this further threat certainly has its basis in Victorian anxieties about the collapse of class boundaries, it engages with the additional contemporary discourses of the cult of childhood and the degeneration crisis. The ghosts in the text then become expressions of contemporary fears that exposure to queer forms of identity – including, and perhaps especially, that of the socially liminal governess – would destroy childhood innocence, give rise to a generation of perverse deviants amongst the genteel classes, and bring about societal dissolution.

This function of the ghosts within the text helps to explain why *The Turn of the Screw* continues to perturb readers even today. Our views of children and childrearing still owe a great deal to the Victorians, with their institutionalization of the cult of childhood initiated by the Romantics. For the average reader today, the thought of anyone or anything threatening the innocence of a child is just as unbearable as it would have been to James's contemporary audience. As horror films such as *Poltergeist* and

*The Ring* indicate, the ghostly continues to be a powerful way of communicating the unspeakable horror and dread that the thought of such a threat inspires. The ghostly, after all, elicits the same deep, visceral response as the pedophile and the willful corrupter of youth. Moreover, as I suggested in chapter one, the ghostly also enacts symbolically the very same kind of violence that such transgressive forms of identity and behavior inflict on a psychosocial level.

This latter quality of the ghostly also indicates a further avenue for study. If the otherworldly has the capacity to signify in the ways that I have argued here, then it would be interesting to examine how ghosts and other supernatural entities function within other Victorian texts. Such an examination would likely find the ghostly functioning not unlike it does in *The Turn of the Screw*, as a means of signifying and meditating upon the sociopolitically destabilizing effects produced by forms of class, gender, and sexual identity that conflicted with dominant Victorian ideology's conceptualization of what was normal, natural, proper, and even possible. For the ghostly, as we saw in chapter one, disrupts the narrative of dominant ideology by bringing us face-to-face with that which exceeds the limits of the reality inscribed by that narrative. What better way, then, to represent that which subverts or transgresses against the dominant? Such an explanation would certainly go a long way in accounting for the otherwise inexplicable popularity of the ghost story and other varieties of supernatural or fantastic fiction amongst a reading public that increasingly demanded realism in literature. The Victorians turned to *The Turn of the Screw* and its ilk not simply because they wished to escape from their reality, but because they wished to find ways of safely thinking about and dealing with the socio-cultural forces that threatened it.

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