

“If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw”: the performance of childhood in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at conducting a queer analysis of the representation of children in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and of their role in the story’s aesthetic effect, in order to suggest a new possible interpretation of the novella and to explore the theme of the performance of childhood. Following Carmen Dell’Aversano’s proposal for a method of queer hermeneutics for literary texts, the paper problematizes some aspects of childhood as a social category, as it is represented in James’s text; it focuses on the concept of innocence and its implications, by linking it to Michael Billig’s idea of repression as a discursive practice that is learned since childhood; and, through these considerations, it addresses a crucial critical issue of the novella – the protagonists’ ambiguous obsession with the ghosts’ influence on her pupils, so severe that it possibly leads one of them to his death.

KEYWORDS: queer literary criticism; Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*; performativity; queer child; repression

Figures of children are early introduced in *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James’s renowned novella, as an element of crucial importance for the narrative. The Prologue, which works as a frame for the main story, opens *in medias res* on a group of friends who have gathered “round the fire”, “in an old house”, to share “strange tales” – stories whose main feature is to be “gruesome” (JAMES 1908: 21-22), and which seem to be a tradition of Christmas Eve. In the very first sentence, one of the participants notices that the tale they have just heard is “the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child” (*ibid.*). Douglas, another member of the company, expands on that remark: “I quite agree – in regard to Griffin’s ghost, or whatever it was – that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it’s not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have been concerned with a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say of two children –?” (23). The presence of the title phrase, which appears only

twice in the novella, can be read as a hint at the importance of Douglas's statement for an interpretation of the text; indeed, the character is talking about the mechanics of the main story, which is itself a "strange tale" featuring children. In order to analyse the reasons behind the story's effect, it seems promising to explore questions such as: which features of children – and, more specifically, of the image of children and childhood that can be traced in the text – are so effective in a supernatural tale when paired with ghostly appearances, and why? In what ways does the presence of children give "another turn of the screw" to the effect of the story?

This article aims at investigating such issues by applying theoretical stances and interpretive tools developed by, or coherent with, queer theory, to the text. The methodological basis for my analysis is drawn from DELL'AVERSANO's proposal of a queer hermeneutics of the literary text (2011). Dell'Aversano notices that "many of the most important queer theorists, from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to contemporaries such as Lee Edelman, have started off as literature scholars and insightfully confronted themselves with several literary texts, both in and out of the canon", hence finding it surprising that "a general, theoretical stance on methods, perspectives, procedures and results of a queer hermeneutics of the literary text" (49¹) is still lacking. As a response, Dell'Aversano's article proposes a systematic queer hermeneutical model. Her preliminary definition of queer theory's scope and objects of study seems to me particularly productive because, while referring to foundational texts of queer theory (50) in a coherent way, it systematically reaffirms how it is possible to expand its horizons to *any* social category, including the ones that are not typically associated with the field:

Queer deals with problematising categories and deconstructing their performances; and the categories it focuses on the most are the ones that define social identity. It is evident that, among the categories that constitute social identities, those regarding sex and gender are notably important, but so are, for example, the ones concerning social class, citizenship, ability/disability, and species. And the innovating potential of queer theory is found in the possibility of generalising its approach to the point of questioning every identity and each of its representations, critiquing every form of normativity, and, ultimately, de-ontologising the social constructs on which any culture's functioning is based (50).

¹ All translations from the article are mine.

As regards the procedures, Dell'Aversano's hermeneutic proposal suggests that the queer reader first identify relevant categories in the literary text of interest, and then "analyse [...] how the category functions in systems such as language, society, and culture in its complex" (50), aiming at "deconstruct[ing] the implications and the consequences of the way they are modelled in common sense" (89). This analysis should then become the "premise for a queer interpretation of [the text] that, as such, will deconstruct the identity categories on which [its] actantial dynamics and plot development are based" (53).

Performativity necessarily holds a central place in the analysis, since it is through repeated acts that identities are created and established. Judith Butler, and, as Dell'Aversano maintains (57, footnote 10), queer theory in general, assume this "understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation" (BUTLER 1990: 185) as a premise: it is on this basis that Butler goes on to argue that "acts, gestures, enactments [which produce the illusion of an internal substance], generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (*ibid.*). An attention towards the links between social identities, the categories that constitute them, and the ways such categories are re-asserted and re-produced through individuals' performances, emerges from Dell'Aversano's article (57). In particular, the work refers to the tools of Membership Categorization Analysis, a methodology of sociological analysis created by the American linguist and sociologist, Harvey SACKS (1992). Sacks's methodology studies the ways in which social groups produce and organise common knowledge about their members, starting from the premise that they divide said members into categories. Moreover, according to Sacks, social groups posit, for each category, both some fixed characteristics and some actions the members *always do*, or *never do*: the most common examples would be the assumptions that men never wear skirts, and women are the ones who do the housework. Sacks calls the "compulsory" actions I have just mentioned "category-bound activities". Social knowledge works both in a descriptive and a prescriptive way, which means that such knowledge can be used to interpret the member's actions (e.g., "she is crying because women are emotional") and, vice versa, that people are expected to behave accordingly. The concept of category-bound activities is an interesting tool for the study of performativity, because it works

as a set of indications about the performances that members of any given category need to enact in order to construct themselves, and to be recognised, precisely as members. With these premises in mind, while selecting and analysing a social category, this paper will also take into consideration the category-bound activities that are eventually linked to it in the text, and the concrete actions through which they are performed.

In line with the broad scope of queer theory embraced by Dell'Aversano, my approach to *The Turn of the Screw* begins with isolating the social category of children as particularly relevant. On one hand, I deem my choice interesting for the internal mechanics of the text – after all, my analysis aspires to be a hermeneutical operation, aiming to read the text in a possibly new way. In fact, in his statement on the role of children in the story's effect, Douglas is already talking of children as if they were a social category. He is stating that the presence of *any* child has an effect on the story: although readers do not know much about the one in Griffin's tale, and have not yet met Miles and Flora, the young characters from the main narrative, they are most likely to understand what Douglas is talking about because he is referring to children as a social category – a group of people perceived as sharing a series of defining features, some of which, one can imagine, will contribute to the effect of the story. On the other hand, I also believe that a focus on childhood in *The Turn of the Screw* underlines issues that can be of general interest for queer theory and for the study of performativity.

In particular, one of the paper's aims is to suggest that a greatly relevant, and possibly underdeveloped, theme for the field may be the performativity of childhood. Since our perspective understands identities as "fantasies" construed by repeated acts and discourses, it may be productive to explore the ways people learn to take part in this process. The idea that individuals are constantly being shaped into (more or less) fit members of their society is inherent in FOUCAULT's notion of a process of subjectivation (1982), and in a number of anthropological approaches: e.g., it is counted as one possible declination of anthropo-poiesis, a concept developed by the Italian anthropologist Francesco REMOTTI (2013). Individuals are immersed in said process since birth; and, since the ability to enact believable performances is a fundamental skill for any member of society, one can conclude that they start to acquire it, too, during childhood. However, a queer understanding of the actual ways such a skill is acquired seems yet to be theorised. In other words, while performance constitutes a crucial point of reflection for

queer theory, surprisingly little attention is placed on the concrete practices through which performances take place, and the modalities in which children learn to perform.

Although it does not mention queer theory or Judith Butler's work, BILLIG 1999 does tackle the issue of discursive performances in childhood while proposing a re-reading of Freud's theory of repression. The monograph argues that repression does not happen on a totally unconscious level, but is achieved while talking, by managing conversations in socially approved ways and stirring away from certain topics. It also tackles the issue of how children learn to perform, e.g. describing the ways they observe, and interact with, their caregivers. For these reasons, I find it a convenient interpretive lens for the present work.

I deem it productive to focus on *The Turn of the Screw* as a literary case study for the issues I have so far discussed because its disquieting effect is largely produced by the protagonist's uncertainty on the status of the child characters, on a moral and, as I will argue, an ontological level. As Douglas's statement underlines, the novelette's peculiarity is its focus on said child characters, and whether they are under the influence of ghosts. The protagonist fears that such an influence has nefarious effects on her pupils and, significantly, her suspicions are often based on her pupils' behaviour. In fact, while the children usually act in their best conduct (in other words, they enact all the category-bound activities expected from children, especially their own innocence, a crucial feature I will focus on), concerns grow that they might be hiding something from adults, and the final dialogues overthrow the initial image of children as essentially innocent creatures. This paper explores these contradictions on the children's part, and their connection with the hermeneutical issue of the novelette's ghosts, by reading them in light of the queer concepts and methodology delineated in the present paragraph. While providing a possibly new interpretation of the text, the analysis should give space to a reflection on how children are modelised by societies, and how the idea that they, at their young age, might already be performing their identity remains to date out of focus.

1. CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE AS A DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

1.1 INNOCENCE IN THE PROTAGONIST'S EYES

In line with Dell'Aversano's methodology, my inquiry on the category of children in *The Turn of the Screw* begins with an analysis of the child

characters' most significant traits as they emerge from the text. The novelette's protagonist is a "young, untried, nervous" (28) woman of twenty (26), "the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson" (*ibid.*). The novelette opens with her taking up a position as the governess of two wealthy orphans at Bly, an isolated country estate. The same character is said to be the first-person narrator of this main tale, written down decades later; the story is thus filtered through her perspective.

The first trait to gradually emerge from the narrator's descriptions of children is the soothing effect their presence exerts on the governess. The reasons for this effect are progressively outlined in the first chapters, and, as I will argue, they are linked to one of the most prominent features of children in the novelette – innocence. Upon arrival at Bly, the governess is positively impressed by Flora, the younger of her pupils, whom she describes as "the most beautiful child I had ever seen", "a creature too charming not to make it a great fortune to have to do with her" (30). The reasons for such a high praise are found shortly after, when the narrator affirms that "there could be no uneasiness in a connection with anything so beatific as the radiant image of my little girl" (*ibid.*): Flora's presence is soothing because it wards off all concerns. However, the description is immediately followed by a hint of anxiety, which sounds like an oxymoron: if Flora's presence takes away any "uneasiness", why does the governess add that "the vision of [her] angelic beauty had probably more than anything else to do with the restlessness that, before morning, made me several times rise and wander about my room to take in the whole picture and prospect" (*ibid.*)? The contradiction is left unexplained, but it can be read as a first appearance of the governess's anxiety towards children that I wish to explore.

The effect of the children's beauty is further explored when the governess meets her older pupil, Miles:

I felt, as he stood wistfully looking out for me before the door of the inn at which the coach had put him down, that I had seen him on the instant, without and within, in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his little sister. He was incredibly beautiful, and Mrs. Grose had put her finger on it: everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence. What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child—his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world

but love. It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence [...] (36-37)

Just as Flora's company cancels any uneasiness, Miles's presence "sweeps away [...] everything but a sort of tenderness for him". The children's beauty is effective against concerns because it does not leave any room for them. Significantly, the governess underlines how this mechanism also impacts the children's own awareness of the world around them: since they can only inspire affection, they must know no other feeling – hence Miles's "air of knowing nothing in the world but love". This sentence introduces a second feature of the governess's understanding of children: their lack of knowledge. The passage sums up her impression of Miles by mentioning his "sweetness of innocence", a crucial concept the governess often returns to throughout the text. Miles's innocence consists in his unconsciousness of everything except for love, which, in turn, is the reason behind his and Flora's beauty.

The passage also subtly renders the peculiarities of the governess's own way of perceiving reality.² The narrator uses two adjacent rhetoric figures to convey her first impressions of Miles: "I had seen him [...] in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his little sister". The first figure, "great glow of freshness", connects elements from two different sensory spheres, creating a regular synaesthesia; the following, "fragrance of purity", is a more complex expression that associates a concrete perception of the sense of smell with an abstract moral value, "purity". LAKOFF & JOHNSON (1980) identify this second figure as a cognitive metaphor, which establishes a link between a sensory datum and a field of experience that cannot be perceived directly through our senses, with the purpose of allowing a more immediate understanding of the latter. While a number of cognitive metaphors, such as "the passing of time", are lexicalised in everyday speech and cease to be marked, "fragrance of purity" is not a common expression, and thus emerges as relevant in the text. The immediate juxtaposition of a synaesthesia and a cognitive metaphor gives the impression that the second association works much in the same way as the first, suggesting that, in the governess's mind, Miles's personality can be immediately seen and

² This matter will be addressed at a greater extent in paragraph 2.

recognised through her senses, just like a scent or a glimmer of light. This process denotes an essentialist basis: it assumes that the abstract moral qualities at the core of a subject's identity (such as childhood) necessarily emerge in physical appearance, becoming so materially obvious that it is impossible not to notice them.

The governess returns to the children's supposed unawareness of the rest of the world in another descriptive passage, which specifies that, according to her, Miles is precisely lacking a notion of what is considered bad and negative:

We expect of a small child a scant one, but there was in this beautiful little boy something extraordinarily sensitive, yet extraordinarily happy, that, more than in any creature of his age I have seen, struck me as beginning anew each day. He had never for a second suffered. I took this as a direct disproof of his having really been chastised. If he had been wicked he would have "caught" it, and I should have caught it by the rebound—I should have found the trace. I found nothing at all, and he was therefore an angel. (43)

Not only has Miles never been faced with anything *bad* in his life, the governess is sure that he must never have been punished for having committed a bad action himself, either: if he had, he would have discovered that he, too, could be labelled as bad. This idea might also emerge from one of the governess's dialogues with Mrs. Grose, who is Bly's housekeeper and the protagonist's confidante. The older woman's statement, partly anticipated by the governess, that "a boy who never is [bad] is no boy for me" (35) can be linked with the assumption that boys sometimes do bad things unwittingly because they do not know the difference between good and bad actions yet; if they did, they may as well be considered grown-ups.

1.2 INNOCENCE, REPRESSION, AND PERFORMATIVITY

In the protagonist's mind, the children's lack of knowledge about good and evil is equated with innocence; together with Mrs. Grose, she actively takes measures to preserve it:

There were naturally things that in Flora's presence could pass between us only as prodigious and gratified looks, obscure and roundabout allusions. "And the little boy—does he look like her? Is he too so very remarkable?" One wouldn't flatter a child. "Oh, miss, *most* remarkable. If you think well of this

one!"—and she stood there with a plate in her hand, beaming at our companion, who looked from one of us to the other with placid heavenly eyes that contained nothing to check us.

"Yes; if I do—?"

"You *will* be carried away by the little gentleman!" (31)

The "thing" Flora should not be aware of is, of course, her and her brother's "remarkability", which, once again, consists in the large measure of innocence they apparently have in common. Children's innocence must be protected by hiding from them the fact that something different exists, and that not everyone in the world is in the same condition – as innocent as them. Significantly, these "hiding" measures, and the assumptions beneath them, are portrayed as being part of a sort of common knowledge shared between adults. The governess uses the adverb "naturally" to express the principle that some things must be communicated between adults only by "obscure and roundabout allusions" in the presence of a child; since Mrs. Grose follows the governess's policy, one can assume that she tacitly believes in the same principle.

Applying Harvey Sacks's concepts to these preliminary considerations on the recurring traits of children in the novelette's first chapters, innocence can be described as a feature that is *bound* to the social category of children in the same way category-bound activities are. In fact, as I have shown, the governess immediately recognises it in her wards, finds it reassuring, and uses it to describe them in a positive way; moreover, she deems it "natural" to preserve it. Mrs. Grose shares the same belief, at least to a certain extent, as is shown by her negative remarks on "a boy who never is bad" and her tacit agreement on how to communicate in front of Flora. This suggests it is a widespread belief among the adult characters of the story that innocence is a necessary quality of children.

Another early passage suggests that the opposite of innocence is possibly corruption. Quoting in full the dialogue in which Mrs. Grose comments on "a boy who never is bad", we find the governess reflecting on the "degree" to which children can be naughty:

"I take what you said to me at noon as a declaration that *you've* never known [Miles] to be bad."

She threw back her head; she had clearly, by this time, and very honestly, adopted an attitude. "Oh, never known him—I don't pretend *that!*"

I was upset again. “Then you *have* known him—?”

“Yes indeed, miss, thank God!”

On reflection I accepted this. “You mean that a boy who never is—?”

“Is no boy for *me!*”

I held her tighter. “You like them with the spirit to be naughty?” Then, keeping pace with her answer, “So do I!” I eagerly brought out. “But not to the degree to contaminate—”

“To contaminate?”—my big word left her at a loss. I explained it. “To corrupt.”

She stared, taking my meaning in; but it produced in her an odd laugh. “Are you afraid he’ll corrupt *you?*” She put the question with such a fine bold humor that, with a laugh, a little silly doubtless, to match her own, I gave way for the time to the apprehension of ridicule. (35)

While in a previous conversation the governess had traced a rather strict distinction between “good” and “bad” children, here she accepts Mrs. Grose’s idea that children can be “bad” at times. Nevertheless, she draws a difference between children who are “bad” in the sense of being “naughty”, and those who go as far as “corrupting” the others. In its usual meaning, corruption presupposes the presence of an originally pure nature of human beings,³ which is manifest in children and is probably the same condition of innocence the governess recognises in her pupils; in this view, corruption happens when the original condition of purity is subverted, in ways that the governess does not specify, but that are probably related to what she considers “evil”. A naughty boy does bad things without being aware of the notion of good and evil. Corrupted people, on the contrary, know what evil is and, through their bad actions, spread evilness in others. This implies, in turn, that people become corrupted because of somebody else’s influence, in a possibly perpetual cycle.

The text hints at the fact that, when her pupils start acting as if they were not innocent any more, the governess stops referring to them as “children”; a quote from one of the last chapters provides some sort of countercheck of the idea of innocence as a trait that is bound to the category of children. At this point, the governess believes that the ghosts and the children are plotting to hide from her the fact that they are in contact with each other.⁴ Thus, she is convinced that the children are lying to her about what they see:

³ This points, once again, at the governess’s essentialism, explored in paragraph 2.

⁴ The hermeneutical issue of the story’s ghosts and on the effect that, according to the Governess, they have on children, is further discussed in paragraph 3.

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[Mrs. Grose:] "How can you be sure [that a ghost appeared to you and Flora]?" This drew from me, in the state of my nerves, a flash of impatience. "Then ask Flora—*she's* sure!" But I had no sooner spoken than I caught myself up. "No, for God's sake, *don't!* She'll say she isn't—she'll lie!" (56)

Moreover, according to the governess, the ghosts are passing some unspecified "evil" burden to the children:

"Quint's and that woman's. They want to get to them."
Oh, how, at this, poor Mrs. Grose appeared to study them! "But for what?"
"For the love of all the evil that, in those dreadful days, the pair put into them. And to ply them with that evil still, to keep up the work of demons, is what brings the others back." (76)

In one of the final chapters, the governess affirms that when Flora is in contact with one of the ghosts, "she's not a child: she's an old, old woman" (99). Significantly, the things that Flora does while she is with Miss Jessel are the exact opposite of the traits of innocence delineated in the text so far: Flora acquires knowledge about the distinction between good and evil, with Miss Jessel teaching her bad things, and she *purposefully* does evil things, such as lying to the governess (while, as we have seen, innocent children who act 'bad' should do so unwittingly). In other words, when Flora no longer conforms to the traits of an innocent creature, the whole identity of her *as a child* ceases to exist. This re-asserts the importance of the feature of innocence in children's identity.

By adding Billig's ideas to the picture, one can consider the governess's and Mrs. Grose's "obscure and roundabout allusions" as examples of a wider policy that regulates the conversations about moral values in the presence of children. In the governess's case, this consists mostly in not involving children in discussions about matters deemed bad or inappropriate for them. In an attempt to rethink and better define loose ends in Freud's theory of repression and of the Oedipus complex, BILLIG 1999 notices that Freud viewed moral sense as set in place in the child "almost at a single go" (108), when the Oedipus complex took place and forced the boy to internalise the voice of the father, resulting in the creation of a super-ego. However, the essay argues, such an impromptu change is not a satisfactory explanation for the birth of morality in children: "Yet, as will be seen, matters are more complicated and more gradual. Even the pre-Oedipal child is a speaking

subject, constantly participating in conversations that convey, and themselves represent, a moral order” (*ibid.*). Freud’s concept of repression is also deemed lacking: it is connected to moral sense because it pushes away wishes that the super-ego would label as shameful, but it “does not explain how the child, or its newly created superego, is able to repress the shameful wishes, when the occasion demands. The skill just appears” (*ibid.*). To solve these contradictions, Billig suggests that children may internalise both their moral sense, and the mechanics of repression – which he views as an active skill – simply by observing how their caregivers put both into practice during everyday conversations. After quoting the work of developmental psychologists who have shown “how caretakers, especially mothers, routinely use moral concepts when talking to children from a very young age”, Billig notices that “[r]ight from the earliest conversations, [the child] should be hearing, and responding to, moral discourse. Often this morality will not be expressed directly. It will be contained within the practice of talk, for, as was argued in the previous chapter, conversation itself is bound by moral codes. [... The child] is being implicitly instructed in what should be said – and, most importantly, in what should not be said. In these instructions are the roots of repression” (79). Billig supports his theory with an analysis of several passages from Freud’s study on the case of Little Hans, a Viennese boy whose story was reported to the psychoanalyst by his father. Employing the tools of conversation analysis, Billig explores the parent-child conversations collected and analysed by Freud and finds evidence of how repression was happening during those talks, through devices such as small words and sudden changes of topic.

A similar process of repression seems to be happening in *The Turn of the Screw*. The episode in which Mrs. Grose and the governess communicate “by obscure and roundabout allusions” in front of Flora is only one of its instances – there are several more. Until the final chapters of the novelette, the governess never fully confronts the children with her suspicions about their relationship with the ghosts. She is convinced that the ghosts she sees belong to Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, who were part of Bly’s service personnel during their life; she also knows that they had formed a strong bond with the children back then. However, she never discusses this with her pupils until the very end, when she declares that she sees one of the ghosts at the very moment (chapters XIX and XXIV). While her concerns about talking to the children about supernatural entities are obvious, one

could problematise the fact that she never attempts to approach the matter sideways, asking them about Quint's and Jessels's time at Bly when they were still alive. In addition, the protagonist chooses to remove some topics from her conversations with the children even before the ghosts' apparitions begin. Miles's arrival is preceded by a letter from his boarding school, which "expresses [the school's] regret that it should be impossible to keep him" (54). The letter raises serious concerns in the governess, who concludes that "that can have but one meaning. [...] That he's an injury to the others" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, she then changes her mind upon meeting Miles, and concludes that the school staff must have made a mistake, because the boy looks to her perfectly innocent. At this point, with another questionable decision (which she will stick to until the last chapters), the governess communicates to Mrs. Grose her resolution of avoiding any mention to Miles's expulsion with the school's headmaster, with Miles himself, and with her employer, the children's uncle:

"[...] What will you say, then?" Mrs. Grose immediately added.
"In answer to the letter?" I had made up my mind. "Nothing."
"And to his uncle?"
I was incisive. "Nothing."
"And to the boy himself?"
I was wonderful. "Nothing." (37)

Repression is also put into practice on the part of Miles's boarding school, whose masters "go in no particulars" (34) about the reasons for his expulsion. At the very end of the novelette, when the governess finally discusses the matter with Miles, she discovers that he was expelled because he said things he should have left unspoken.

"What then did you do?"
He looked in vague pain all round the top of the room and drew his breath, two or three times over, as if with difficulty. He might have been standing at the bottom of the sea and raising his eyes to some faint green twilight. "Well—I said things."
"Only that?"
"They thought it was enough!"
"To turn you out for?"
Never, truly, had a person "turned out" shown so little to explain it as this little person! He appeared to weigh my question, but in a manner quite detached and almost helpless. "Well, I suppose I oughtn't." (118)

In other words, the reason for Miles's expulsion was that he had failed to perform repression while talking with his friends – that he had violated rules about the topics he should have repressed while talking. Billig underlines that caretakers do not openly explain to their wards what repression is and why it is important, they just put it into practice while interacting with the children and sanction them if they do not recognise and follow its rules. In alignment with this principle, the things Miles said were probably tacitly forbidden: since the boy can only “suppose” he ought not talk about them, one can imagine that the school-masters had never explicated the prohibition. Moreover, said rules are so strict that the headmaster continues to observe them in his letter to the boy's family. In fact, according to Miles, what he said was “too bad... to write home”:

“And these things came round—?”

“To the masters? Oh, yes!” he answered very simply. “But I didn't know they'd tell.”

“The masters? They didn't—they've never told. That's why I ask you.”

He turned to me again his little beautiful fevered face. “Yes, it was too bad.”

“Too bad?”

“What I suppose I sometimes said. To write home.” (119)

It is appalling that, after this last confession to the protagonist, Miles will never break the rules of repression again: after she asks him a crucial question, which would finally solve the mystery of his expulsion – “What *were* these things?” (119) – her impression of Peter Quint at the window overcomes her and, after a tense exchange between the governess and the boy, Miles's heart stops for reasons unknown.

If anything, Miles's expulsion must have definitively taught him the importance of practicing repression. While analysing the children's apparent innocence at the start of the novelette, one should take into consideration that they have been, and are still being, constantly exposed to repression practices. In fact, children are described as evading certain topics during conversation since the first chapters:

Both the children had a gentleness (it was their only fault, and it never made Miles a muff) that kept them—how shall I express it?—almost impersonal and certainly quite unpunishable. [...] I remember feeling with Miles in especial as if he had had, as it were, no history. [...] He never spoke of his school, never mentioned a

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comrade or a master; and I, for my part, was quite too much disgusted to allude to them. Of course I was under the spell, and the wonderful part is that, even at the time, I perfectly knew I was. (43).

The passage details how Miles and Flora systematically avoid talking about anything that might be classified as problematic and unspeakable – anything “bad”. The governess, after all, acts in the same way: “I, for my part, was quite too much disgusted to allude” to the uncomfortable topic of Miles’s expulsion.

Billig does not mention performativity, but he does describe conversation as a practice bound by moral codes: a repeated performance that takes place while speaking, with the aim of re-asserting a crucial identity trait such as moral integrity. Moreover, an important feature of the mechanics of repression is that it should conceal itself: when it becomes evident, it ceases to work and cannot be considered repression anymore. Repression has to create the illusion that its effects are natural, necessary, non-constructed switches of topics, instead of discursive practices; in the same way, in Butler’s analysis, “acts and gestures [...] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality” (BUTLER 1990: 185-186). Billig revisits, in a particularly poignant way, the performative nature of discourses that construct other parts of one’s identity than sexual orientation and gender.

An analysis of the portrayal of children in *The Turn of the Screw* highlights an important link between the concept of infantile innocence and the mechanics of repression. This broadens Billig’s perspective because it thematises repression as both the cause and the effect of the belief that children are, and must be, innocent beings. In fact, if repression pressures everybody to perform their moral integrity, children’s situation is complicated by the fact that they are construed as innocent. Coherently with queer’s de-essentialising impulse, one can affirm that this concept of innocence is lacking, because it does not explain how children learn to distinguish good and evil while growing up – how they acquire pieces of knowledge that, as innocent beings, they should not possess. Like the ability to repress in Billig’s critique of Freudian repression, “the skill just appears”. From a queer point of view, the way children introject a sense of morality must be more gradual, especially if one takes into consideration the idea that individuals become fit members of society through a

continuous learning process (see the introductory paragraph).

However, as the governess makes clear when she compares Flora to an “old, old woman”, innocence is modelised as a trait children should not lose; otherwise, they cease to be considered as children and are displaced outside the schemes of normality. This model attributes the responsibility of this transformation to an external, corrupting influence that is believed to have modified their nature: this way, the idea of an original, pure essence of the child is maintained. As a result, however, children are pressed to strike a difficult balance between avoiding any mention of bad things, in order to respect the mechanics of repression (doing otherwise can lead to negative outcomes such as Miles’s expulsion), and at the same time acting as if they did not even know how to distinguish the good things from the bad, in order to keep being considered innocent, and thus “normal”, children. Repression is at play in both these instances.

I previously suggested that innocence is a trait *bound* to the category of children in the same way category-bound activities are. At this point, it is possible to further develop this consideration and suggest that innocence is, in fact, a category-bound activity itself, because it needs to be discursively performed, instead of being a fixed trait. As a result, the very construct of children’s identity is called into question. Children stop being children when they lose their innocence, but innocence is unattainable as a fixed condition and can only be performed: this underlines the performative quality behind this model of children’s identity.

After all, in her early descriptions of the children, the governess often refers to theatre and acting, thus highlighting a constructed component in their behaviour and implicitly calling their spontaneity into question. For instance, early in the novella, a few lines before the first appearance of Miss Jessel’s ghost, the governess portrays their games as “a spectacle they seemed actively to prepare and that employed me as an active admirer” (54). As I explore in paragraph 4, these references are often found in the vicinity of ghostly appearances, creating a link between the two topics. In a passage I have quoted above, the narrator mysteriously states that she “was under the spell” (43) when she unproblematically accepted the children’s apparently flawless behaviour as natural and spontaneous. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the “spell” she mentions is to be attributed to the ghosts’ evil influence on children (see paragraph 3): they are the ones who subtract the children from their

original condition of purity. Since the ghosts' presence is the core of the story's effect as a "strange tale", I deem it productive to investigate the possible links between their figures and the depiction of childhood I have explored in this paragraph. Nevertheless, in order to discuss these links, the governess's perspective should be taken into further consideration, as it is the filter through which all the events of the story are narrated.

2. THE GOVERNESS'S PERSPECTIVE: AN ESSENTIALIST WORLDVIEW

As paragraph 1.1 anticipated, the governess's perspective is imbued with essentialism; the passage in which she reacts to the letter that announces Miles's expulsion from his boarding school allows a more in-depth analysis of the way she interprets the world around her. She discusses the letter with Mrs. Grose as follows:

"What does it mean? The child's dismissed his school." [...]

"They won't take him?"

"They absolutely decline."

At this she raised her eyes, which she had turned from me; I saw them fill with good tears. "What has he done?"

[The governess passes the letter to Mrs. Grose, so that she can find out for herself, but discovers that she cannot read.]

I winced at my mistake, which I attenuated as I could, and opened my letter again to repeat it to her; then, faltering in the act and folding it up once more, I put it back in my pocket. "Is he really *bad*?"

The tears were still in her eyes. "Do the gentlemen say so?"

"They go in no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him. That can have but one meaning. [...] That he's an injury to the others." (33-34)

Miles's expulsion is confusing for the protagonist, because it stands in contradiction against the angelic image of her pupils she has quickly formed. She has not met Miles yet at this point, but Mrs. Grose guarantees that he is just as "remarkable" as his sister, as paragraph 1.2 argued. Furthermore, when in the following chapter she finally gets to know the boy, she ends up deeming the school staff's decision unacceptable, and she keeps believing in her children's completely innocent status.

In any case, in the quoted passage, the governess is faced with a troublesome piece of news and must try and give a meaning to it. In this small moment of crisis, the inferential principles that rule her worldview emerge,

in an especially vivid way if compared with Mrs. Grose's reaction. The elder woman keeps it pragmatic by asking "What has he done?". With this question, she tries to establish a cause-effect relationship between concrete actions: the reason for Miles's expulsion must be that he has done something bad; the only thing left to understand is which action in particular. This concern about concrete facts is not shared by the governess: while she does not even attempt at guessing *what exactly* Miles has done, she immediately delves into a more abstract level of meaning. Her questions – "What does it mean?"; "Is he really *bad*?" – are less straightforward and have deeper implications. Even without knowing what exactly has caused Miles's expulsion, the governess uses this piece of information to ascribe him to a moral category, and in particular to the one of "bad" people – as if the elements she has were enough to do that. It is in this sense that, regardless of what has caused it, Miles's expulsion *means something* about the boy: it reveals his supposedly fixed "bad" moral status. The premise of this thought process is, of course, that moral categories such as "good" and "bad" exist; and that it is possible to decide which individuals belong to each category, even when one only knows them in an incomplete and superficial way – after all, at this point the governess has not even met Miles in person. The notion that someone's actions are necessarily linked to a supposedly fixed moral disposition, which is the cause of such actions and, at the same time, is retrospectively confirmed by them, is clearly an essentialist one.⁵

In Sacks's descriptive language, the governess's line of thought strikingly resembles a particular property of category-bound activities, called *hintability*.⁶ Sacks points out that category-bound activities are, among other elements, an example of what he calls "hintable-with objects": features of a given person which indicate, without explicitly stating it, that said person is a member of a certain category. One can take as an example the owners of luxury boats: people will assume them to be rich, without considering the possibility that they could just be middle-class people who spent everything on their boat, and who now earn money by renting it to tourists. Hintable-with objects are modelled as identity traits; hence, they

⁵ I had the idea of focussing on this essentialised notion of goodness and badness after reading Giulia Bigongiari's draft for her paper for the 2019 CIRQUE Conference, "Decostructing the performances of good and evil in fiction: a case study".

⁶ I thank Davide Burgio for suggesting that I use the concept of hintability in my analysis.

are perceived as stably and permanently belonging to their owner, and ruled by clear social codifications. As a consequence, when a hintable-with object comes up in a conversation, the owner’s social status is not deduced by other people through a gradual inferential process; on the contrary, fellow members of society automatically ascribe the object’s owner to the category the object hints to. In the case of the governess’s reaction to Miles’s expulsion, doing something sanctioned by the scholastic institution can be viewed as an activity bound to the category of bad people. The only logic deduction is therefore that Miles belongs to that category: he *is* bad and will *always* act bad. As in Sacks’s model, in the governess’s mind people belong to fixed categories, and as a result they cannot but accomplish the related category-bound activities.

The governess further develops this initial distinction between “good” and “bad” in the dialogue about “a boy who never is bad”, quoted and discussed in paragraph 1.2. Here, “on reflexion” (35), the protagonist’s system of beliefs starts opposing innocent children (who can be naughty but have no bad intentions) on the “good” side, and people who have been “corrupted” (and are thus inevitably drawn to act in a consciously evil way) on the “bad” side. The protagonist’s train of thought remains essentialist at its core: it postulates an originally pure nature that can be corrupted, and it assumes that, when their essence is subverted by evil forces, people have no choice but acting accordingly to their new condition – in this case, behaving in a bad way.

However, although immediate, the governess’s beliefs on Miles’s moral status change abruptly in the following chapter, when she meets the boy and concludes that he must be innocent. In paragraph 1.1 I analysed the passage that describes such encounter, discussing how the narrator’s rhetorical figures verbally rendered her essentialist beliefs. Once again, her sudden change of heart can be described in Sacks’s terms: upon his arrival, the protagonist recognises in Miles several traits that are incompatible with the category of bad/corrupted people; since people cannot belong to opposite categories at the same time, according to her belief system, she prefers to trust her own judgement instead of the headmaster’s, and re-ascribes him to the category of good/innocent children. Consequently, the contradiction between Miles’s expulsion and his angelic appearance is momentarily pushed aside, with the governess choosing to discard the headmaster’s letter as “grotesque” (37), and to never talk about it with the

children or their uncle. Nevertheless, this is not enough to solve the problem: while Miles and Flora keep acting perfectly good, the governess starts witnessing the appearances of ghosts. She then starts to dread that the ghosts' main objective is to corrupt her pupils, whom they are already in contact with; and that the children's apparent innocence is nothing but "a policy and a fraud" (76), inspired by the ghosts themselves, and set up to conceal the fact that the children have been already "pl[ied] with all the evil" (76) of those presences. As paragraph 3 argues, these elaborations are deeply influenced by her essentialism. Thus, to continue my study of the governess's worldview, it makes sense to spend a few words on the ghosts, analysing how she faces the problem they constitute through her set of beliefs.

3. THE PROBLEM WITH GHOSTS

In several critical works about the novella, the central question about the ghosts is whether they are actually operating in the story's universe, or they only exist in the governess's mind.⁷ In the first decades after the novella's publication, the second hypothesis had not been proposed yet, and most readers viewed the governess as a perfectly sane young woman who does whatever is necessary to save the children from the ghosts. Then, in the Thirties, Edmund Wilson published a psychoanalytical study of the novella which saw the governess as affected by neurosis: according to him, the ghosts were delusions made up by her insanity, and Miles's final death was her fault. This reading of the text has gained enormous success; Leon Edel, Henry James's biographer and one of his most influential critics, was among its supporters. While critical works have been polarised between these two options for decades, in recent years reader response critics and other scholars have suggested a third hypothesis, according to which it is impossible to determine whether the ghosts are "real" or otherwise; Todorov, for instance, shared his view.⁸

⁷ A compendium of critical works on the novella can be found in BEIDLER 2010.

⁸ Although the history of the novelette's reception is interesting in its own right, I find the whole debate surprising, and I have a feeling that, in some cases, the text's evidence about the reality status of the ghosts has not received the appropriate attention. For example, as Dell'Aversano pointed out to me, in Chapter IV the governess tells Mrs. Grose about the "extraordinary man" (46) whom she has seen twice inside the property. The description she provides is so detailed that the housekeeper is able to affirm that the man cannot be anybody but the ex-superintendent of the house, Peter Quint, who is dead. Since the governess did not even know about Quint's exis-

Whatever position one decides to support about the "reality" of the ghosts, I believe that a second hermeneutical question should be raised about their presence in the text: is it correct to sustain that the governess is right about them? When the governess details how the ghosts would want to "get hold" of the children and corrupt them, is it possible to determine if she really has understood their purpose correctly, or even to determine if they have any purpose at all?⁹ In fact, while the protagonist describes her encounters with the ghosts and details her intuitions about their intentions, she does not provide much factual information about what she has seen. In other words, readers can rely on a scant series of concrete facts, and then are offered the deductions through which the governess links them all together; deductions that are not supported with enough elements for the readers to determine whether they agree or not. As the novella unfolds, the governess develops a complex narrative about how the ghosts are actively working to corrupt the children and withdrawing them from their caretaker's influence; but the concrete evidence that supports her narrative remain extremely precarious.

Moreover, the ending scene raises crucial doubts about the validity of the governess's grasp on events and, ultimately, of her narrative. At least, it proves that the protagonist has not understood *everything*: her intuitions culminate in the resolution to push Miles to "confess" (110) his bad actions and his acquaintance with the ghosts, in order to free the boy from their influence; however, the result of her decision – Miles's death – cannot be considered positive, nor could the governess consciously aim at such an outcome. Furthermore, the ending leaves us with the doubt that Miles has died cursing the governess instead of Peter Quint, because the boy,

tence before Mrs. Grose identifies him in the figure she has seen, the only way to explain how she has been able to describe him so faithfully is to accept the supernatural encounter as true. Later in the novella, the governess herself recalls the episode and underlines how it is a proof that she has, in fact, seen an actual dead person: "I found that to keep [Mrs. Grose] thoroughly on the grip of this I had only to ask her how, if I had 'made it up', I came to be able to give, of each of the persons appearing to me, a picture disclosing, to the last detail, their special marks – a portrait on the exhibition of which she had instantly recognised and named them" (59-60). In his compendium of the text's interpretations, BEIDLER 2010 mentions some arguments which provide alternative explanations for this episode, but they seem extremely convoluted and not very compelling.⁹ My position on the subject is close to VAN PEER AND VAN DER KNAAP 1995. In their opinion, the hypothesis that the ghosts are real and the one that sees the governess as an unreliable narrator are not mutually exclusive, "because the two readings relate to different aspects of the work and its meaning, aspects that complement rather than exclude each other" (707).

immediately before his death, cries out “Peter Quint – you devil!” (120), and there is no way to determine whether he addresses Quint or the governess with his vocative.

The governess’s precarious way of making inferences can be observed in several passages. In Chapter VI, for example, she tells Mrs. Grose she has realised that Quint’s ghost could be “looking for” Miles; she describes how the idea came to her through what she calls a “portentous clearness”. However, Mrs. Grose holds a more pragmatic mindset (see paragraph 2), and clearly asks the protagonist: “how do you know?”. At which the governess offers the most tautological answer possible: “I know, I know, I know”, basically refusing to elaborate:

[Mrs. Grose]; “[The ghost of Peter Quint at the window] was looking for someone else, you say – someone who was not you?”

“He was looking for little Miles.” A portentous clearness now possessed me.

“*That’s* whom he was looking for.”

“But how do you know?”

“I know, I know, I know!” My exaltation grew. “And you know, my dear!”

She didn’t deny this, but I required, I felt, not even so much telling as that. (50)

A similar uncertainty on the validity of the governess’s deductions emerges from a relatively long excerpt of Chapter VII.¹⁰ In the previous chapter, the governess sees Miss Jessel’s ghost on the lake of Bly, while Flora, who is also present, candidly keeps playing. Immediately following this episode, Chapter VII consists of only a scene in which the governess elaborates to Mrs. Grose and herself that, in her opinion, Flora is able to see the ghost, even if she has not told anyone – thus suggesting that there is a secret, reciprocated relationship between the ghosts and the children – and that Miss Jessel’s goal is “to get hold of her”.

I got hold of Mrs. Grose as soon after [the ghost’s appearance] as I could; and I can give no intelligible account of how I fought out the interval. Yet I still hear myself cry as I fairly threw myself into her arms: “They [the children] *know**—it’s too monstrous: they know, they know!”

“And what on earth—?” I felt her incredulity as she held me.

¹⁰ In this passage only, I have marked the most relevant phrases for my argument in italics; to distinguish them from mine, I have signalled James’s original italics by adding an asterisk after the single word.

"Why all that *we** know—and heaven knows what more besides!" Then as she released me I made it out to her, made it out perhaps only now with full coherency even to myself. "Two hours ago, in the garden"—I could scarce articulate—"*Flora saw**!"

Mrs. Grose took it as she might have taken a blow in the stomach. "*She has told you?*" she panted.

"*Not a word—that's the horror. She kept it to herself!* The child of eight, *that** child!" Unutterable still for me was the stupefaction of it.

Mrs. Grose, of course, could only gape the wider. "*Then how do you know?*"

"I was there – *I saw it with my eyes: saw that she was perfectly aware.*"

"Do you mean aware of *him**?"

"No – of *her**." I was conscious as I spoke that I looked prodigious things, for I got the slow reflexion of them in my companion's face. "Another person—this time; but a figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful—with such an air also, and such a face!—on the other side of the lake. I was there with the child—quiet for the hour; and in the midst of it she came." [...] [...] "Was she some one you've never seen?"

"Yes. But some one the child has. Some one *you** have." Then to show how I had thought it all out: "My predecessor – the one who died.

"Miss Jessel?"

"Miss Jessel. You don't believe me?" I pressed.

She turned right and left in her distress. "*How can you be sure?*"

This drew from me, in the state of my nerves, a flash of impatience. "*Then ask Flora—she's* sure!*" But I had no sooner spoken than I caught myself up. "*No, for God's sake don't*! She'll say she isn't—she'll lie!*"

Mrs. Grose was not too bewildered instinctively to protest. "Ah how *can** you?"

"Because I'm clear. Flora doesn't want me to know."

"It's only then to spare you."

"No, no—there are depths, depths! The more I go over it, the more I see in it, and the more I see in it the more I fear. I don't know what I *don't** see—what I *don't** fear!" [...]

"[...] For the woman's a horror of horrors."

Mrs. Grose, at this, fixed her eyes a minute on the ground; then at last raising them, "*Tell me how you know,*" she said.

"Then you admit it's what she was?" I cried.

"*Tell me how you know,*" my friend simply repeated.

"*Know? By seeing her! By the way she looked.*"

"At you, do you mean—so wickedly?"

"Dear me, no—I could have borne that. She gave me never a glance. *She only fixed the child.*"

Mrs. Grose tried to see it. "Fixed her?"

"Ah, *with such awful eyes!*"

She stared at mine as if they might really have resembled them. “Do you mean of dislike?”

“God help us, no. Of something much worse.”

“Worse than dislike?”—this left her indeed at a loss.

“With a determination—indescribable. With a kind of fury of intention.”

I made her turn pale. “Intention?”

“To get hold of her.” Mrs. Grose—her eyes just lingering on mine—gave a shudder and walked to the window; and while she stood there looking out I completed my statement. “*That’s** what Flora knows.” (55-59)

As Mrs. Grose follows the governess’s train of thought, she does not accept it as true before asking questions. The protagonist’s answers continue to face the reader with the utter impossibility of verifying her findings. Usually, the most immediate way to conduct an intersubjective verification of someone’s ideas is conversation – asking other people involved in the events. In fact, that is the first solution to come to Mrs. Grose’s mind when the governess states that “Flora saw” Miss Jessel: “She has told you?”. However, the governess points out that talking with the children is not a viable option, thus disqualifying it as a means of intersubjective verification: “‘Then ask Flora—*she’s* sure!’ But I had no sooner spoken than I caught myself up. ‘No, for God’s sake *don’t!* She’ll say she isn’t—she’ll lie!’”.

As the protagonist explains to a doubting Mrs. Grose, her deductions are based instead on what she has *seen*. When, after hearing that the governess has not talked to Flora, Mrs. Grose asks her “Then how do you know?”, the protagonist simply answers: “I saw it with my eyes”. Later, when the conversation shifts to Miss Jessel, the same mechanics is repeated: the governess states that “the woman’s a horror of horrors”; Mrs. Grose says again “tell me how you know”; the governess guarantees: “Know? By seeing her! By the way she looked”.

The protagonist does not question her own intuitions, perhaps because she tends not to separate the moment in which she witnesses something from the act of giving a meaning to it through interpretation (see, again, the analysis of her cognitive metaphor in Paragraph 1.1). Moreover, her way of drawing conclusions subtracts them from intersubjective verifications. In fact, if the governess is the only one who sees the ghosts, Mrs. Grose cannot reach the position of sharing her beliefs: if she accepts them, it is through an act of faith, and readers are faced with the choice whether to do, or to refuse to do, the same.

The governess's narrative culminates in the conclusion that the ghosts have got the children involved in a make-believe game to deceive her. In the passage below, she articulates this idea in the presence of Mrs. Grose:

"The four, depend upon it, perpetually meet. [...] Oh yes, we may sit here and look at them, and they may show off to us there to their fill; but even while they pretend to be lost in their fairy-tale they're steeped in their vision of the dead restored to them. [...] Their more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness. It's a game;" I went on; "It's a policy and a fraud!"

[...]

"[Is this fraud] on the part of little darlings – ?"

"As yet mere lovely babies? Yes, mad as that seems!" The very act of bringing it out really helped me to trace it – follow it all up and piece it all together. "They haven't been good – they've only been absent. It has been easy to live with them because they're simply leading a life of their own. They're not mine – they're not ours. They're his and they're hers!"

"Quint's and that woman's?"

"Quint's and that woman's. They want to get to them." (76)

Paragraph 1.2 argues that Miles and Flora perform innocence through the discursive practice of repression, and that the governess does realise that her pupils' behaviour is not always spontaneous, since she compares it to theatrical actions. However, as the paragraph anticipates, the protagonist considers their behaviour as the result of a "spell": when, in this passage, she decides that the children's "goodness" is "a policy and a fraud", she explicates that said spell is, in her opinion, orchestrated by the ghosts.

If one takes her rigid essentialist world-view into consideration, however, this account of the children's behaviour seems a relatively comfortable solution to push aside the gnoseological problem that said behaviour might raise in the protagonist. In the governess's narration, the ghosts embody an external corrupting influence that is turning Miles and Flora into evil creatures. Thus, the idea of innocence as a natural condition is preserved, because children are depicted as being led away from their original state of purity for supernatural, overwhelming reasons, without having a say in the matter.¹¹ In turn, the governess's narration pushes

¹¹ The very way the narrator phrases her conclusions in the quoted passage is interesting. At first she states that when the children conceal something from her they are "simply living a life of their own"; however, she contradicts herself immediately after and affirms that, in her opinion, Miles's and Flora's lives are not *their own*, because they belong to "Quint and that woman". In

away the possibility that the children's behaviour may not be the necessary effect of an essentialised condition of purity, and may instead be construed by discursive practices, according to a way of handling identity traits such as innocence and morality that the governess herself presents to the children as valid. If taken into serious consideration, such a possibility would cast doubts on her whole worldview, undermining the existence of an essential identity of childhood – which she sees as the natural cause of the children's behaviour – and, if carried to the extreme, of identity in general; consequently, it would lead to the prospect that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause” (BUTLER 1990: 185-186).

4. THE EFFECT OF THE TEXT

This paper started with a quote of the crucial statement that “the child gives the effect another turn of the screw” when it comes to “strange tales”, and problematised the ways in which it does so. Going back to this first question, one should re-take into consideration the governess's contradictory statement that Miles and Flora “are simply living a life of their own [...] They're not mine, they're not ours. They're his and they're hers”. The passage expresses an anxiety about “who owns children” – who has the most effective influence on them; who gets to teach them the correct values, and ultimately determines the way they will grow up – that can recall the concept of reproductive futurism, proposed in EDELMAN 2004. In Edelman's opinion, the reason why our society shows considerable concerns about children (who are often made the centre of political propaganda, or “shielded” from lifestyles and values that are considered wrong by their caregivers) is that it recognises children as opportunities to perpetuate itself in the future. Children, Edelman argues, are seen as the vehicles to bring forward our culture and our social order, because they are supposed to interiorise it and learn to follow its rules. Consequently, “[t]he Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (10-11).

other words, according to her, if the ghosts did not exist Miles and Flora would not be capable of giving her the illusion that they are innocent without actually being so.

If children are under the influence of people outside their society, if they are taught alternative values, this represents a threat to culture as a whole. In *The Turn of the Screw*, Miles and Flora do not conform to the worldview of the governess and to the social knowledge which pertains to it; their elusive repression skills threaten to spark off a gnoseological crisis in the governess's beliefs, pointing at their faults and insufficiencies; by ultimately refusing to buy into these beliefs, the children turn down their task to bring them on in the future – an interruption of continuity that is vividly symbolised by Miles's death in the end. This feels even more tragic if one considers that it should be precisely the governess's job to "watch, teach, 'form'" (31) her pupils, since she is their designed caregiver.

The ghosts seem to work as a vehicle and a symbol for this rupture. Significantly, a similar storyline of a ghost that causes an interruption in social normality also appears in the first strange tale of the novella, Griffin's, summarised in a few words during the Prologue:

The case, I may mention, was that of an apparition in just such an old house as had gathered us for the occasion – an appearance, of a dreadful kind, to a little boy sleeping in the room with his mother and waking her up in the terror of it; waking her not to dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again, but to encounter also herself, before she had succeeded in doing so, the same sight that had shocked him. (22)

A relevant portion of this brief summary is dedicated to describe the actions that the little boy's mother is unable to accomplish because of the ghost: "dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again". These are the actions that we would expect from a mother in any normal circumstance – her category-bound activities. In his lectures, Sacks offers an example of category-bound activities that involve mothers and children: "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up" (SACKS 1992: 236). For a casualty, these are strikingly similar to the ones mentioned in Griffin's story. The appearance of the ghost prevents the relationship between mother and child to be carried on as it should be, thus breaking the course of normality as culture intends it. The connection between two generations, and the transmission of social knowledge that it implies, is interrupted.

In the governess's story, the mechanism is magnified and brought to its extreme consequences: as we have seen, her whole worldview is called into question. As the designated caregiver, she should pass it to her wards, but

the children themselves point at the insufficiency of her beliefs in doing so – the worldview that she should pass on to them is not even capable to give her a full understanding of what is going on in the children’s lives. If, on one hand, the ghosts allow the protagonist not to face radical doubts about her beliefs, they also work as a catalyst for such a crisis.

If the effect of a ghost story is to be “gruesome”, then, the novella uses the figures of ghosts and children to represent, through the eyes of the governess, the disquieting collapse of a whole system of beliefs, which is both put into question and threatened in its continuity.

5. CONCLUSION

Applying queer hermeneutical stances to the portrayal of children in *The Turn of the Screw* allows to identify the cultural assumptions it recalls, and their contradictions. In particular, a queer reading of the novelette can underline the connection between seemingly distant elements: on one hand, classic essentialist concepts such as innocence and corruption; on the other, a theory of repression that takes performativity into consideration, focusing on the repeated acts that constitute repression as a performative practice which aims at reaffirming the moral integrity of a subject. In fact, *The Turn of the Screw* represents childhood innocence as propped up on concealed practices of repression on the children’s part, at the cost of placing the children themselves in a difficult position.

Furthermore, this reading identifies a new possible interpretation for the figures of ghosts, who, narrated by the governess as embodying an external force of corruption, are instrumental in preserving her essentialist view of children, and of reality in general. At the same time, it highlights the precarity of said worldview, brought to the fore by the disastrous ending. Finally, the paper explores how these elements contribute to the disquieting effect of the text, in that they stage both a threat to an entire worldview and an anxiety for its social continuity, usually entrusted to children.

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