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The Turn of the Linguists: Text, Analysis, Interpretation

Michael Stubbs

> 'You should not pay too much attention to interpretations. The scripture is unalterable and the interpretations are often merely an expression of despair.' Franz Kafka. *The Trial*.

1. The turn of the screw

At the turn of the twentieth century, in 1898, Henry James published a short novel entitled *The Turn of the Screw*, and ever since it has been the turn of freudians, marxists, structuralists and others to publish often conflicting interpretations. Despite so much disagreement, I think we can agree on the following summary of the main plot.

> A rich London gentleman (anonymous) employs an inexperienced young woman (anonymous), as the governess of his nephew and niece, two orphans (Miles aged ten and his sister Flora aged eight). She travels to his large country house in Essex, and is immediately delighted by the two beautiful children. After some time, she starts to see apparitions. She cannot convince the housekeeper of what she sees, and sometimes questions her own sanity, but is herself convinced that they are the ghosts of the children's previous governess (Miss Jessel) and the London gentleman's valet (Mr Quint), who have both died under mysterious circumstances. She is further convinced that the ghosts have come back to earth to claim the children. She tries to save the children from this evil influence, but Flora becomes ill and Miles dies.

This main story is embedded in a frame story, and this contributes to much of the ambiguity of the whole book. I will come back to this shortly.

The characters are as follows. The employer is 'a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life' (p.11). He is described mainly in the frame story and does not appear in person in the main story. The governess is 'a fluttered, anxious girl' (p.11), 'young, untried, nervous' (p.13). Although she is aged only 20, and in her first job, she is put in charge of the household. The housekeeper, Mrs Grose, is 'below stairs only' (p.12) and illiterate (pp.20, 86). The two children have been orphaned due to the death of their parents in India, where the father was a military man (pp.11-12). The ex-valet of the employer, Quint, is now dead: he was 'a base menial' (pp.52, 54), who was unscrupulous in his relations with

young women: 'the fellow was a hound' (p.48). The ex-governess, Miss Jessel, is also dead: by implication she had an affair with Quint.

Structuralists may be struck by the gender stereotypes: a rich man of the world, a naive young woman, a solid middle-aged housekeeper, two precocious children, an unscrupulous cad, a fallen woman. These stereotypes form clear oppositions: respectable versus unrespectable, educated versus illiterate, not to mention alive versus dead! Marxists may be struck by the potent social mix of characters from different social and economic classes: the employer is a rich wordly city gentleman living in his town house; the employee is a poor naive country girl in charge of his country house. Linguists may be struck by the potential for miscommunication within this social mix: I will return to this point below.

I will use the following presentation conventions. 'Single quote marks' are used for terminology and/or quotes from other authors. "Double quote marks" are used for the meaning of a linguistic expression. Page references to *The Turn of the Screw* are to the Penguin Popular Classics (1994) edition. All examples, in single quotes or presented on separate lines, are from this text.

2. One text, many interpretations

Many readers around 1900 interpreted the book as a ghost story of a particularly horrific kind because it involves two young children. It contains conventional gothic elements: the first person narrator is a young woman in a large country house with towers and dark corridors, who admits she may be mad. Many readers around 2000 probably find the ghosts rather pathetic creatures. They certainly don't do much: they appear and stand outdoors briefly, on top of a tower and on the far side of a lake, or sit indoors looking rather unhappy, say nothing, and disappear again.

The governess never receives unequivocal confirmation that either the children or the housekeeper can see the ghosts, and much early criticism debated a question of 'quite startling naivety' (as Cook 1994: 228 puts it): whether the ghosts are merely imagined or not. Does the governess really (in the fictional universe) see ghosts? Or does she only imagine them? Are they created by her hyper-active imagination? Or is she the only person who can see them, because her hyper-sensitive nature gives her extra-sensory powers of perception? This all suggests a less naive question: whether this is less of an external action story about ghosts, and more of an internal psychological thriller about consciousness. As the governess says herself of one of her sightings of Quint: 'He was there or was not there: not there if I didn't see him' (p.33). And even some early criticism noted that this is 'no vulgar ghost story' but a 'picture of spiritual states' (review from 1898 cited by Esch & Warren 1999: 151). Subsequently, a large secondary

literature comments on the book from different theoretical standpoints, which variously emphasize what the author has put into the text (e.g. James' background and intentions), what is in the text itself and the text-type (e.g. a new kind of ghost story), or what readers take out of the text (given their theoretical assumptions).

In the rest of this article, I have drawn heavily on the following sources. The critical edition by Esch and Warren (1999) presents a selection of criticism from the 1890s to the 1990s. In addition, two substantial studies summarize and evaluate dozens of interpretations, which are themselves sometimes very repetitive: a long three-part article by Brooke-Rose (1976-77) and a doctoral dissertation by Parkinson (1991). Brooke-Rose is particularly critical of critics who select quotes which suit their argument (1976: 267), and who produce subjective interpretations disguised as erroneous paraphrases (1976: 270, 272). Parkinson (1991, ch. 5) also talks of interpretations which are 'breathtaking in their implausibility'.

Author-centred interpretations use information about James' life and/or statements in his notebooks as evidence of his authorial intentions. Theological interpretations emphasize the themes of good and evil, life after death, and the innocence or corruptness of young children (the governess is a poor parson's daughter, p.11). Freudian interpretations see the ghosts as a projection of the governess's obsession with her rich and handsome employer, who is socially out of her reach (though she does not repress this: she freely admits it to Mrs Grose: p.17). Marxist interpretations argue that the trouble arises from fundamental conflicts in the social order. Victorian morality forbids love between the social classes: between the governess and the 'master', but even more between a woman and a man of a lower social class, Jessel and Quint. Structuralist interpretations identify archetypal themes and oppositions: good and evil, life and death, natural and supernatural, villain and victim, and point out that we are often not sure which is which. More recent cognitive interpretations (e.g. Weber 1992, Cook 1994) use schema theory to identify prototypical expectations in readers: about naive young women, solid and sensible housekeepers, etc. There are few if any genuinely linguistic-stylistic analyses, but some language-oriented interpretations (Brooke-Rose 1976-77) point to the ambiguity of individual sentences in the text and of the text as a whole.

In addition, perhaps the psychological and sociological interpretations imply each other. Freudians argue that the governess is mentally abnormal. Marxists argue that this is a predictable and normal product of Victorian social class prejudice. The governess cracks under the institutional pressures: her crush on her employer, the two strange upper-class children, the older housekeeper (much more experienced, but her social and educational inferior), and her responsibility for a large household.

All these interpretations provide a clear demonstration of the plurality of the text and of changing fashions in literary criticism. Many earlier studies try to interpret the text correctly (e.g. are the ghosts real or mere figments of the governess's imagination?), whereas many later studies argue that there is no correct interpretation. For example, Brooke-Rose (1976-77) tries to explain how different techniques make the story inherently ambiguous. As Douglas says in the frame story: 'The story won't tell' (p.10).

3. The turn of the narratologists: the unreliable narrator

One explanation of the complexity of the story lies in the narrative structure. Henry James tells of an anonymous first person narrator who tells of a man called Douglas who tells of an anonymous woman who tells of her memory of events which happened twenty years earlier. The outside frame is a self-referring cliché: friends sitting round a fire in 'an old house' on Christmas eve tell 'strange tales' which have happened 'in just such an old house' (p.7). This is a common literary device: the ancient mariner tells his tale to a wedding guest; Marlow tells his tale to some friends on a boat. Further frames place a considerable distance (which includes the death of two main narrators) between the events at the country house and the version which we read. The governess first gave Douglas an oral account. Later she gave him a written version: this is what he reads to the company, a 'manuscript ... in old faded ink' (p.8). The anonymous first person narrator makes 'an exact transcript' (p.10) of this manuscript.

So, the story exists in different versions: what we read is a copy of a manuscript which has been written some 25 years before and 20 years after the events it recounts. If we assume that the ghost stories around the fire are approximately contemporaneous with the publishing of the novella (let's say around 1895), then the original events took place around 1850.

Around 1850 the governess (aged 20) takes up her post at the country house.

Around 1860 the governess gives an oral account to Douglas (who is aged around 20).

Around 1870 she writes down her account and gives a copy to Douglas.

Around 1895 Douglas reads this account to the company around the fire.

The anonymous narrator has copied this account, and this is what we read.

The governess has been dead for 20 years (p.8). Douglas is also now dead.

We cannot trust the anonymous first-person narrator. We know nothing of him or her: not even whether s/he is male or female. S/he admits to being unsure of Douglas's account: 'He seemed to say it was not so simple as that' (p.8). Nor can we trust Douglas. We know nothing of him either, though we do know that he could be deceived about the governess. He is biassed in her favour since, when he was a student, he found her 'clever and nice' and 'liked her extremely' (p.9). But she has been dead for twenty years and his main memory of her is over

thirty years back. When he knew her, Douglas viewed the governess as normal (she was his sister's governess), although (since he has heard her account) he knows that she thought she might be mad. In addition, he explicitly refuses to provide any precise interpretation of her story.

Nor can we trust the anonymous governess. She writes down her experiences, from her own restricted point of view, in a journal. The first words of her account are 'I remember' (p.14), but she admits that her memory may be faulty, in an account written some twenty years after the events. Of a sighting of Quint she says: 'how long was it? I can't speak to the purpose today of the duration of these things' (p.33). And she debates whether she is mad or whether the children are mad (pp.70, 98) or whether they are deliberately deceiving her (pp.69, 94). The narrative "I" is frequently followed by perception and speech act verbs. Just a few illustrative examples with their frequencies are:

- I felt 45; I know/knew 32; I remember 23; I thought 12; I suppose(d) 11;

  I believe(d) 6; I saw 31; I see 22; I had seen 13; I could see 9

The governess tries repeatedly, with little success, to get the housekeeper to confirm her sightings of the ghosts. In contrast to the unreliable young governess, the housekeeper is presented as a 'stout, simple, plain, clean, wholesome woman' (p.15), but she is uneducated and illiterate (pp.20, 86), and has problems understanding the governess's 'big words' (p.21). In addition, we only have the governess's word that the housekeeper is solid and sensible, but, since she is looking for a credible witness, she would say that, wouldn't she? So, we have another frame: only the governess tells us what other characters say.

Finally, since two of the main characters are anonymous, the listeners round the fire in the frame story cannot check the details of the governess's account. They cannot look up the employer in *Who's Who*, discover the address of his Essex estate, and pop round to interview the current gardener or the neighbours, to see if they remember their parents or grandparents telling them about strange goings-on up at the big house.

In summary: This is a story about different versions of a story, though we get only one version. There is no reliable centre from which to judge the truth of this version.

4. The turn of the structuralists: plots, parallels, intertext, conventions

A second explanation of the complexity of the story uses structuralist concepts. Structuralists pay particular attention to the literary object itself and to the general form of narratives. They search for general patterns in texts, in order to provide an explanation which is simpler and shorter than the original. One argument is that there is only a limited number of plots, which have all been

written, a closed system of basic story schemas which depend on conventional signs, such as the young fluttery girl, the handsome employer, the unreliable servant, the precocious infant (Parkinson 1991, ch. 5), and on archetypal plots and motifs, such as good versus evil, mad versus bad, natural versus supernatural, heroine (p.42) and villain, victim (p.39) and oppressor, fairies who carry off innocent children, unrequited love, the struggle with death, etc.

As Allen (2000: 96-97) puts it (rather cynically?), according to this way of analysing a text: An author takes themes and leitmotifs from the general literary and cultural system and re-arranges them in a unique text. A critic identifies these units in the unique text and places them back in the general system. A structuralist critic thinks that, if you do this, then you can arrive at a stable interpretation of the text and at a theory of interpretation. A post-structuralist critic thinks that you can't, and that there is an infinite regress of interpretations.

A strong convention in interpreting literary texts demands that we pay particular attention to parallels, on the assumption that they have semantic significance. Jakobson (1960) argues that these equivalences in the text itself, along the axis of combination, are what unify different parts of a text. In this text, critics have pointed out a series of parallels and reversals: between Douglas and Miles, and between the ex-governess (Miss Jessel) and the present governess (the main narrator). In the main story (told by the governess), the governess is aged 20 and Miles is 10. In the frame story (the part told by Douglas), the governess is 30 and Douglas is 20. So, Douglas is exactly the same age as Miles would have been (if he had not died). In the main story, the governess is in charge of Miles and his younger sister Flora. In the frame story, the governess was in charge of Douglas' younger sister. Therefore Miles (aged 10) is to the governess (aged 20) as Douglas (aged 20) is to the governess (aged 30).

There are further parallels between the governess, the master and Douglas. The governess (aged 20) has a crush on the older anonymous master. Douglas (aged 20) has a crush on the older governess (aged 30). And there are further parallels again between the governess and the ex-governess (Miss Jessel). The governess is in love with the master: this love is hopeless since he is of a higher social class. On one interpretation this ends in disaster: it leads to her hallucinations. The ex-governess has an affair with the master's valet: this is socially unacceptable since he is of a lower social class. This ends in disaster: they both die.

Then, as we have already seen, there are two parallel stories which it is impossible to entertain at once (Parkinson 1991, ch. 6). Is this a gothic story about evil children who are corrupted by supernatural forces? Or is it a psychological story about a good woman who is driven mad by social forces? Various formulations express the archetypal nature of the plot. The beautiful young heroine struggles with the dark forces of evil and death, but fails to save

two corrupted children from the clutches of the devil. The mad governess (witch, evil fairy) summons up the dark forces of evil and death, and drives two innocent children to destruction.

In emphasizing the literary object itself, structuralists also argue that literary texts do not refer to anything in the world, which is why Cook (1994: 228) condemns the 'startling naivety' of debating whether the ghosts exist. Texts refer to other texts within a literary and cultural system. Literary texts are referred to by name (*Udolpho, Amelia*, pp.28, 58). The governess is one of those fictional characters (like Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*) who is influenced by the gothic fiction she has read: she thinks there may be a mad relative locked up in the attic (p.28: she has been reading *Jane Eyre*). Text-types are referred to: the company tell ghost stories round the fire and discuss criteria for a horrific ghost story, and what we read is one of these ghost stories. There are different versions of the same(?) text: the governess's oral account to Douglas, her later written account, and the 'exact transcript' (p.10) of this document (a token of the same text) by the outside narrator. Different social dialects form part of the plot: the educated governess and the illiterate housekeeper have problems understanding each other. So, the novella draws attention to its own conventions, by referring to specific texts, text-types and varieties of language.

In the frame story (p.14), James plays with the strong convention that novels have titles:

What's your title?	[asks a lady in the company]
I haven't one.	[replies Douglas]
Oh, I have!	[says the first person narrator, without saying what it is]

The phrase 'the turn of the screw' occurs twice (pp.7, 111), referring to the horrific nature of ghost stories involving young children, but presumably also to the turns and twists of the interpretations (governess mad or not, etc).

And James plays with the strong expectation that a literary text has a beginning, a middle and an end. Douglas has already told the 'prologue' (p.10) which gives details of the governess's visit to the employer, so her own narrative starts 'at a point after it had [...] begun' (p.11). In addition, her narrative simply stops with Miles' death. There is no comment on this event, either from the author (James) or from the narrators in the opening frames. Labov (1972) proposed that a fully formed narrative of personal experience has the following structural elements (not necessarily in this sequence):

[1] Abstract:	what is the story about?
[2] Orientation:	who, what, where, when?
[3] Complicating action:	the ghosts!
[4] Evaluation:	what is the point?
[5] Result or resolution:	Miles dies.
[6] Coda:	there is none.

In this text, there is no abstract [1]. Douglas refuses to give one: 'the story won't tell'. Much of the orientation [2] (the governess applies for and accepts the job) is in the frame. So is much of the explicit evaluation [4]. Someone has told a story which was 'not particularly effective' (p.7). Douglas has a story to tell which nobody but he has ever heard: 'it's quite too horrible' (p.7).

The book simply stops abruptly, with no coda [6], leaving two points without comment. First, the book's last sentence recounts a death which is implausible to say the least: Do ten-year-old boys die of heart failure? Can you really be frightened to death? Second, it is implausible that the governess was able to continue with her profession of looking after young children, including Douglas's sister, despite the disasters in her previous job: one child becomes severely ill and the other dies. Surely there must have been an investigation? There is only apocryphal evidence of a desultory initial interrogation of the governess by the local police (which seems to have been abandoned without charges being brought) in the form of fragments of notes by the village policeman, Mr Plod:

Mr Plod. So, Miss, you were trying to prevent the young gentleman from seeing a Mr Quint, who had appeared at the window. But Mr Quint had died some time previously, you say? (Please remain calm, Madam: I'm just trying to establish the facts. Yes, I remember the case: we suspected a jealous husband, but could never prove it.) And the young gentleman just dropped dead in your arms. You admit that you were 'pressing him to you'. But not enough to suffocate him, or throttle him, for example? And there was no previous history of fainting? epileptic fits? heart problems? anything of that kind? ... And then there is the question of the young lady: what was she called? Blossom? Ah, Flora, I beg your pardon, Miss. She became ill and you sent her away, you say? When was this exactly?

The Governess. How can I retrace, even today, so shortly after these unnatural and unfortunate events, the strange steps of my obsession? It was at such junctures as these, that one felt, steeped in the preternatural vision, and with deepened but uncertain sensibility, the restless presence of a beast ready to spring.

Mr Plod. Such big words are not for me, Miss. But I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence, if we can understand it.

5. The turn of the linguists: semantic, pragmatic and social meaning

So, we have several interpretations of the story, some of which imply each other (such as the psychological and the sociological). But what is the story really about? (Goak here.) Well, freudians see psychological themes, marxists see social themes, and linguists see linguistic themes.

5.1. A pragmatic analysis: communication problems

One critic (Krieg 1988: 148) argues that 'the basis on which the story is built' is 'knowledge and its communication', and points to a cluster of themes around language, meaning, miscommunication and truth. We have already seen that the story is a self-referential story about stories. Its topics include texts, text-types and social dialects, and an unreliable, possibly mad, narrator. In addition, essential to the plot is a string of communication problems. The employer makes the strange requirement that the governess may not communicate with him in any way (p.13). The governess thinks the children may be deceiving and tricking her (pp.69, 94). The governess and the housekeeper sometimes communicate in 'obscure and roundabout allusions' (p.17); 'I don't understand you', says the housekeeper on one occasion (p.47).

There are problems with letters which variously bring disturbing news from home and are not read, not understood, written but not sent, forbidden to be sent, written and stolen. The employer receives a letter from Miles' school but does not read it (p.19). He forwards it to the governess who cannot understand it because crucial information is missing (p.20). The governess receives 'disturbing letters from home' (p.31). The children write letters to their uncle but the governess does not post them (p.76). She forbids the housekeeper to write to her employer (p.71): the illiterate housekeeper can in any case communicate with him only if the bailiff writes on her behalf (p.86). The governess writes to her employer but her letter is stolen by Miles (pp.91, 107, 117-18). Not to mention the whole question of communication between this world and the next: the governess is convinced that Miles and Flora 'perpetually meet' and communicate with the ghosts (pp.63, 68), but the ghosts never speak to her (e.g. p.59). And speaking to the children directly about the ghosts is 'beyond [her] strength' (p.71): she avoids such a 'subject of conversation' (p.72).

5.2. A stylistic analysis: surface linguistic features

A linguistic analysis is usually assumed to be based on a description of individual stylistic features which are identified and claimed to be significant, such as the frequent pattern of first person pronoun plus psychological verb which I illustrated briefly above. Brooke-Rose (1977: 541-48) points out, more generally, that terms of "supposition or certitude" are frequent. She gives examples of phrases such as

- I at once felt sure; I could have sworn; my absolute conviction; I absolutely believed; I took this as direct disproof; it was superceded by horrible proofs; it was not yet definitely proved; I felt an instant certainty; I had an absolute certainty; etc

Examples of semantically related words are:

- doubt, doubted, doubtless; true, truth, truly; lie, lies (e.g. 'his lies made up my truth', p.116); justified, justification; proof, prove, proved, proving; trust, trusted

The vocabulary in these semantic fields is an explicit signal of the theme of language and (mis)communication, though only a few individual words and phrases occur often enough to be prominent in frequency lists. For example, the lemmas KNOW and MEAN are frequent (158 and 51 occurrences in a short text of only 42,880 words):

- know 89, knew 37, known 15, knows 7, knowledge 6, knowing 4
- mean 42, meaning 6, meant 2, means 1

The word KNOW occurs in rather absurd dialogues, which imply that the governess doesn't know at all (e.g. p.39):

Governess:	He [Quint] was looking for little Miles.
Housekeeper:	But how do you know?
Governess:	I know, I know, I know. And you know, my dear.

And characters are constantly asking each other what they mean. The concordance shows the occurrences of *do you mean* in the text:

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e could only look at me harder. "Do you mean he's a stranger?" "Oh, very muc
 that she was perfectly aware." "Do you mean aware of HIM?" "No--of HER." I
By the way she looked." "At you, do you mean--so wickedly?" "Dear me, no--I
ght really have resembled them. "Do you mean of dislike?" "God help us, no.
her comparatively firm. "A talk! Do you mean she spoke?" "It came to that. I
he filled out my picture, gape. "Do you mean," she faltered, "--of the lost?
'll tell him." I measured this. "Do you mean you'll write--?" Remembering sh
 up at me from his pillow. "What do you mean by all the rest?" "Oh, you know
, it might already be too late. "Do you mean," I anxiously asked, "that they
 I could quite understand. "What do you mean by more time?" "Well, a day or
Goodness knows! Master Miles--" "Do you mean HE took it?" I gasped. She hung
; but what he finally said was: "Do you mean now--here?" "There couldn't be
into ice to challenge him. "Whom do you mean by `he'?" "Peter Quint--you dev
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The governess's constant search for meaning leads her to over(?)-interpret things and, again, to make rather absurd admissions and claims:

- I had restlessly read into the facts before us almost all the meaning they were to receive (my emphasis, p.41)
- I extracted a meaning from the boy's embarrassed back (my emphasis, p.113)

5.3. A semantic analysis: the propositional logic

Other aspects of the propositional logic of the text show why the story poses a riddle for which no definitive interpretation is possible, and why the reader is made to flip back and forwards, from one interpretation to another.

[a] The governess is the heroine. [b] The governess is the villain.

[c] The children are innocent. [d] The children are evil.

On the face of it, the following logical relations should hold: [a] and [b] cannot both be true: they seem logically contradictory. [c] and [d] cannot both be true: they seem logically contradictory. [a] and [c] can both be true: the good governess tries to save the innocent children. [b] and [c] can both be true: the hysterical governess destroys the innocent children. [a] and [d] can both be true: the good governess tries to save the children (who have been corrupted by Jessel and Quint). [b] and [d] cannot both be true: the story would not make sense.

But even this does not quite work: [a] and [b] are not completely incompatible: the governess tries to do good, but fails; she wants to be a heroine, but ends up as the villain. [c] and [d] are not completely incompatible: the children are presented as a mixture of innocence and calculation. [b] and [d] are not completely incompatible: the children are already partly under the influence of the ghosts, and the hysterical governess just makes things worse. As much criticism argues, everything is balanced with contradictory evidence, so that the ambiguities are simply not resolvable. Miles is charming: but he has been expelled from school for a reason we never discover. He is good, but oddly precocious, and can be bad (e.g. p.68). Flora is also charming, but can look like 'an old, old woman' (pp.96, 99), and can use foul language (pp.106-07). They are either little angels (to all appearances) or little devils (in reality): either innocent or corrupted by Quint.

Given two main propositions [a / b] and [c / d], which can vary independently, one sees why critics have been debating the story for a hundred years. And one simple point should be made: if the story wasn't ambiguous, it wouldn't be interesting. In addition, James implies in a 1908 preface to the novella (Esch & Warren eds 1999: 125) that it is all an elaborate literary joke, designed as 'an amusette to catch those not easily caught', a trap for the literary critic (Felman 1977 in Esch & Warren 1999: 211-12).

5.4. Semantic and pragmatic concepts

A restriction to surface stylistic features is inadequate on its own since textual interpretation depends on the interaction between linguistic and cultural knowledge. Linguists have traditionally based theories of meaning on concepts such as denotation and connotation, semantic and pragmatic meaning, and

linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge. These distinctions are essential, but, since inferences may be generated by commonsense knowledge, there is no clear dividing line between the dictionary and the encyclopedia, between linguistic and cultural knowledge, or between explaining the meaning of a word and a literary allusion (Halliday 2004: 21-22). Consider, for example, the connotations of *Udolpho* (p.28) and therefore of the kind of people who read such books.

[1] Denotation. Some propositions are asserted or logically entailed by the text, and cannot be denied without logical contradiction. For example, it is a logical entailment of the last sentence of the book that Miles dies: 'his little heart [...] had stopped' (p.121). Nevertheless, some critics seem to use the text as a jumping off point for pure speculation. There are certainly parallels between Miles and Douglas (see above section 4), but some critics (cited by Parkinson 1991, ch. 6) have suggested that they are the same person. If we hold this interpretation, we have to assume either that the last sentence of the book is not true or that Douglas himself is a ghost (who has changed his name)! This reading is sometimes related to a further extravagant interpretation (cited by Parkinson 1991, ch. 6), for which there is also no textual evidence, namely that the events at the country house never happened: it is all an allegory, invented by the governess, to indicate in a roundabout way her love for Douglas. In their search for ever more ingenious interpretations, some critics have interpreted statements in the text to mean their exact opposite. I am reminded of the point in Kafka's novel *The Trial*, where Josef K is discussing the parable *Before the Law* with the priest. The priest says: 'You should not pay too much attention to interpretations. The scripture is unalterable and the interpretations are often merely an expression of despair.'

[2] Connotation. The governess once refers to her father as 'eccentric' (p.72). This single word has been taken to imply that her father was mad, that madness runs in the family, and that this supports the view that the governess is mad. Admittedly, James changed this word in one edition to 'whimsical', perhaps to avoid this interpretation. (Parkinson 1991, ch. 6; Esch & Warren 1999: 92). More valid examples of connotation, and how they arise, involve the word 'respectable', which is itself a word commented on by a character in the frame story.

[3] Inference. In the frame story, someone picks up a reference to the ex-governess's respectability and asks (pp.12-13): 'what did the former governess die of? - of so much respectability'? One of the women also infers (p.10), that Douglas's way of talking about the governess implies that he had a crush on her. The text does not state explicitly that Jessel and Quint had an affair. But Miss Jessel leaves her job and dies (pp.22-23), implying that she is a fallen woman and that this was common knowledge(?). Perhaps she had to leave because she had become pregnant, and died due to an abortion or suicide. We are told that Quint

was probably a thief (p.37) and that he 'was a hound' (pp.48ff). He died on his way back from the pub on a winter's night. There was a wound to his head which 'might have been produced' by a fall on an icy slope (p.42). But did he fall or was he pushed? He had 'vices more than suspected' (p.42) and it is implied that he had also got other young women into trouble.

[4] Cultural frames. Inferences may depend on cultural assumptions: for example, assumptions about the sense in which a woman in the 1850s was expected to be respectable. The servants at the house (cook, groom, housemaid, dairywoman and gardener) are described as all 'thoroughly respectable' (p.12). This is the slightly old-fashioned sense of the word which the *Oxford English Dictionary* documents from the 1750s as "honest and decent in character [...] in spite of being in humble circumstances". Words make sense within cultural frames which change over time. The governess and the housekeeper discuss explicitly the theme of social rank: 'the place of a servant in the scale' (p.48). Mrs Grose is herself 'below stairs only' (p.12), and 'knew too well her place' (p.34), but she regards Quint as far below her, 'so dreadfully below', whereas Miss Jessel 'was a lady' (p.48). (Cf pp.52, 54: Quint was 'only a base menial'.) The text assumes a social world, rather alien to readers post-2000, in which people who are seen outdoors without a hat (this applies to both Quint and Jessel, pp.37, 93) may be assumed to be morally corrupt. So, a topic of the book, which is necessary for the plot, is inferences and the cultural frames which generate them.

[5] Factual knowledge. Finally, some inferences are only possible on the basis of specific factual knowledge. The governess has read a book about 'an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement' (p.28). The reader is presumably expected to recognise this as *Jane Eyre*, which was published in 1847. So, the story could take place around 1850 (which corresponds with the time sequence presented above).

In summary: Since inference and cultural knowledge may leave no observable traces in the surface of the text, there may be little for traditional linguistic stylistics to get its teeth into. At most perhaps there is the vocabulary in certain semantic fields (e.g. "certainty") which signals important themes. However, linguists have developed many ways of analysing how words relate to other words (e.g. sense and entailment), how words relate to the world (e.g. denotation and inference), and how words relate to speakers and their attitudes (e.g. connotation). These distinctions can help to systematize literary critical interpretations.

5.5. Four theories of meaning

We can take one final step in explaining how the different interpretations come about. Many critical interpretations of the story can be related to four models of

meaning, which are used by Harris (2004: 3-5) to discuss how language is used to talk about the past.

Models [1] and [2] have a very long history. In model [1], words refer to things in the world, which exist independently of us and our language. The purpose of the word 'ghost' is to refer to ghosts. (A 'startlingly naive' model, as Cook 1994 might say.) In model [2], words refer to ideas in the mind, and therefore to the world as we perceive it. Presumably many more people believed in ghosts in the mid-1800s than nowadays. Henry James himself attended séances, though seems to have been very sceptical (Esch & Warren eds 1999: 97). The difference between models [1] and [2] is relatively slight: words refer to things or to our concepts of things. Models [3] and [4], which I have tended towards in my discussion, are rather different. In model [3], the classic structuralist model, words acquire their meanings from their place in the linguistic system. For example, contrasts such as servant/master, or words such as 'respectable', or phrases such as 'below stairs' depend on the sociolinguistic system in use in the mid-19th century. This lexical network depends in turn on conventional social agreements within a community of speakers. But in model [4] it is emphasized that there is no stable system: speakers are constantly asking each other: What do you mean? One reason for miscommunication is social class divisions.

According to which model critics hold, they might ask (of the fictional universe): Model [1]: Do the ghosts really exist? What really happens? What is the truth? Model [2]: What does the governess think happens? What is going on in her mind? Model [3]: What is the social significance of the statements she makes (irrespective of their truth)? Model [4]: Is there any successful communication at all between the rich upper-class employer, the educated but inexperienced governess, the uneducated housekeeper, and the precocious children?

Harris (2004: 8) further summarizes these models and points out that: Model [1] relates words to the world (but language is not a faithful mirror of reality). Model [2] relates words to ideas (but language is not an adequate expression of thought). Model [3] relates words to each other (but the lexical system is not stable). Model [4] relates speakers to each other (but the language contract is not reliable).

6. Coda

Explicit theories of meaning can help to explain why so many interpretations have arisen, they can make central themes of the story more explicit, and they can make literary critical accounts more systematic. Both literary critics and linguists are interested in texts and their meanings, but it seems impossible to

persuade them to cooperate. This is regrettable for both parties. If literary critics have no systematic theories of meaning, then there is a major gap in literary theory. If linguists cannot explain how meanings are generated in literary texts, then there is a major gap in linguistic theory.

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