**Vision of Innocents**

**NB *This reading and defence was submitted in 2013 in response to previous syllabus. As the student understands the principles of reading and defence genres and is quite literate, she was awarded a VHA or A grade, which was confirmed by panel. It seems that third person point of view is now preferred for the reading as the audience is academic in new syllabus assessment objectives and ISMGs.* *The defence still requires a mixture of first and third person narration to the best of my knowledge.*** *See QCAA exemplar response, if unsure.*

I had been recommended Henry James’ ‘*The Turn of the Screw’* as a novel I would enjoy prior to this assessment and as such I was already reading it recreationally. I have a love of fantasy horror with strong heroines who are entrapped. A supernatural edge piques my interest immediately and before beginning the novel I was expecting a typical gothic horror. The plot of ‘*The Turn of the Screw’* revolves around a young governess sent to live with two beatific siblings, ten-year-old Miles and eight-year-old Flora, at a remote country estate; however, she quickly becomes aware of a malevolent presence which materialises in the form of a male spectre, later identified as Peter Quint, the valet, who was said to have been “*too free”* with young Miles. His ghost is followed by the apparition of his alleged former lover and the previous governess, Miss Jessel. James explores how easily innocence can be corrupted through the young governess’ battle for her unnaturally angelic pupils’ immortal souls. The governess elicited my sympathy and understanding. *She was in love* with the children’s uncle and though the governess’ adoration for her pupils’ uncle can explain her intimate affection with the children, and her conviction of their *“positive fragrance of purity”*, I believed that she was also bound by a sense of duty. I related to the governess through my own romanticised values of honour and love. I found myself siding with the governess as she faces a threat that no one but she can see. I understood the governess’ need to protect those around her from the misfortunes to which she is subject, particularly when she states “*I’d rather die than give you pain or do you wrong”* as I have my own commitment to shield others from harmful realities. As she tries desperately to protect the innocent, I could understand and personally justify her every action.

Though ‘Wilsonians’ state that the novel is primarily a psychological characterisation of the neurotic governess with the ghastly situation a manifestation of her psychosis, I find this interpretation unsatisfying and indefensible. The text itself does not support this claim, for if the claim is to be believed, the spectres are merely in the governess’ mind. How then, could the governess have known Miss Jessel and Quint’s features? She had never seen a portrait of either yet the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, after hearing her description of the first spectre “*blanched”*. The inconsistencies in the Wilsonian interpretation are also demonstrated by the governess’ surprise, both that Mrs. Grose knew Quint and that he was dead: *“Died?” I almost shrieked*.” Though the Wilsonian psychological reading can easily be justified by alluding to the text in general, it ignores many key plot elements, without which the story becomes incoherent. I therefore find myself an anti-Wilsonian who prefers a supernatural meaning that explores the nature of good and evil.

James places great importance on saving the children’s souls from the embodiment of evil – the ghosts. The governess’ determination to rescue Miles from those corrupting spirits appears to be part of a larger, eternal battle between good and evil, in which good should always triumph. James’ values and mine are aligned at this point – the governess is there to aide Miles in the rejection of the spectres. Though I hold this view, and believe the author does as well, others may interpret the governess as problematic rather than helpful. Her victory is a Pyrrhic one; at the moment of triumph, when she has saved Miles’ soul, “*his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped”*. While James may be willing to sacrifice a child for the greater good, I am not; nor, do I believe, was the governess.

Suggested short stories and novellas for the task:

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| Henry James*, “*The Turn of the Screw” Edgar Allen Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”Edgar Allen Poe*, “*The Fall of the House of Usher”W.W. Jacobs “The Monkey’s Paw” Theodore Sturgeon, “Yesterday Was Monday”Jerome Bixby, “It’s a Good Life” Daniel Keyes, “Flowers for Algernon”Franz Kafka, “The Cell”Stephen King, “Battleground” | Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”Ambrose Bierce, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery” H.H. Munro (“Saki”), “The Open Window”Frederick Marryat, “The Werewolf” Franz Kafka, “Metamorphosis” Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Hound of the Baskervilles” Tim Winton “ The Water Was Dark and It Went Forever Down”Ray Bradbury “ There Will Come Soft Rains” |

**Defence**

Literary theorists have investigated a plethora of approaches to construe meanings from text, each one focusing respectively upon the role of the reader, author or the text itself. Author-centred theorists asserted the authority of an *‘Author-God’* (Gallix, 2010) as sole creator of meaning. As literary theory evolved, the ‘Author-God’ came to be seen as unreliable; authorial intention was acknowledged as the ‘*intentional fallacy’* (Beardsley, 1946). The text-centred approach further debunked author-centred approaches to texts, positing that meaning exists in *‘the words on the page’*(Lye, 1996) so that all sophisticated readers derive a similar interpretation. Twentieth century reader-centred theorists further proposed that text was only ‘ink on paper’, asserting that meanings were culturally transferred between readers; the text’s meaning exists *‘only in the reader’s mind’* (Lye, 1996). The reader’s involvement with the text was vital.

Louise Rosenblatt posited that there are *‘two opposing modes of experiences of a text-the “efferent” and the “aesthetic”.’* When reading from the efferent position the reader is motivated only to acquire information. Alternately, aesthetic readers interpret the novel through unique personal experiences and individual engagement with the text(Rosenblatt, 1978). During my reading of *‘The Turn of the Screw’* by Henry James I found that, though I believed I took Louise Rosenblatt’s *“efferent”* approach, I actually read as a psychological reader, or as Rosenblatt described it, an *“aesthetic”* reader(Church, 1997), “*I found myself siding with the governess.”* Rosenblatt’s work in literary theory from the 1930s onwards was the generational instigator of a theoretical movement from which many prominent theorists launched their theories, including Stanley Fish and Norman Holland.

Stanley Fish created a phenomenological theory, based on the concept of ‘interpretive communities’ (Lang, 2012). Fish held the perspective that it is the reader who projects formal features identifiable in all times and places onto a text, much as I did when I stated, “*I was expecting a typical gothic horror”*. Fish’s theory *‘places the meaning solely within the arena of those receiving the text’*(Lang, 2012); however, this is not the individual, rather it is the group with whom the reader identifies. Fish’s reading strategy creates meaning as the reader *‘authors the text’* (Gulish, 2011) using clarifying strategies formed by their ‘interpretive community’. I employed this approach to problematise the Wilsonian viewpoint. I identified my own *“romanticised values of honour and love”* which I have adopted from culture and thus my interpretive community. Although Fish’s theory can be applied to describe my reading approach, I found his ideas constrictive. Interpretive communities do not address the idea that the reader can both bring and take away from the text; this theory posits that *‘the reader is only reading their preunderstanding back into the text’*(Lang, 2012). It is assumed that the text has no form of its own, only the form that the reader, channelling the interpretive community, gives to the text. I have found that as a reader, many of my values and beliefs are shaped by what I have read; therefore Fish’s theory does not quite satisfy my understanding of how I read the text.

As I continued to read, I employed Norman Holland’s psychological concept, *‘*identity theme’ (Holland, 1998). This theory focuses upon how each individual *‘construes it [the novel] differently’* due to his or her individual personality (Holland, 1998). According to Holland’s theory we actively interact with literature *‘so as to re-create our identities’*. This concept relates to Rosenblatt’s ‘transactional theory’ that suggests that the reader and the text continuously act and are acted upon by each other – that each of these acts is a unique experience for the reader(Rosenblatt, 1978), By personally relating to the governess I was using Rosenblatt’s 'transactional theory’ but ‘identity theme’ reaches beyond this; in Holland’s theory we completely re-create ourselves when we read and no matter the kind of literature we are interacting with, it will affect our personality in some way, *“I could understand and personally justify her every action.”*.

The key feature of identity theme is the reader’s understanding within a framework of defence, expectations, fantasies and transformations (DEFT). Defence addresses what societal influences the reader allows to affect their expectations of the novel and how they re-create themselves through these transactions with novel, in many ways this is similar to Fish’s ‘interpretive communities’. When addressing the ‘Wilsonian’ viewpoint I allowed societal influences to affect my opinion of an adequate plot ending, *“I…find myself an anti-Wilsonian who prefers a supernatural meaning.”* These expectations, in turn, characterize the reading of the literary work within the reader’s ‘horizons of expectations’. Both defence and expectation are enforced by the fantasies the reader projects upon the text, that is, what the individual includes of their personality within their understanding of the novel and its characters. I used my fantasies to relate the governess’ life to reoccurring patterns within my own life including *“my own commitment to shield others from harmful realities”*. Together defence, expectations and fantasies allow the work to be transformed to *‘have a meaning beyond time’*(Holland, 1998) thus allowing the reader to be changed by the text. DEFT places the reader’s understanding at a crossroads between human experience, internal and external influence and the ideologies of the person(Holland, 1998). These elements created, for me, a DEFT reading of the novel and in particular the governess with whom I *“found myself siding”*.

In the conclusion of my reading, I considered the invited meaning and the implied reader of *‘The Turn of the Screw’*. I was inclined to accept the supernatural elements of the novel at face value and found myself sympathizing with the governess’ plight as she stood against the evil that the spectres presented. I also noted that more experienced readers who have looked into Freudian analysis tend towards the Wilsonian stance, making them sceptical of the governess’ actions. The author has made the novel purposefully ambiguous, making it difficult to elicit a single ‘invited meaning’. I did not find myself to be, what Iser describes, as the ‘implied reader’(Queensland Studies Authority, 2011) whose ideologies align with those of the novel. While I agreed with the ideologies of the governess, the ideologies of James as the ‘implied author’ were rather different from my own. Although I agreed that good should always triumph, sometimes at a cost, I am not *“willing to sacrifice a child for the greater good.”* James appears to believe that good should succeed no matter the personal toll and I disagreed with this concept. I thus found myself not to be the ‘implied reader’ as I disagreed with the sentiments presented by the ‘implied author’.

In conclusion, whilst Fish’s ‘interpretive communities’ partially conveyed how I read *‘The Turn of The Screw’,* I actually took a more psychological approach, which relied heavily upon Norman Holland’s ‘identity theme’ to construct meaning.

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