Although *The Turn of the Screw* appears to be an inexhaustible source of critical controversy, looking at the majority of evidence we see that Henry James was interested in the supernatural and was given an opportunity to express his curiosity. Psychoanalytic critics have pulled valid points and a unique reading of this novel, however, when looking at the time and place in which James published this, interpretations from his contemporaries, and interpretations of those today we find evidence that the story is bringing in a scary but widely discussed topic for the time. By looking at articles, criticisms, books, the novel itself, and modern day interpretations (plays, movies etc) we will discuss evidence to support the ghost story theory.

**Information on James: the beginning**

Henry James was given an opportunity to publish a story for *Collier’s Magazine*. It was to be a ghost story and come out in small sections at a time. Before looking at some personal background of James and what he claimed about the story, there is a key element that helps unravel the truth between this supernatural reading and some of James’s intentions: T. Griffiths’ painting “The Haunted House.” We might potentially suggest that this eerie picture did not influence James because there is no proof he actually saw it, however the time and place of publication does not leave much room for debate. According to Robert Lee Wolff’s article, “The Genesis of *The Turn of the Screw,*” Griffiths’ picture was first published in the 1891 Christmas addition of the
magazine *Black and White*\(^2\). This is pertinent because Henry James’s story “Sir Edmund Orme” was first published in the same edition of this magazine. Consequently it is near impossible to believe James did not see this. Wolff’s article includes a footnote stating that complete files of this magazine can be found in the Library of Congress and at the Yale University Library.

James wrote a letter to F. W. H. Myers claiming that “*The Turn of the Screw* is a very mechanical matter, I honestly think—an inferior, a merely pictorial, subject and rather a shameless pot-boiler.” N. Fagin referenced this, among numerous other sources, but actually accessing the letter was not a success. By using the word “potboiler,” James insinuates that his work was subordinate to the fact that he wrote it for the money. Although this evidence is inconclusive, we can assume that James did not put in the extra effort to make *Turn of the Screw* more than simply a ghost story. And if he did have something more in mind, then he would have been intentionally contradicting himself.

In Martha Banta’s book *Henry James and the Occult*, she discusses James enthusiasm for the supernatural. “Between 1881 and 1898 James was exposed to the excitements and controversies stirred up by the Society for Psychical Research. He found new ways of viewing, and expressing, what he had intuited almost from the first about the special nature of psychic sensitivity” (Banta, 7). Banta continues this section by saying that James had two decades of invested time and says he has had enough exposure to the psychical world to express his beliefs through literature. Throughout her book, we can see the connections between James’s “shameless potboiler” and his elation with ghosts.
Whatever the truth is, it is clearly important to think of James’s contemporary readers. Who, at the time, was reading Collier’s Magazine? It would have been really interesting to know more about these readers and what we can say about twentieth century popular culture. Unfortunately, it was almost impossible to find this information within the constraints of my resources. Although accessing this specific history was difficult, it was not too challenging to really read into the adaptations of this novel through the popular culture.

**Twentieth Century Popular Culture**

When looking at some of the many interpretations of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, it is relevant to note that the majority of them have actual apparitions. Since the book’s publication in 1898, there have been stage, film, and radio versions to account for. A very notable film rendition of the novel is Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents* in 1961. According to Peter Hutchings’s gatherings,

“Clayton's next film was an adaptation of Henry James' celebrated ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*. *The Innocents* is probably more significant an indicator than *Room at the Top* of the themes that would subsequently preoccupy the director. In *The Bespoke Overcoat* he had already explored the psychological dimension of being haunted, with the ghost that visits the tailor potentially an externalisation of the tailor's own guilt.”

This is very important in that it shows Clayton having already exercised the psychological aspect of the ghost story. Clayton saw James’s story and agreed with
many popular culture artists that this is a great story revolving around the terror of the supernatural.

Another, more recent film alteration of The Turn of the Screw is the 2001 movie “The Others.” The entire DVD could be placed in comparison to the novel, however there are key moments that need much attention. The opening or introduction giving credits has still paintings. One painting that flashes up is an eerie sun set with a misty glow, and the two children stand next to a tree and look to the horizon. The T. Griffiths painting, which again was a basis for the novel, has a very similar tone. A creepy tree with a boy and a girl cannot be denied as a likeness. Another picture comes up in the introduction of the movie: a large, daunting house sits in the distance, over looking a lake and great yard, which matches perfectly to “The Haunted House.”

Staying with “The Others” but moving from the painting, we watch and hear Nicole Kidman’s character, Grace, say, “The housework has been rather neglected since the servants disappeared almost a week ago.” The new servant, Mrs. Mills asks if they have vanished and Grace replies, “Into thin air.” Just like The Turn of the Screw, the previous caregivers have left with no explained reason. A few scenes later, Grace shows the new servants a piano and makes a point to keep the children off it. This is a bit different from the book, as Miles is a beautiful piano player, but it is included in the movie nonetheless. The next scene shows the female servant exclaiming that they do not need to see the whole house, but of course Grace finds that rather odd. We can compare Mrs. Mills and Grace to Mrs. Grose and the Governess. There is not a definite boundary to whom plays what role, yet Mrs. Mills and Mr. Tuttle end up being ghosts.
Carolyn Abbate’s book about opera claims that unsung voice can be much stronger than what is actually said. She discusses that having lights and actual people as portrayals of ghosts is showing, without question, the presence of the supernatural.

When looking at other interpretations, the Britten-Pears website has significant references to the ghosts. There is an opera that tells the tale by cleverly using its chamber orchestra to signify the entry/exit of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, along with the changing of scenes. In this opera, Peter Quint actually talks to the audience and says, “I am the hidden life that stirs/ When the candle is out.” Clearly, this interpretation of the novel portrays the ghosts as actually physical apparitions and not just figments in the Governess’ mind. There are many pictures of plays on this website that have actually people as the ghosts and lights to signify them. The author of the page claims that there were no voices saying these were just in her imagination. A section devoted to recreating the ghost story in the opera explains all about making the audience believe in the ghosts and see them appear. There is much debate about whether James’s ghosts are real or just in the Governess’ imagination, but one thing holds strong: Countless readings and interpretations of The Turn of the Screw have the supernatural world at heart.

Psychoanalytic Perspective

According to Edward Parkinson, the theory that the young narrator is an anxious case of sexual repression and the ghosts are merely hallucinations is simply because it generates a bigger impact. The psycho analytics tend to read the story in that direction because it is more interesting to pick apart little scenes for anything that can support their
theory. We can assume, through other evidence, that James wrote this novel for money and personal satisfaction, and that he did not take the time to make it much more.

The psychoanalytic perspective does have a basis for digging through this text. This is clearly pointed out by M. Katan as she says, “The analysis did not offer much difficulty, and the result was an elaborate construction, containing James's traumatic infantile experiences and their influence upon his later development.” She has a good point, however James himself was interested in ghosts, being that his brother was an expert. This story came at a time of great supernatural anticipation for James.

“The difference between interpretations F and G is not the fact that they exist. What is striking is that these differences are perceived as opposites, representing two claims that mutually exclude each other” (Peer and Ewout, 695). Many interpretations of the same work do not necessarily mean that one work must be wrong if the other is right. It is important to classify incompatible interpretations as differences and not contradictions.

Professional Readings—Critics

Many critics have analyzed James’s story by using the “have it both ways” idea. The romantics, those who insist on taking the ghosts as supernatural, tend to fall in a completely different category than those who believe the governess is a caged up bottle of sex repression. In much research, including C.B. Ives article “James’s Ghosts in The Turn of the Screw,” there is a want to revert to the old-fashioned thrills and “sacred terror.” It is interesting that a critic from 1963 would say this because James was writing
in a time of supernatural phenomena, yet Ives does say that he regrets “the loss, in the new ‘psychical’ type of ghost story.”

A very interesting approach to the ghosts being is that of David Miall. He postulates that if the ghosts are supposed to be real then what do they actually mean\textsuperscript{5}. We often times lose track of our objectivity and focus greatly on the subjective. If something is to be done, it is to take a step back and look at the big picture.

**Conclusion**

The ghosts are key to this novel; nevertheless we should be analyzing them for their meaning and significance to interpretation. No matter what interpretations exist there is not necessarily a wrong answer to the question of “are the ghosts real?” James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* at a time when ghosts were interesting and terrifying. He wrote this for a magazine that wanted a solid ghost story, and James exclaimed that it was a moneymaker. Because it is so arguable, it is safe to conclude that this debate will not soon be forgotten.
Works Cited

Primary Source


Secondary Sources


