

**“CRAVING TO BE FRIGHTENED”: HENRY JAMES’S  
THE TURN OF THE SCREW AS A SINISTER PARODY  
OF JANE AUSTEN’S NORTHANGER ABBEY**

**“DESEANDO ASUSTARSE”: LA NOVELLA  
DE HENRY JAMES, THE TURN OF THE SCREW,  
COMO PARODIA SINIESTRA DE LA NOVELA  
DE JANE AUSTEN, NORTHANGER ABBEY**

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**Abstract**

This article seeks to argue that *The Turn of the Screw* is a sinister parody of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and of the female quixotic Bildungsroman. To sustain this claim, I will show that both Catherine and the governess are two burlesque and quixotic heroines who are deeply influenced by their extravagant fancies and their readings of romance. I will also explore their self-assumed role as heroic characters in search of cognitive certainty. And finally, I will argue that evil is intimately related to social and class conflicts in both narratives. Nevertheless, contrary to what happens in *Northanger Abbey*, in James’s parodic reworking of Austen’s novel, Gothic intrusions do not serve as a means of discipline for the governess’s overworked imagination and her potential story of marriage and social ascent is consequently foiled. The narrative’s refusal to educate the governess and its deviation from the female quixotic tradition links James’s novella to modernity.

**Keywords:** *Northanger Abbey*, *The Turn of the Screw*, sinister parody, quixotic heroines, moral growth.

**Resumen**

Este artículo pretende argumentar que *The Turn of the Screw* es una siniestra parodia de la novela de Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*. Para sostener esta

afirmación, argumentaré que tanto Catherine como la institutriz son dos heroínas burlescas y quijotescas que están profundamente influenciadas por su imaginación extravagante y sus lecturas de romances. También exploraré su papel autoimpuesto de personajes heroicos en busca de certeza cognitiva. Y finalmente, mostraré que el mal está íntimamente relacionado con la transgresión social y de clase en ambas narraciones. Sin embargo, a diferencia de lo que ocurre en *Northanger Abbey*, en la reescritura paródica que hace James de la novela de Austen, las intrusiones góticas no sirven para disciplinar la sobrecargada imaginación de la institutriz y, en consecuencia, su potencial historia de matrimonio y ascenso social se ve frustrada. La negativa de la narración a educar a la institutriz y su desviación de la tradición femenina quijotesca vinculan la novela de James con la modernidad.

**Palabras clave:** *Northanger Abbey*, *The Turn of the Screw*, parodia siniestra, heroínas quijotescas, crecimiento moral.

## 1. Introduction

72 Much has been written about the connection between Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) with Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Henry Fielding's *Amelia* (1751) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), the three novels which are invoked by James's famous governess.<sup>1</sup> However, there is a novel which —although less explicitly and more obliquely— is also brought to mind by the narrative, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817). This is Austen's earliest narrative of female enlightenment and also her only mock-Gothic novel, since the burlesque of the eighteenth-century Gothic conventions is pervasive.<sup>2</sup> Henry James's remarks about Jane Austen are disseminated through his various critical essays, and canonical critics like F.R. Leavis (1950), Brian Lee (1978) and Tony Tanner (2007) have pointed out Austen's undeniable influence on Henry James. Tanner's words could not be more forceful:

while we all agree that James could scarcely have written as he did without George Eliot and Balzac (not to mention Hawthorne) behind him, it seems to me quite as arguable that James learned as much from Jane Austen as Jane Austen did from Richardson. Which is to say a great deal. (2007: 9)

And yet, the Austen-James connection remains conspicuously unexamined, probably because it has often been taken for granted. James's relation with his literary forerunner is certainly ambiguous, to say the least. It oscillates between arrogant condescension, unfair criticism and admiration. It is arguably a clear example of what Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence (1997: 25). In a letter to George Pellew, written in 1883, James jeers at Austen's heroines, who

“had undoubtedly small and second-rate minds and were perfect little she-Philistines” (James 1987: 189). That surely is an unfair accusation if we think of, say, Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price or Anne Elliot, who are characterized, to a greater or lesser extent, by their reflectiveness, self-reliance and moral intelligence.

At first glance, there are no obvious intertextual similarities between *Northanger Abbey* and *The Turn of the Screw*. The first follows the thematic pattern of a female Bildungsroman, which involves a heroine on the difficult path to maturation, self-discovery, and the acquisition of experience in her social environment (Borham Puyal 2015: 105).<sup>3</sup> The second is a psychological thriller in which a young governess tries to exorcise two ghosts which, in her view, are perverting the minds of her protégés. Nevertheless, there is a subtextual connection which links Catherine Morland to the unnamed governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. Both are unexperienced and naïve young girls who are ridden by the power of their unruly and infatuated imagination. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland learns through experience and hardships that her wild fantasy must be contained and disciplined, otherwise it may carry disastrous consequences for her social life. Austen is clearly issuing a warning about the dangers of assuming literary principles as a reference system for life (Borham Puyal 2015: 120). But, does James’s governess go through the same learning process? Or is she more of a “little she-Philistine” than any of Austen’s heroines?

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The classical debate over *The Turn of the Screw* has long dominated its critical output. On the one hand, we find Edmund Wilson’s argument that the story is “a neurotic case of sex repression” and that the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel are not real ghosts but “hallucinations of the governess” (1934: 102). On the other hand, we have Robert B. Heilman’s counterclaim that the ghosts are not hallucinations and that Miles and Flora have really been corrupted (1947: 435-436). Subsequent critics have also taken sides in the Wilson/Heilman antinomy. My reading does not intend to take sides with either of these trends —although I acknowledge that it is closer to Wilson’s analysis— but aims to offer a different view of the matter and to analyse the governess as an example of a female Quixote who cannot escape “the hallucinatory coils of the literary” (Castle 1998: xv). Thus, I will show that both Catherine and the governess are two burlesque heroines of the “female Quixote variety” who are deeply influenced by their extravagant fancies and their readings of romance (Butler 1989: 173). I will also explore their self-imposed role as heroic characters who have to fight imaginary evils and who want to obtain cognitive certainty about people’s motives. And finally, I will argue that evil is deeply related to social conflicts in both narratives and that —unlike Catherine— the governess’s reversal of fortune is foiled. Thus,

my main claim is that *The Turn of the Screw* can be read as a fascinating and sinister parody of *Northanger Abbey* in particular, and of the female quixotic Bildungsroman in general. Whereas in Austen's novel, Gothic motifs function as a means of moral instruction for Catherine, who is eventually rewarded with an advantageous marriage, in James's parodic reworking of Austen's novel, Gothic intrusions do not serve as a means of discipline for the governess's overworked imagination, and she is deprived of romance and social ascension. The narrative resists the governess's wish to become conscious and to solve the mystery, as the plot "provides no definite knowledge and no assurances to either protagonists and readers", a fact that links James's novella to modernity (Despotopoulou 2011: 88).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Catherine and the Governess: Two Female Quixotes

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Catherine Morland and the governess are two imaginative and fearful young girls in "active pursuit of Gothic illusions" (McKillop 1963: 60). Both heroines illustrate a female version of what Miriam Borham Puyal calls "literary quixotes" (2015: 16), since their quixotic madness comes from the assimilation of literary principles (13).<sup>5</sup> Enmeshed in their literary delusions, Catherine and the governess confound reality with fiction and they consequently "misread" the events and situations that surround them. The key difference between them is that, whereas Catherine is finally awakened from her literary delusions, no character can disabuse the governess of her Gothic expectations. Unlike Catherine, who has Henry Tilney as her mentor, the governess lacks corrective and conversational forces and is deprived of her quixotic epiphany. She is condemned to rely upon the tropes of Gothic and sentimental fiction. This ironic reversal allowed James to experiment "with the much celebrated subjectivity of vision and the style of indeterminacy" (Despotopoulou and Reed 2011: 5).

In *Northanger Abbey*, there is a progression in the Cervantine character of Austen's parody that culminates in Catherine's quixotism (Pardo García 2005: 360). According to Pardo García's ideas, in the first volume Austen parodies the romantic conventions that were present in Charlotte Lennox's novels and introduces an anti-romantic heroine in an anti-romantic reality.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Austen challenges romantic clichés and the literary expectations of her readers, and she presents an ordinary heroine (or antiheroine) whose father "was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters" (Austen 1998: 1). Catherine's quixotism begins when she is invited to go to Bath by Mrs. Allen. There, her social circle expands and she will have to learn how to "read" people and the social panorama of Bath. However, Catherine's overwrought imagination is contaminated by her reading of Gothic and sentimental novels, especially Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and she tries

to “read” reality in a Gothic key. Thus, after meeting Mr. Tilney for the first time, and her unsuccessful pursuit of him in all the balls in Bath, the narrator humorously concludes that “[t]his sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero, threw a fresh grace in Catherine’s imagination around his person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him” (Austen 1998: 20). Thus, at first, it is more his alleged mysteriousness than his character that really appeals to Catherine.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, we also find an avid reader as heroine. Like Catherine, the governess is also swayed by naïve and foolish literary delusions. There is a hint of the governess’s romanticism and sentimentality when Douglas, the first narrator of the story, recounts the governess’s first meeting with her master in Harley Street: “This prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as has never risen, save in a dream or an old novel before a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” (James 2008: 8). As can be observed, Douglas depicts the governess as a nervous and fearful girl who tends to romanticize everything. This is corroborated when he highlights that the governess fell in love with her master after seeing him only twice. The potential courtship plot is foiled from the beginning.

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The governess and Catherine prove to have a book-fed imagination that distorts and deforms reality, and an easily excited sensibility. Hence, Catherine’s literary perception of reality increases when she is invited to spend some days at Northanger Abbey. There, she must learn to distinguish between reality and fiction, since the abbey is a similar setting to that of her Gothic novels and, more importantly, she must learn to “read” the people around her (Borham Puyal 2015: 121). Catherine is elated by the fact that it is an abbey and not an ordinary house and, in her naivety, she imagines a Gothic scenario. Her literary expectations are in fact stimulated by Henry Tilney, who mockingly invents a Gothic romance with Catherine as protagonist. Although her first expectations about the abbey are increasingly frustrated, Catherine does not despair and goes so far as to think that General Tilney, a severe and authoritative father, could have assassinated his wife or imprisoned her alive, and she compares him with Montoni, the villain of Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*. In *Northanger Abbey*—and in her juvenilia—Austen highlights the improbability and immorality of sentimental and Gothic fiction, and exposes the dangers of taking fictional formulas as absolute truth without taking into account differences of context (Borham Puyal 2015: 121). As John Wiltshire puts it, “[t]he reference points of her imagination become clichés of the Gothic novels she has read” (2014: 19).

Like Catherine’s, the governess’s imagination is also inflamed by naïve and foolish Gothic expectations. Her position as a governess in a “romanticised” space—an

isolated country house inhabited by a housekeeper and two little orphans—magnifies her literary expectations. However, unlike Catherine's, her imagination is not inflated by the playful inventiveness of a suitor. The governess's solitary position in the house and her lack of corrective forces serve only to stimulate her literary delusions. She envisions Bly as "a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite" (James 2008: 16). But for a story to be complete, "something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way" (Austen 1998: 5). In a clear (ironic) allusion to Charlotte Brontë's love story in *Jane Eyre*, the governess wishes that her master should be there to "smile and approve" her fulfilment of the mission entrusted to her (James 2008: 24). However, the figure of the master-suitor is absent. *The Turn of the Screw* raises Gothic and romantic possibilities only to deviate from them. James is surely parodying Austen's preoccupation with the disparity between fiction and real life, as well as the governess novel, popularized by the Brontës, since he deprives the governess of her well-deserved romance and her subsequent learning process. Unlike Catherine's, the governess's "visions of romance" are never overcome (Austen 1998: 159).

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Again, it is observed how the literary realm pervades the governess's imagination when she explicitly evokes *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre*: "Was there a 'secret' at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?" (James 2008: 27). The allusions to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre* "are not templates to map what the narrative is but quicksilver glints of what it fails to be" (Lustig 2010: 138). These desired events—the arrival of a handsome hero and the finding of a secret at Bly—would certainly mitigate the "grey prose" (James 2008: 29) of her office and the tedious life of a lonely governess in the middle of the English countryside. In fact, she contrasts the "grey prose" of the actual world with the beauty of romance and poetry: "so how could work not be charming that presented itself as daily beauty? It was all the romance of the nursery and the poetry of the schoolroom" (29). This interesting metaphor implies that even the governess's office at Bly is permeated by fiction.

When Catherine and the Tilneys engage in a discussion about history, she complains about its dullness and expresses her preference for the "flights of fancy" of novelists (Austen 1998: 84). In this meaningful conversation, Austen moves away from the parody of Gothic and sentimental clichés, and makes a eulogy of novel reading, which is much more than a self-deluding pastime, since "it promotes friendship, contributes to social distinction, [and] forms a common topic and pursuit for men and women" (Richardson 2005: 400). In fact, it is reading that distinguishes Catherine—and the Tilneys—from the hypocritical Thorpes. At the same time, by taking part in the tradition of the female quixotic Bildungsroman,

Austen also seeks to warn her implicit readers of the dangers of taking fictional formulas as a reference system for life. This is Marianne Dashwood’s mistake in *Sense and Sensibility*, whose ideas about love have been shaped by her readings. Thus, Catherine’s and the governess’s quixotic imagination and their literary expectations serve both to illustrate and to refute and parody romantic foolishness (McKillop 1963: 57). They have been, in Austen’s own words, “craving to be frightened” (Austen 1998: 160).

However, their “voluntary, self-created delusions” lead Catherine and the governess along different paths (Austen 1998: 60). Thus, Catherine’s active chase of ghosts and terrors in *Northanger Abbey* is frustrated and culminates in Henry Tilney’s admonition and her subsequent moral growth. Catherine’s moral development turns the novel into a Bildungsroman in which Catherine gains experience of the world, as can be observed in: “The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened” (159). This is, in Butler’s words, “the typical moment of *éclaircissement*” so common in all of Austen’s novels, “the moment when a key character abandons her error and humbly submits to objective reality” (1989: 176). A second moment of anagnorisis takes place when she understands Isabella’s true character. This second disillusionment is another manifestation of the same problem of how to “read” people and reality appropriately, which is a frequent preoccupation in the tradition of the female quixotic Bildungsroman.

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By contrast, the governess’s romantic and Gothic fascination is never abandoned, and she becomes a neurotic woman who sees the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel around the house and who is obsessed with the idea that the children have been perverted by the domestics’ clandestine sexual intercourse. The endpoint of this paranoia is a kind of manic obsession, the perturbation of her mind under internal pressures. Unlike Catherine, the governess never questions how far her frantic imagination has carried her and she cannot be disabused of her own hallucinations. This is in fact Henry James’s culmination of his sinister parody of *Northanger Abbey*. In Austen’s novel, Henry’s admonition elicits Catherine’s disillusionment and suggests “a blow upon sentiment” (Austen 1998: 188), but James carries his satire further and the governess never goes through a learning process. Thus, in James’s novella, the governess “loses the balance between sensibility and sense”, which in the case of Catherine is jeopardised but ultimately maintained (Lustig 2010: 139).

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen shows that Catherine’s “delicate sensibility” can carry disastrous consequences for her life (Austen 1998: 102). Therefore, she proves that the advocacy of sensibility as a female accomplishment can be self-defeating and problematic. James, on his part, makes a fascinating and sinister parody of this female “accomplishment” through the governess’s frantic chase of

the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel. Jane Austen warns us readers of how an excessive sensibility can lead to a positive result, though reversible, desocialization, since Catherine is so naïve and impressionable that she is easily deceived (Tanner 2007: 78). Yet James makes an ironic reversal of the situation and portrays a neurotic and disturbed governess who distrusts everybody else but not her own conjectures and assumptions. The governess's easily excited sensibility, in this case, leads to a negative desocialization since she cannot take part in any sane relationship. And yet, whereas Austen overtly condemns Catherine's overwrought imagination, James —underscoring the collapse of all certainties and the impossibility of plain answers— leaves it to the readers to judge or condemn the governess of his tale.

### 3. Catherine and the Governess: Two Would-be Saviours in Search of Cognitive Certainty

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The epistemological dimension of quixotism in both narratives is presented as a conflict between reality and its perception, showing the mind “as the principal source of terror” (Shelden 1974: 122). In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine makes up for her inexperience with the conventions of romance and imagines herself the heroine of a Gothic novel, whereas James's heroine assumes the role of moral redeemer and guardian of the social order in the house at Bly. The governess appropriates a religious discourse of salvation with Bly representing a kind of Eden inhabited by two innocent children and the governess as their would-be saviour or redeemer (Heilman 1948: 277). Although the religious overtone is absent in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine also assumes the role of heroic saviour in a comic romance. In this sense, Catherine and the governess imagine themselves as heroic characters who have the self-imposed quest of overcoming concocted threats and who want to achieve cognitive certainty about other people's motives. However, in *Northanger Abbey* self-deception is followed by disillusionment and subsequent learning, whereas in *The Turn of the Screw* the governess's solipsism and self-absorption thwart her rite of passage. James is surely parodying the moment of enlightenment which characterizes the female quixotic Bildungsroman.

After having been disillusioned by two failed Gothic explorations of the Abbey, Catherine —inspired by her Gothic readings— comes to the conclusion that General Tilney has imprisoned his wife in some out-of-the-way room in the abbey and she considers it her mission to unveil this mystery. She even calls into question Mrs. Tilney's decease and her purported funeral since she “had read too much not to be perfectly aware of the ease with which a waxen figure might be introduced, and a supposititious funeral carried on” (Austen 1998: 153). Catherine imagines herself as the heroine of a Gothic novel who must unravel a secret mystery about

a languishing woman who has been shut up by a jealous and cruel husband. In no other passage is Catherine more similar to the hero of a mock-epic.

Likewise, James’s governess also speaks a language of heroism but, in this case, her self-imposed mission is to save the children from moral corruption and to maintain the social order in the house. Since her romance script is foiled, the governess tries to establish imaginative links with Fielding’s Amelia, a committed wife and mother who sacrifices herself for her children and for her negligent husband (Purton 1975: 1). The governess wants to see herself “at the heart of a highly charged emotional situation” (Punter 2013: 50), and she is soon assaulted by the “unformulated fear” that the children have been corrupted by their knowledge of sexual intercourse between Mr. Quint and Miss Jessel and by dangerous familiarity with them (Goddard 1957: 10).

Like Catherine, the governess imagines herself the heroine of a Gothic romance and she undertakes the mission of saving those helpless children and the ignorant housekeeper: “I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquillity of my companions” (James 2008: 40). James’s parody of the discourse of salvation is evident here. The governess wants to emerge in the eyes of her master as the brave and admirable saviour of the corrupted children. She prides herself on being the chosen one to carry out this important mission. The irony lies in the fact that she has not been chosen by God but by a mortal, the children’s uncle, with whom she is secretly in love. The children’s uncle has bestowed complete authority on the governess, and she becomes “the Puritan certain that depravity inheres in everyone and that she alone is elected to fight it” (Lydenberg 1957: 47). Thus, despite her (subaltern) condition of governess, she acquires moral authority over Mrs. Grose and the children.

These two would-be saviours are obsessed with the cognitive process of seeing and knowing, which constitutes a key element for readers to understand the moment of awakening of the heroines (Borham Puyal 2015: 104). They want to achieve cognitive certainty about other people’s motives and behaviours. Thus, when Henry Tilney reveals to Catherine that his brother is already aware of the fact that Isabella is engaged to James, she is puzzled by Captain Tilney’s behaviour, anxious to understand the motives behind that conduct: “But what can your brother mean? If he knows her engagement, what can he mean by his behaviour?” (Austen 1998: 119). A further instance of Catherine’s eagerness to attain truth about others takes place when she is rudely expelled from the abbey by the General. Catherine is so perplexed by this bewildering “breach of hospitality” that she anxiously ruminates about the unknown reasons behind his change of attitude (190). This cognitive process of vision and perception acquires special relevance at the moment of Catherine’s anagnorisis, of the fall of the blindfold which covers

the female Quixote's vision (Borham Puyal 2015: 104): "She *saw* that the infatuation had been created, the mischief settled, long before her quitting Bath, and it *seemed* as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged" (Austen 1998: 160, emphasis added).

Like Catherine, the governess has an irrational obsession with the cognitive processes of seeing and knowing. However, in her case, her thirst for knowledge has nothing to do with domestic and courtship matters but with obscure psychological issues related to moral salvation and the preservation of the normative community. She wants to know what the children *can* see or know. Like little Maisie in *What Maisie Knew* and Nanda in *The Awkward Age*, Miles and Flora have been premature witnesses of sin and the result—from the governess's point of view—is that their innocence has been contaminated.<sup>7</sup> But the governess's obsessive zeal is not only for what she can see and perceive but for what is occult and remains hidden from her. Therefore, when Mrs. Grose asks her if she is afraid of seeing Miss Jessel again, she answers: "Oh, no; that's nothing—now! [...] It's of *not* seeing her" (James 2008: 48, emphasis in original). The fact of not seeing and not knowing is what really perturbs the governess. She wants to penetrate the children's minds to discover the motives behind their association with both Quint and Jessel. Her fear is that the children "may keep it up [...] without [her] knowing it" (48). She compulsively craves for absolute control and authority over her charges. Like Catherine, James's governess is "a presence seeking to penetrate the heart of the story where she is an intruder, an outsider forcing her way in, distorting the mystery, perhaps creating it, perhaps discovering it, but certainly breaking in, destroying it and only revealing the ambiguity which conceals it" (Blanchot 1982: 82).

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Concealment and disguise are in fact pervasive in both narratives. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen makes a metaphoric and humorous correlation between concealment in drawers and concealment of motives, intentions, knowledge and truth (Tanner 2007: 65). Catherine wants to discover some mysterious manuscript in the old-fashioned black cabinet in her apartment, but she is deeply disappointed when she finds a mundane inventory of linen and a banal washing-bill. Chests and drawers—like human beings—keep and hide secrets, they are indeed "veritable organs of the secret psychological life" (Bachelard 1994: 78). In the novel, they come to represent the intimate life of people, their secrets and enigmas. Thus, in the same manner that Catherine tries to unlock the chest and the cabinet in order "to satisfy herself at least as to its contents" (Austen 1998: 130), she also seeks to understand the General's behaviour. Catherine knows that chests and wardrobes are "evident witnesses of the need for secrecy" and she is not ignorant of the fact that someone who hides something in a chest or cabinet is also burying some inner secret (Bachelard 1994: 81). But the General is not the only one in the novel who

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conceals his motives and intentions; characters like Isabella also mask their intentions and designs. In a significant authorial statement, Austen —through the voice of the narrator— makes an ironic critique of a society that encourages women to be ignorant and deceitful: “A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can” (Austen 1998: 86). Indeed, the concealment of knowledge by women is a pervasive theme in all of Austen’s mature novels and in James’s novels. Both authors portray contrived societies that are guided by “concealment, repression, obfuscation of knowledge” (Tanner 2007: 66).

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess is obsessed with what others might conceal from her. She wants to obtain knowledge, to penetrate secrets and motives to attain absolute truth. In this sense, the governess functions as an inquisitor since she tries to extract Mrs. Grose’s and the children’s confessions. She is always on her guard, suspecting everybody of concealing information from her. When Mrs. Grose asks her if little Flora confessed to her that she had seen the ghost of Miss Jessel, the governess denies it with these words: “Not a word, that’s the horror. She kept it to herself!” (James 2008: 47). Therefore, the governess’s greatest fear is that the children would keep her apart from their clandestine relationship with both Quint and Jessel. Hence, she becomes an agent of surveillance, performing a policing function in the house, spying on the children, and even eavesdropping on their private conversations. When Flora manages to escape her surveillance and takes the boat to cross the lake, the governess states: “Our not seeing it is the strongest of proofs. She has used it to go over, then has managed to hide it” (104). This sentence, insignificant as it seems, carries with it a lot of meaning. It shows the governess’s neurotic obsession with that which escapes her senses, her fanatic belief that everybody tries to conceal the truth from her, and her anxiety that —unlike Catherine or Jane Eyre— she will not obtain her well-deserved anagnorisis. Her personal Bildungsroman is foiled. James takes from Austen his interest in human cognition and the obfuscation of knowledge, and in *The Turn of the Screw* he emphasises the inherent tension between what can be known and what must remain secret in human relations.<sup>8</sup>

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#### 4. Social Horrors and Fairy-tale Justice

In *Northanger Abbey* and *The Turn of the Screw*, evil is defined not only in terms of supernatural otherness or moral wickedness but also in terms of social and class otherness. In Jane Austen’s novel, Catherine Morland attains moral growth and wisdom, social disruption is finally contained, and Catherine is thus rewarded with a prosperous marriage and a higher social status. Nevertheless, in James’s novella,

the governess's imaginative romance is foiled from the beginning, the narrative refuses her wish to gain consciousness, and she is not granted such a reversal of fortune. This way, she does not obtain "fairy-tale justice" (Moretti 2000: 205).

In *Northanger Abbey*, it is when Henry goes to find Catherine after she has been expelled from Northanger Abbey by his father that she learns that the General has behaved like a true villain and that her only fault has been to be "less rich than he had supposed her to be" (Austen 1998: 199). Hence, what the General fears about Catherine is that she is socially inferior to his son, that she might be an unscrupulous social climber. When he discourteously expels Catherine from the Abbey, the General is really acting like a Montoni. This is indeed a truly mock-Gothic passage in the novel, since the Gothic heroine is not confined in the castle, but thrown out (Wheatley 2019: 64). Although Catherine has been disappointed in her quest to find ghosts, lost manuscripts or imprisoned wives in Northanger Abbey, she has indeed discovered a secret there: that the General is actually a snobbish and unsympathetic man who has put money and social advancement over respect, hospitality and sympathy (Tanner 2007: 46). Misled by Thorpe's malicious account of Catherine's poverty, the General is led to believe that Catherine's family is "a forward, bragging, scheming race" (Austen 1998: 201). His rudeness and inhospitality finally exceed Catherine's Gothic expectations. The danger of a potential méssalliance and patriarchal tyranny constitute the deep structure of the narrative, the core of its "mystery". The greatness of *Northanger Abbey* is that it "domesticates the gothic" and transfers its conventions and excesses into the parlours of English houses (Johnson 1998: 47).

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In *The Turn of the Screw*, it is a secret class transgression in the Edenic world of Bly that perturbs the governess. According to Millicent Bell, James's novella "is about social classes and their relation to one another" (1993: 91). The governess is horrified by the idea that the children have witnessed the sexual and class transgression of their former governess and one of the servants, who was "dreadfully below" (James 2008: 50), and she compares Quint's social otherness with evil: "'But if he isn't a gentleman—' 'What *is* he? He's a horror'" (35, emphasis in original). She is outraged by "the open secret of trans-class sexuality" that this social transgression implies (Robbins 1993: 200). The governess's revulsion with class transgression "is almost equal to her disgust with the sexual immorality and corrupting influences of the former servants" (Orr 2009: 62). In the novella, servants are frequently likened to ghosts and the supernatural otherness of the ghosts is equated with "the class otherness of the servants" (Robbins 1993: 200). According to Robbins, the Freudian reading would be that the governess is extrapolating her repressed romantic-sexual desire for her master to the supernatural otherness of the ghosts. What she desires is nothing but "the erotic transgression

of class” (201). This repressed love for the master implies that at some future point she must duplicate the ghosts’ social transgression and commit a *mésalliance*. There is a significant passage in the novella where Mrs. Grose reminds the governess—and the readers—that, like herself, the governess is also a subaltern in the house, and both exchange “a sound of the oddest amusement”, which involves mutual understanding and complicity (James 2008: 56-57). It suggests that the governess is not so different from Mrs. Grose and the servant-ghosts, that they share their social otherness and that she is also part of the “evil” at Bly. The historical myth implied by the Gothic—regicidal revolutions, anarchy, despotism or rebellion—is translated onto the ground of domestic and private passions in both narratives (Duncan 2005: 25). Therefore, the Gothic horror takes the form of social anomalies. Austen and James expose the ideological substratum of the Gothic, putting to the fore the social conflict and setting aside traditional Gothic motifs, like ghosts, which are only present either as symptoms of a neurotic woman or as delusions of an imaginative girl, and which serve only “to displace the antagonisms and horrors evidenced within society to outside society itself” (Moretti 1983: 67).

Social advancement and personal ambition constitute, then, the real threats; they are ominous or immoral menaces that threaten the social hierarchy. In *Northanger Abbey*, the characters’ desire to rise socially above their class is frequently punished. Hence, Isabella Thorpe, the true anti-heroine in the novel, is ambitious, selfish and pushy. Her unabashed attempts to seduce Captain Tilney—a wealthy young man and heir to the Northanger estate—while she is engaged to James Morland are severely punished, and she ends up completely deserted, without fiancé or friends. Through her devious schemes and her hypocritical assertions, she is presented as “a comic villainess” who functions as Catherine’s foil (Levine 1975: 341). As opposed to Isabella, Catherine—who is probably an embryonic type for Fanny Price—does not actively pursue marriage above her station. Although she is infatuated with Henry Tilney, she patiently waits for his approach and uncomplainingly fulfils her social and moral obligations (341). It is in fact the unscrupulous John Thorpe who places Catherine—in General Tilney’s eyes—in a higher social position, making the latter see her as a prospective daughter in law. Catherine’s true enlightenment consists in learning to “discriminate between true friends and false” (Butler 1989: 173). Having learned this lesson, she is eventually rewarded with her beloved Henry Tilney, whose “considerable fortune” makes him “a match beyond the claims of [Catherine]” (Austen 1998: 203). Unlike the governess, Catherine does achieve fairy-tale justice.

The case of James’s governess differs from that of Catherine. Unlike Austen’s heroine—who has a safe social position as the daughter of a clergyman with

“considerable independence” (Austen 1998: 1)— the governess has an ambiguous social position in the house at Bly. In fact, her uncertain social status exemplifies nineteenth-century concerns about social and sexual limits (Robbins 1993: 149). The governess is thus “the liminal figure par excellence”, since she occupies an ambiguous space in the house, excluded both from the world of the masters and that of the servants (Lustig 2010: 149). The ambivalent social status of governesses in the nineteenth century is precisely what makes them socially mobile. Nevertheless, the governess of *The Turn of the Screw* does not receive fairy-tale justice. Although she fantasizes with the idea that the master would arrive at Bly “to smile and approve” her difficult enterprise (James 2008: 24), her romantic delusions are not fulfilled, and she does not rise socially via the “recognition-inheritance pattern” so common in Dickens’ novels and also present in *Jane Eyre* (Moretti 2000: 205). Therefore, what the governess disapproves of is the fact that the valet and the previous governess have challenged the power structures of the social order. When she encounters Quint for the first time, she meaningfully remarks that “there was a touch of the strange freedom [...] in the sign of familiarity of his wearing no hat” (James 2008: 26). Later on, we learn from Mrs. Grose that Quint takes the liberty of wearing the master’s clothes and that he was “much too free” in the house (40). It is his daring usurpation of the master’s place in the house and his familiarity with little Miles that the governess truly condemns. According to the governess, Quint has taken liberties that are “rather monstrous” (29). A servant who usurps the place of his master is not only a horror, but also a monster. Tellingly, once Mrs. Grose has informed her of Quint’s servant status, there is a rather significant change in the places where the governess subsequently encounters him. He is no longer at the top of the tower, but on the other side of the window where the governess can directly confront his gaze, provoking an interesting game of reflected images that suggests their shared liminality; and downstairs, below her, where she can “meet and measure him” as the interloper that he is (62). In this case, the governess clearly relates the ground floor with moral degradation and social (and sexual) transgression. These spectral moments in which an anxious observer meets a seductive and disturbing ghostly figure, often to wonder who —observer or ghostly figure— is more dreadful, are pervasive in James’s fiction (Stevens 2008: 132).

Miss Jessel also shared the governess’s ambiguous social status. Like James’s heroine, Miss Jessel had a liminal position in the house and she also enjoyed a very intimate relationship with the children. The governess’s resemblance to Miss Jessel in fact disturbs her since Miss Jessel has dared to trespass the (social) limits and to indulge in a forbidden relationship with the valet, a transgression that the Puritan governess considers sinful. This disturbance is especially opprobrious when the governess sees Miss Jessel in the schoolroom and remarks on her defiant and

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accusatory look, a look impregnated with the blame of usurpation: “she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers” (James 2008: 90). The governess is perturbed by the fact that, like “her vile predecessor”, she would also like to trespass the social rules and to marry a man of a different social status, in her case, a man who is socially above her (90). She condemns Miss Jessel’s immorality but, unconsciously, she realizes that there is little difference between them.

The governess’s disturbance and conflicted feelings increase if we consider that her potential Mr. Rochester is totally absent and that she needs a Jane Eyre-like resolution to fulfil her particular romance. The governess is hopelessly “marooned in a narrative which refuses to satisfy her imaginative demands” (Lustig 2010: 144). Hence, the ghosts are the product of her frustrated imaginative romance. In the governess’s mind, both Quint and Miss Jessel serve as scapegoats for the perversion of the normative community and the traditional status quo. They have disturbed the equilibrium of the community at Bly and, consequently, they have to be sacrificed. Quint and Jessel have been selected as *pharmakoi*, ritual victims who must be exorcised so that the children can regain their lost innocence and the power structures of the social order can be completely re-established. In the end, the governess is reassured by her knowledge that she has preserved the social hierarchy (Punter 2013: 51).

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In *Northanger Abbey* and in *The Turn of The Screw*, we see how evil is inherently related to class conflicts, which are probably more threatening than the ghosts, villains, haunted castles and like evils that these quixotic heroines can find in the Gothic novels that engage their imagination. And yet, there is an important difference which cannot be overlooked. Whereas Austen finally rewards her heroine’s moral enlightenment with an advantageous marriage and her resulting social ascent, James emphasizes the ideological substratum of the Gothic and subverts the female quixotic Bildungsroman by perversely thwarting his heroine’s romantic expectations and social ambitions and by condemning her to a perpetual liminal position as a governess.

## 5. Conclusion

James’s reappropriation of the figure of the female Quixote in *The Turn of the Screw* allows us to read this novella as an ironic reworking of *Northanger Abbey* and a sinister parody of the female quixotic Bildungsroman. Thus, Austen’s version of the female Quixote finds its ironic parallel in James’s portrayal of an imaginative and sensitive young woman who is entrapped in her literary and hallucinatory delusions and who cannot distinguish fiction from reality. The key difference

between Catherine Morland and the governess is that the latter never goes through a learning process; she never awakens from her romantic illusions and finally sinks into her self-formulated fears. In this sense, the novel of education or ‘coming-of-age’ is aborted here, since the governess never attains consciousness. Its deviation from the female quixotic Bildungsroman and the fact that the plot provides no definite knowledge or assurances links James’s novella to modernity.

In their delusions, both heroines appropriate a discourse of salvation and they envision themselves as heroic saviours whose main mission is to solve an intricate mystery and to rescue a helpless victim. They are also obsessed with the cognitive processes of seeing and knowing and, consequently, they are always in pursuit of cognitive certainty about other people’s intentions. And yet, whereas Catherine’s desire to attain cognitive certainty is finally granted, the governess’s frantic pursuit of knowledge is constantly frustrated.

86 Finally, I have analysed how evil in both narratives is not only related to supernatural props or moral wickedness but also to social and class conflicts. In this sense, social advancement, personal ambition and potential mésalliances are the actual Gothic threats; threats which challenge the power structures of the social order in both narratives. Nonetheless, whereas in *Northanger Abbey* these disruptive energies are finally disciplined, and Catherine is rewarded with a wealthy husband and social ascent, the governess’s social prospects are never satisfied, and she is perpetually condemned to an ambiguous social position.

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### Notes

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1. For an in-depth analysis of the intertextual similarities between *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw*, see Tintner (1976), Petry (1983) and Lustig (2010). Besides, Valerie Purton (1975) and May Ryburn (1979) have called attention to the intertextual similarities between *The Turn of the Screw* and Henry Fielding’s *Amelia*. Lastly, the connection between *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Turn of the Screw* has been less explicitly and more obliquely established, and always in analyses of how James’s novel both repeats and deviates

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from Gothic patterns (see Lang 1964; Briggs 1977; Lustig 2010; and Bauer 2016).

2. Delfina Morganti Hernández (2017) and Juliet McMaster (2019) have analyzed the intertextual relation between *Northanger Abbey* and *Washington Square*, and Robyn R. Warhol (2007) has examined the strategies of narrative refusal in both *Northanger Abbey* and *The Spoils of Poynton* but, to my knowledge, no critic has paid attention to the many intertextual similarities between *Northanger Abbey* and *The Turn of the Screw*.

3. The roots of the female Bildungsroman are in Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen and George Eliot. To dig into this genre, see Susan Fraiman (1993) and Lorna Ellis (1999).

4. According to Ronald Schleifer, *The Turn of the Screw* is based on absence rather than presence, “on the fact that there is nothing, that nothing happens” (1980: 300). Hence, whereas the tradition of Gothic fiction is characterized by narrative closure and the explanation and rationalization of the mystery, in James’s fiction the ghostly is never deciphered or explained. In this sense, James inaugurates “the modern tradition” (Schleifer 1980: 299).

5. In her book *Quijotes con enaguas* (2015), Borham Puyal identifies three concentric circles of quixotism: literary quixotism, which includes those literary parodies in which the quixotic madness comes from the assimilation of literary principles; ideological quixotism, which includes fiction with strong ideological overtones, such as the anti-Jacobin novels of the end of the eighteenth century; and

displaced quixotism, in which the quixotic madness detaches itself from literature and becomes an illusion of youth or an innate idealism (16-17).

6. The female quixotic tradition in Britain predates the publication of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752). Some examples of the assimilation of the female quixote in Britain are Sir Thomas Overbury’s *Characters* (1614), the English translation of Adrien Thomas Perdoux de Subigny’s *Mock-Clelia, or Madam Quixote* (1678), Richard Steele’s *The Tender Husband* (1705), or Jane Barker’s *Galesia* trilogy. All these works would have an obvious impact on Lennox (see Borham Puyal 2015). On the other hand, Lennox’s novel has, in fact, been considered a literary inspiration for Jane Austen, who had certainly read and enjoyed the novel, as her letters to her sister Cassandra demonstrate.

7. Interestingly, in presenting the children as corrupted and deceptive (at least through the governess’s eyes) James is subverting here the tradition inaugurated by Mark Twain in which children’s pure vision is presented as “the truest kind of vision” (Fiedler 1997: 339). This can of course be a remnant of his international theme, in which the two English children embody the values of the Old World —deceitfulness, guile and immorality. The neurotic governess of James’s story is then like the American Novel itself, with its obsession with innocence and supernatural horrors, and its fear of sexuality.

8. The problem of knowledge in Jane Austen’s mature novels has been amply discussed. For more recent criticism, see Weiss (2013), Davidson (2014) or Wiltshire (2014).

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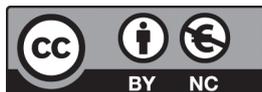
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