

Author



The Music of Benjamin Britten as Interpretation of Henry James' Novella, *The Turn of the Screw*

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English

Perhaps the best research projects are created when two interests are brought together. Such is the case with Cynthia Simonian's current endeavor, which combines her love for reading with musical composition. In her project, Cynthia analyzes Benjamin Britten's operatic interpretation of Henry James' novella, *The Turn of the Screw*. She presented her research at the 2002 Undergraduate Research Symposium, where she used a multimedia slide show and audio presentation to point out musical themes from the opera that served to interpret the story's plot. Cynthia encourages others to discover and develop links between different fields. She plans to pursue a second baccalaureate in Music Composition at UCSB.

Key Terms

- ◆ First Story
- ◆ Jamesian Ambiguity
- ◆ "Screw" Theme
- ◆ Second Story

Abstract

Literary critics of Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* have tended to take one of three interpretive positions regarding the role of the young governess who comes to a mansion to care for two young children, and there becomes convinced that the ghosts of the former valet and governess are attempting to morally corrupt the young ones. The first interpretation, often referred to in James criticism as "the first story," states that the young governess is defending the children from the evil embodied by the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. The second interpretation takes the opposite position, which states that the governess is imagining the ghosts, and is herself the greatest danger the children face. The third view is that James purposefully makes the story ambiguous by not allowing the reader to decide between the first or second views. Benjamin Britten's opera, *The Turn of the Screw*, makes a case for the third interpretation by using musical themes that at times seem to support the governess' innocence, and at other times, to imply her guilt. The listener is left in the same uncertain position as Britten's governess, and is not allowed to easily decide who is good or evil. Unlike the governess, who cannot bear the uncertainty of not knowing whether she is innocent or guilty, and who tends to leap to explanations blaming the ghosts or herself, the listener is challenged by an opera which does not allow for such solutions.

Faculty Mentor



Cynthia Simonian's essay goes far beyond the familiar task of analyzing how a composer of opera adapts a literary text and translates dramatic and thematic elements into music. Taking advantage of a longstanding controversy among critics of James' famous ghost story—a controversy that questions whether it is in fact ghosts that James is describing and not a repressed governess' erotic hallucinations—Simonian argues that Britten's music adopts a third interpretation that has emerged from the debate. This complex critical position contends that the text is insistently ambiguous and far more unsettlingly leaves the question undecidable. In her rigorously argued analysis, she shows that Britten's opera is best viewed not as mere adaptation, but rather as a highly wrought work of interpretive criticism.

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Introduction

Three Interpretations of The Turn of the Screw

It is often difficult to distinguish who is good and who is evil in Henry James' novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, or even what the nature of this evil might be. In the novella, a young woman becomes the governess of two children, Miles and Flora, and becomes convinced that the children are, at some level, being corrupted by the ghosts of the former valet and governess, who had a love affair while alive. She attempts to protect the children from these ghosts, but fails. The young boy, Miles, tragically dies after she pressures him into telling her the name of Peter Quint, the one he is supposedly seeking. He collapses in the governess' arms and is soon discovered to be dead. The novella abruptly ends with the boy's death, offering no further explanation and leaving both the governess and the reader to wonder who or what is responsible for the tragedy. A major issue in the novella is open to interpretation: whether Miles and Flora's nameless governess is a harmless benefactress intent on protecting the children, a mentally disturbed woman driven to a frenzied state by her possessive desire to claim the children as her own, or some combination of these.

The first interpretation, that of the governess as good and the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel as real, is referred to in Patricia Howard's book, *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw*, as "the first story" (23). The interpretation that holds that the governess suffers from hallucinations and is misled by her own possessive desires is referred to as "the second story" (Howard 23). There is, however, a third interpretation, which holds that James is purposefully ambiguous, allowing for neither a simple acceptance of the ghosts' existence or a rejection of the ghosts as hallucinations. Because there is evidence in James' text that can be used to argue for either the first or second story, the third argument, which states that one cannot make a clear choice, carries the most rhetorical weight. The Benjamin Britten opera *The Turn of the Screw* takes James' intentional lack of clear-cut answers into account as well, siding with the third

interpretation through its own use of musical and lyrical ambiguity.¹

A prime example of the first interpretation occurs in *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, which has this somewhat simplified reaction to the James story:

There is something peculiarly against nature, something indescribably hellish in the thought of the beautiful little children holding unholy communion with the wraiths of two vile servants who had, when alive, corrupted them.

(rpt. in James, Norton Critical Edition 155)

The opposition of the "beautiful" on the one hand and the "vile" and "corrupt" on the other suggests the dualistic thinking into which a first story analysis inevitably leads. Written in 1898, the same year *The Turn of the Screw* was published, this review responds to the mysterious events at Bly, the story's "haunted mansion," in the same manner that the governess does, with horror. The governess herself subscribes to the first story. She believes in Miles and Flora's fragile innocence and in the spirits' existence and corrupting influence from which she must protect the children. She, like the writers of the review, is concerned with the "effect" Quint had, while alive, "on innocent little precious lives" (James 26). Through her opposition to Quint, whom she portrays as a dehumanized embodiment of evil by dubbing him "that creature," she initially casts herself in the role of beneficent protector (James 26). She admits, "I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me" (James 27). This "flight of heroism," however, requires defensive rather than aggressive action; her task simply consists of supervising the children at all times and constantly watching for any potential influences of the ghosts. Her defensiveness breeds paranoia, for she attributes any perceived abnormality in the children's actions to the direct influence of the ghosts. However, this constant state of fear makes her feel important and appeals to her apparently overactive maternal instincts and pride. She exults in the singularity of

¹ For the purposes of this paper I will only be discussing Britten's function as a literary critic, an interpreter of James. However, he is more than that. In his collaboration with librettist Myfanwy Piper, Britten is the creator of a substantially different work than the James novella. His use of the 12-tone "Screw" theme to provide ominous foreshadowing after every scene, for example, would be impossible in a written narrative. Similarly, his decision to have the ghosts sing and speak differs markedly from the novella. The fact that his ghosts do speak suggests a further ambiguity than is possible in James, because the operagoers, like the governess, both see and hear these ghosts that may or may not exist. In this manner the constraints of the opera serve to place the viewer/listener in the governess' position. In addition, Britten creates a very different effect by using ambiguous themes to

suggest similarities between the governess and Quint, both musically and personally, especially in the confrontation scene that concludes the opera. This type of subtle suggestion concerning the characters would not be possible in James' written novella. Likewise, the terrible final confrontation in which the audience hears both the persuasive voice of Quint and the desperate voice of the governess pleading for the boy to join their sides (an audible conflict which perhaps only the governess and the audience can hear) also helps the listener identify, at least in part, with the governess' position. Objectivity is questioned because the opera, like the book, unfolds from the governess' point of view, as mentioned by the narrator in the Prologue. Thus, Britten's opera serves to strengthen and add new dimensions to the ambiguity that already exists in James.

her position: “I was there to protect and defend the little creatures...They had nothing but me, and I—well, I had them” (James 27). She enjoys the complete control she believes she has over their welfare, and especially the sense of possession that her role as governess gives her.

The governess’ possessive nature can be seen as well as her good intentions; she not only wants the children to be protected, but she wants to be the one who bears the all-important title of protector. She wishes to impress the man who has entrusted the children into her care. She relishes the thought that she “could succeed where many another girl might have failed,” that her heroism could “be seen—oh in the right quarter,” that is, by her distant employer (James 27). The darker side of her good intentions becomes apparent as her watchfulness begins to take on the character of paranoia: “I began to watch them in a stifled suspense...that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness” (James 27). The governess quickly dismisses the thought that she could be mad by claiming that she has “horrible proofs” of the ghosts’ evil influence on the children, thus demonstrating her sanity to herself and others (James 27). These proofs, however, are called into question by the advocates of the second major interpretation of James. As Howard states, the governess’ evidence of Miles’ fraternization with Quint is sketchy at best, “a matter of geometry, of angles” (45). The governess infers that Miles must be looking at Quint because he is “looking ‘not so much straight at [the governess] as at something that was apparently above [her]’” in the “tower on which Quint first appeared” (James qtd. in Howard 45). If the governess has no real proof for her assertions, then she must be relying on subjective suspicions and apprehensions in order to make her decision.

The second story suggests that the governess does in fact suffer from a form of madness, that it is not the ghosts who are evil (or even real), but rather that it is she who is the actual threat to the children. Harold C. Goddard, in “A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*,” asks rhetorically, “Whence does that apparition [of Peter Quint] come? Out of the governess’s unconfessed love and unformulated fear” (163). Goddard is “credited with [being] the first to put forward the theory that James’ governess suffers hallucinations” (161). These hallucinations include not only the ghosts themselves, but their presumed danger to the children, for, according to Goddard, in order to “save them they must be menaced: they must have enemies” (164). She therefore creates the menace so that she may “be brave for someone’s sake” (Goddard 164). Because, as Goddard says, “fear is like faith: it ultimately creates what at first it only

imagined,” the governess soon begins discovering—or inventing—evidence that supports her worst suspicions (164).

Proponents of the second story also contend that, because “there is never any evidence that anybody but the governess sees the ghosts,” the ghosts only exist in the governess’ feverish imagination (Wilson 170-171). The children are never explicitly described as seeing the ghosts; there is no face-to-face recognition between them. Even at the final, crucial scene when Miles, in the governess’ opinion, chooses between her and Quint, between salvation and destruction, the boy merely looks around to see what it is that the governess sees, crying out in a mixture of frustration and terror, “Where?” (James 85). Miles does not see the ghost even by the governess’ account, which is the only account we have. The fact that Miles does not see Quint at the end of the novella casts the whole confrontation scene in an ambiguous light. If Quint and the governess are not both present in front of Miles, then does he really choose between them or is he merely being pressured by the governess into making a confession? The cause of Miles’ death is similarly ambiguous; although those who hold to the second story believe that the governess “has literally frightened him to death,” James never explicitly indicates the cause of his death one way or the other (Wilson 172). The author’s last line, “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped,” is full of possible interpretations (James 85). “Dispossessed” may refer, in a characteristically first-story manner, to Quint’s spirit losing its power over the boy. However, it can also mean that the boy is no longer in possession of himself because the governess has wrenched control away from him, with fatal results. It is as though the governess has become merely one more possessive spirit fighting for control of the boy, and that while she succeeds in wrenching Miles out of Quint’s grasp, her possession of the boy leads to his death. Even the pronoun “we” in the line “We were alone” is suspect; it may refer to the governess and Miles, or to the governess and Quint, because Miles is dead.

The third interpretation, espoused by Edmund Wilson in his critical essay “The Ambiguity of Henry James,” states that James purposefully creates ambiguity in his narrative. According to Wilson, “Nowhere does James unequivocally give the thing away: everything from beginning to end can be taken equally well in either of the two senses” (172). Ultimately, there is no easy way to settle on either of these two rather simplistic interpretations, because James gives no clear-cut directions as to which interpretation to take. On the contrary, James chooses to use ambiguity in his work

because, as he says, “Make the reader think the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications” (James 128). James’ purposeful use of ambiguity aims to heighten the effect of terror of the unknown in the reader’s mind. Rather than explicitly defining what it is that Quint and Miss Jessel intend to do to the children, for example, James leaves it up to the already fear-ridden imagination of the intended reader. Similarly, rather than simply stating whether the ghosts are real, James makes neither claim, placing the reader in the much more terrifying position of being unable to decide on either of these two assertions. Because James does not squarely place the evil in either the ghosts or the governess, the evil may be anywhere. This third position, a state of permanent uncertainty, is one that the governess attempts to avoid at all costs, but which the reader is forced to confront.

When the reader or listener feels obliged to choose between the first and second stories, s/he may be in danger of falling into the same dualistic thinking that haunts Britten’s governess throughout the opera. To claim that the governess is either completely innocent or assuredly deranged and harmful is to commit the same error she makes in judging Miles as being either “an angel” or a “bad” child. She vacillates between blaming herself or the ghosts. Both the first and second interpretations are valuable to a certain extent, but neither of them alone is sufficient to explain all the evidence or conclusively determine the governess’ role in the purposefully ambiguous opera. Both James and Britten use ambiguity in their words and music to place the reader/listener in the same confused position as the governess. The reader is given the opportunity to accept the ambiguity that so frightens the governess, and from which she eventually flees.

Benjamin Britten’s Opera

In writing *The Turn of the Screw* as an opera in 1955, composer Benjamin Britten and librettist Myfanwy Piper confront “the ambiguity of Henry James,” and choose to support this ambiguity in their interpretation. In condensing and revising the James story into a libretto, Piper makes many interpretive choices regarding the question of the governess’ guilt or innocence, arguing for both simultaneously. For example, the libretto opens with the governess in a state of nervous yet optimistic anticipation. It initially provides evidence for the first story, with the young governess wondering, “Will [the children] like me? Poor babies, no father, no mother. But I shall love them as I love my own, all my dear ones left at home” (Britten 8-9). Her intentions seem blameless, even though an underlying cur-



Figure 1
Excerpt from the 12-tone “Screw” theme (Act I, “Theme.” Britten 4)

rent of anxiety pervades her questions. However, there is also evidence of her guilt, most powerfully in the end. In the final scene, after Miles’ death, the governess echoes the young boy’s lament of “Malo, Malo,” which may suggest that she sees herself as evil for what she has unwittingly done to Miles (Howard 41). Her chilling question, “What have we done between us?” which does not occur in the book, suggests that both she and Quint have been accomplices in Miles’ destruction (Howard 23). She follows her question with “Malo, Malo” once more, with the music finally “dying away” (composer’s direction) with a decrescendo, just as Miles has done (Britten 318).

The Britten opera is divided into sixteen scenes separated by fifteen variations on one main nine-measure “Screw” theme (Figure 1), so called in part because of its “powerful delineation of mounting tension,” which recurs throughout the opera (Howard 73). The theme is composed of two whole-tone scales, which suggest a feeling of unrest because they never reach a tonic or “home” key but rather keep ascending (Evans 205). According to Peter Evans, the “whole-tone scales...imply an infinitely extended pattern; this screw can turn for ever,” never reaching a conclusion (205). A foreshadowing of the “Screw” theme’s whole-tone scale and rhythm of double-dotted eighth notes followed by a thirty-second or sixteenth note is first heard lurking ominously under the narrator’s statement in the Prologue, “She was to do everything, be responsible for everything” (Britten 3). The narrator’s statement, which is sung only on the note C while the ominous 12-note theme plays below, gives it an eerily commanding tone. Regardless of what happens below it, the note C must stay the same, just as the governess must maintain her control over the situation at Bly regardless of what occurs. The juxtaposition of the unsettling “Screw” theme with the narrator’s statement of the governess’ complete responsibility for “everything” foreshadows the terror to come.

Act I Scene VI—The Lesson

There are three main scenes in which the listener cannot decide between the first and second stories: “The Lesson,” “Flora,” and “Miles”. Act I Scene VI, “The Lesson,” in

Figure 2
The Latin nouns (Act I Scene VI, "The Lesson." Britten 106-107)

which Miles sings his famous "Malo" song, gives evidence that leaves the listener unable to decide between the first and the second interpretations. Of his own accord, Miles begins singing the rhyme "Malo," which seems to suggest his "simultaneous attraction towards and yearning to resist evil" (Evans 205). Evans seems to make an argument for the first story, which places the evil in the children and the ghosts, outside the governess' mind. However, the opera purposefully does not allow for a simplistic interpretation. Flora and Miles' most seemingly sinister utterances usually occur only after repeated prompting by the governess, implying that she in fact leads them to the evil. Only after the governess prompts Miles with the probing "What else do you remember?" does he produce his "Malo" song (Britten 110). Likewise, in Act I Scene VII, "The Lake," only after the governess pressures Flora to name the lake does she ominously pronounce it the "Dead Sea" (Britten 118). However, the extent of the governess' responsibility for the children's knowledge of evil remains unknown. The lyrics of Miles' song are ambiguous:

Malo I would rather be...
Malo in an apple tree...
Malo than a naughty boy...
Malo in adversity. (Britten 111)

The first line could be interpreted as a statement that Miles

wishes to be "bad," especially in relation to the symbolic "apple tree" of line 2, reminiscent of the Fall. However, the fact that he speaks of being a "naughty boy...in adversity" implies that he laments his wickedness, suggesting that he is more good than evil. Valentine Cunningham points out that Piper discovered the rhyme in an "old grammar belonging to her aunt...probably H.T. Riley's *Dictionary of Latin Quotations*," and that this rhyme functioned as a mnemonic to help children remember the different meanings

of the word "Malo" (Cunningham 1-2). One of the meanings, "I wish," has its parallel in Miles' line "I would rather be," whereas "males" means "apple tree" and "malum," apple (3). The apple, traditionally associated with the Genesis story of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, may function in the rhyme as another source of ambiguity. From whom does Miles get this knowledge of evil? If, as Miles says, the governess did not teach him "Malo," does he find it on his own or through Quint? The governess' question to Miles, "Did I teach you that?" (Britten 112), suggests that she is asking him whether she has taught him about evil. He merely states, "No! I found it. I like it. Do you?" which seems to mischievously toy with the governess' impressionable nature (Britten 112). He claims that the governess did not teach him "Malo," which could support the argument that he has come to the knowledge of evil on his own or through Quint. However, it could also be that the governess brings out the "Malo" in him, prompting him to feel the need to sing it. The question is raised, but never answered, as in James.

Ominous musical foreshadowing in this scene helps convey the uncertainty surrounding good and evil in the opera. The music suggests a sense of unspecified evil, even though it starts with a child's apparently lighthearted singsong. The scene begins in a frisky F major, but with hints of "Malo" in the melody. The "Malo" theme is foreshadowed in the melody of Miles' recitation of "Amnis, axis, caulis, collis..." (Figure 2) if the notes that are only on the first syllable of each word are emphasized (Britten 106).² The first notice-

² The words of Miles' rhyme are also ironic, as discussed by Cunningham in his at times playfully irreverent article "Filthy Britten," because many of the Latin nouns carry slang connotations for male genitalia. Neither Britten nor Piper invented this rhyme; it originated in "Benjamin Hall Kennedy's standard Victorian schoolbook, the Shorter Latin Primer" as a children's rhyme to remember words such as "river, axle, stalk, hill, hind-leg, etc." (Cunningham 2). The children happily sing these words, which will later recur in an ironic Benedicite: "O amnis, axis, caulis,

collis, Bless ye the Lord" (Britten 194), either suggesting "blasphem[y]" or an "earnest claim for a kind of sanctity of the gay male body," which was often condemned in Britten's day (Cunningham 2, 4). Britten's use of these phallic terms in a rhyme that immediately precedes the melancholy "Malo" song, and is later used in a religious context, suggests the Jamesian link between sexuality and the question of evil, in both book and opera.

ably dissonant musical warning occurs in the dark-sounding horn part, which comes in on F as the governess begins to ask Miles, "Now say for me..." (Britten 109). The musical intrusion comes in not because of Quint, as it usually does, but because of the governess herself. It is Flora who must "rescue" the scene by changing the key quickly into A major (and attempting to distract the governess from Miles). According to critics such as Evans and Howard, the key of A major later becomes the governess' "good" key that battles Quint's A-flat. It is as if the A major, the "good," is subconsciously warning the governess not to continue her manner of questioning. The governess, however, does not stop, showing no interest in Flora during this scene. Flora tries to play but the governess quiets her and focuses on Miles instead.

"Let's do history! Boadicea on her chariot! Look at me!" Flora proclaims, with a child's proud enthusiasm (Britten 109-110). The governess, however, is not interested in Flora's figure of the powerful Celtic queen, but in Miles' Latin nouns, which are all masculine. The governess seems distinctly biased in favor of the male gender at this point. She is singularly focused on Miles, and this obsessive attention and questioning ("what else do you remember?") indirectly leads him to sing "Malo." In the Latin lesson scene, Britten and Piper hint that obsession is linked to sorrow and tragedy, just as they are linked in the end. The governess' focus on Miles foreshadows the similar drama of the final scene, in which her possessive struggle for Miles inadvertently leads to his death and to the second "Malo," which she herself sings.

However, there is ambiguity that does not allow for a clear second-story interpretation of the children as innocent victims; even under Flora's capering, the foreshadowing of the tragic end continues. An almost frighteningly manic woodwind section begins a rapid crescendo, beginning on the bassoon part that enters on a trill just before she mentions Boadicea. The crescendo culminates in Flora's "Look at me!" a desperate demand for attention in the face of the governess' preoccupation with Miles (Britten 110). The horn once again enters on a low, somber tone as she mentions the "chariot," which can be read either as support for

Figure 3

The governess prompts Miles (Act I Scene VI, "The Lesson." Britten 110).

Figure 4

Miles: "Malo" (Act I Scene VI, "The Lesson." Britten 111)

the interpretation that Flora has sinister tendencies, or merely as foreshadowing of the "Malo" scene to come. After the governess commands Miles, "Come now! What else do you remember? Now think!" (Figure 3), the scene moves immediately and eerily into Miles' A-flat major/F minor lamentation, "Malo" (Britten 110). The governess' pointed question, "What else do you remember?" is accentuated by the low horn part, which suggests a partial inversion of the "Screw" theme (Britten 110). The question sounds ominous, and leads up to "Malo."

The "Malo" song's effect is haunting, melodic and chilling. The repetition of "Malo" in ascending minor thirds gives a melancholy tone to the song (Figure 4). The third line in "Malo" is especially sad, with an accompanying B-flat minor chord in the harp. The fact that the music is in F minor, the relative minor of A-flat major, which is the stereotypical "Quint" key, suggests that Miles has some experience with the concept of evil, but laments this experience and/or knowledge, even as he repeats the word "Malo" over and over. Notably, Quint does not appear in this scene, nor is he mentioned. His musical trademarks are absent as well; although there are the melismas of the "Malo" song, there is no celesta or E-flat intrusion. However, this does not necessarily imply that Quint has nothing to do with Miles' sense of guilt. He may be keeping a secret, and "Malo" may be an indirect confession to the governess that he has hidden evil in his nature. There is no resolution to the ques-

tion of Miles' innocence or guilt. The final line in "Malo" ends on a dissonant note, suggesting that the issue of Miles' guilt is not only unresolved at the end of this scene, but may remain so, even when "Malo" resurfaces once again at the end of the opera (Britten 112).

Act II Scene VII—Flora

As in the "Malo" scene of Act I, in the "Flora" scene of Act II Scene VII it is virtually impossible to decide whether Flora is innocent (second story) or guilty (first story). The scene, therefore, lends itself to the third interpretation, suggesting that the reader, like the governess, cannot decide whether the child is lying about her contact with Miss Jessel, the emblem of forbidden female sexuality.

The scene begins with the governess and Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, singing "Flo-ra" loudly in descending perfect fifths (Britten 271), in a varied imitation of Miss Jessel's "Flo-ra" call, which is based on varied intervals of ascending sevenths and fifths (Britten 142). The two women, the governess and Mrs. Grose, appear to be united in their pursuit of the girl and their anger at being foiled, and the music under their call is ominous, with strong rhythms and dissonant notes. They sound as if they are two more apparitions trying to claim the child, which provides evidence for the second story. However, Mrs. Grose's words would seem to belie this simple interpretation: "Fancy running off like that, and such a long way, too, without your hat and coat! You are a naughty girl! Whatever made you leave us all?" (Britten 272-273). The two-measure introduction to Mrs. Grose's reprimand is not ominous, but playful, with a flute and clarinet passage in triplets, which seems to suggest her relief at finding the girl. However, when she speaks, the music darkens once again, showing Mrs. Grose at her fiercest, in a way she has not yet been portrayed in the opera. She scolds Flora harshly with many chromatic notes, but she speaks merely the flustered exclamations of a worried housekeeper, leaving the listener to decide whether she is truly angry. The music, with its string section in vehement unison, seems to convey the women's anger but may also foreshadow the ambiguous confrontation to follow, in which the governess sees Miss Jessel but Mrs. Grose does not.

The discrepancy between the words and the score surfaces again, when the seemingly playful flute and clarinet music recurs before the governess ominously asks, in deceptively simple pianissimo, "And where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" (Britten 274). The immediate response, in which the governess sees exactly what she wants (or doesn't want) to see, suggests both the first and second interpretations simulta-

neously, thus making a strong case for the ambiguity argument. She may be fulfilling her own worst premonitions, or she may be correct in her fear that Miss Jessel is there to meet Flora. The audience, once again, sees the ghost just as the governess does. However, like the governess, the audience is left in the unsettling and eerie position of not knowing whether it is seeing reality objectively (if such a thing can occur in this opera), or whether its views are biased by seeing the world through the governess' fearful mind.

In the "Flora" scene, Britten and Piper strongly convey the ambiguous existence of the ghosts in James' text. The governess in the James text proclaims that "[Miss Jessel] was there, so I was justified; she was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad" (James 68). In the opera, this feeling of horror mixed with vindication is conveyed merely by the governess' cry, "Ah! She is there!" which is almost a cry of triumph (Britten 274). However, Mrs. Grose's inability to see this figure of evil brings the terrifying ambiguity back to the mind of the governess and the reader/listener. "She isn't there, little lady, and nobody's there—and you never see nothing, my sweet! How can poor Miss Jessel—when Miss Jessel's dead and buried?" a shocked Mrs. Grose remarks to the governess (James 70). "We know, don't we love?" she "appeals, blundering in, to the child," suggesting that at this moment Mrs. Grose sees the governess, not Flora, as the overly imaginative child (James 70). Piper's libretto, however, does not specify to whom Mrs. Grose's remark, "We know that, love," is directed (Britten 279). The listener does not know whether Mrs. Grose's comment is to Flora, as in James, or whether it is a condescending comment to the overwrought governess.

Flora herself is similarly difficult to "read" in this scene. Without having been asked any direct questions, she jumps into the fray in an unsettlingly bright B-flat Lydian melody³ that is almost staccato in its quick intensity: "I can't see anybody, can't see anything, nobody, nothing, nobody, nothing, I don't know what you mean" (Figure 5) (Britten 277). This vehement and repetitive denial may suggest that she is protesting too much, that in fact she does have something to hide, which supports the first interpretation. The fact that Miss Jessel has previously said, "Flora, do not fail me! Nothing shall they know" suggests that Flora may be in league with her to protect their secret relationship, the nature of which is purposefully never clearly defined (Britten 275-276). However, Flora's outburst instead may be a result of the aggravation and frustration caused by the

³ In the Lydian mode, the normal E-flat is raised one half step to E, to add a "bright" quality.

governess' incessant harping. Flora's supposed demonstration of evil, in which she tells the governess, "You're cruel, horrible, hateful, nasty. Why did you come here... Take me away! Take me away! I don't like her! I don't like her! I hate her!" is similarly ambiguous (Britten 277-280). If indeed she is secretly meeting with Miss Jessel, she would not want to be taken away (presumably from Bly), unless her hatred for the governess somehow overcame her attachment to Miss Jessel. Or, she could be telling Miss Jessel to take her away, since there is no direction in the libretto that indicates whom Flora is addressing. However, the music seems unsuited for a true declaration of wickedness, since in Flora's choppy soprano passages it resembles more of a childish temper tantrum than a demonstration of sinister intent. Flora's high, almost comical rage is musically quite different from Miss Jessel's low, ominous lamentations. This difference in style casts some doubt on the idea that she has been influenced by her ghost, although the descending whole-tone scale used when she sings "We don't want you, we don't want you" is reminiscent of the "Screw" theme (Britten 281). The ambiguity is unresolved, and the listener, like the governess, is left to wonder whether Flora (or the governess) is indeed innocent or guilty, or whether this can even be determined.

The governess' conclusion that "Flora, I have lost you. She has taught you how to hate me!" is unsatisfying even for her, because she is still lost in self-doubt even as she attempts to reassure herself of the child's corruption (Britten 283-284). She immediately follows her condemnation of Flora by questioning herself, "Am I then horrible? Am I horrible? Horrible?" in ascending perfect fifths, increasing in volume and intensity (Britten 285). This thought is too horrible for the governess to ponder, so she answers her own terrible question with a vehement "No! No!" (Britten 285). She then follows this exclamation by once again undermining her position: "But I have failed, failed, most miserably failed, and there is no more innocence in me. And now she hates me!" (Britten 285-287). Under her statement, the descending



Figure 5
Flora's Outburst (Act I Scene VII, "Flora." Britten 277)

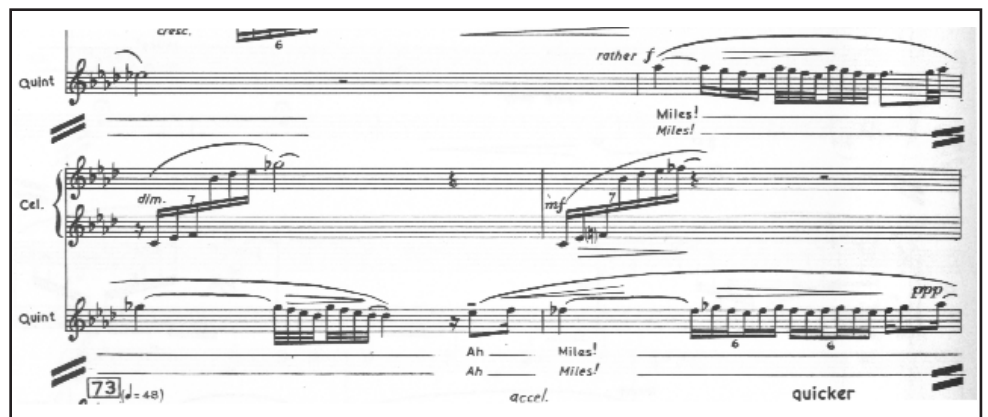


Figure 6
Peter Quint calls Miles (Act I Scene VIII, "At Night." Britten 134).

twelve-tone scale begins to turn its "screw" once more, suggesting a slide into decay, madness or self-doubt. If she is neither horrible nor innocent, having failed in her attempt to protect the child, then she cannot be completely explained by either the first or second story. She is once again lost in ambiguity, as is the listener.

There is no way to conclusively determine Flora's moral condition from this scene, and she is abruptly removed from the plot at this point; neither she nor Miss Jessel is seen again. In Act II Scene VIII, Mrs. Grose seems to agree with the governess that Flora is corrupt because of the "things I never knew nor hope to know, nor dare remember" that "poured out in her dreams" that night (Britten 290-291). However, Flora herself never speaks again in the opera. She is taken away, as protection from either Miss Jessel, the governess, her own nature, or all three. In a characteristically Jamesian fashion, what Flora has told Mrs. Grose about her dreams is left up to the listener's imagination, just as it is left up to the governess' mind.

Act II Scene VIII— Miles

The tension and ambiguity reach their climax in the final scene of the opera, Act II Scene VIII, “Miles,” which ends the plot but does not resolve the questions of guilt, innocence and responsibility. The music contributes to the sense of uncertainty. When Mrs. Grose tells the governess that the letter she had intended to send to the children’s uncle was never sent, the governess surmises, in a trembling pianissimo voice, “Miles?” (Britten 291). However, this time it is Mrs. Grose who comes

to the damaging conclusion: “Miles must have taken it, must have taken it” (Britten 291). Eerily, the governess begins to sing almost the same tune as Quint, when she says “O Miles, I cannot bear to lose you. You shall be mine, and I shall save you” (Britten 292). The main difference between her song of possession and Quint’s melismatic, haunting call of “Miles” (Figure 6) is that the governess sings it one half step up, beginning on E rather than E-flat. This may imply that the governess, although she intended to be good, has become just like Quint, at least in her desire to possess Miles. As in her confrontation with Miss Jessel, the governess becomes like a possessive ghost fighting over the children in her attempt to fight the perceived evil. Whether she is a “good” or “bad” figure of possession is not concluded decisively, even though in the end she recognizes the tragic effects of her intervention and the struggle with Quint: “What have we done between us? Malo, Malo...” (Figure 7) (Britten 317). Her musical similarity to Quint is alarming, leaving the listener to ask the same terrible question she eventually asks herself: is she just like him in her harmful effect on the children? Britten, like James, leaves the audience with no simple answer.

When Miles approaches the governess saying, “So, my dear, we are alone,” as though they are lovers, the tone changes into an unsettlingly sweet dance or promenade theme (Britten 292). The tone becomes slightly more ominous, with a trill in the tympani building tension, when the governess asks Miles pointedly, “Do you mind, do you mind being left alone?” (Britten 293). He cleverly turns the ques-

Figure 7 shows a musical score for Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." Britten 317. It features two staves: Percussion (Timp.) and Governess (Gov.). The Percussion part includes a trill in the tympani, marked with *sim.* and *pp*. The Governess part has the lyrics: "What have we done between us? Malo, Malo..." with musical notation including a *sim.* marking and a *pp* dynamic.

Figure 7

"What have we done between us?" (Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." Britten 317).

Figure 8 shows a musical score for Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." Britten 304. It features three staves: Governess (Gov.), Miles, and Quint. The Gov. part has the lyrics: "for my sake! Is he there? Is he there?" with musical notation including a *f* dynamic. The Miles part has the lyrics: "Is he there? Is he there?" with musical notation including a *ff* dynamic. The Quint part has the lyrics: "Miles, you are mine!" with musical notation including a *f* dynamic.

Figure 8

"Is he there?" (Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." Britten 304).

tion back on the governess, who answers indirectly by proclaiming her love for Miles, as if it is romantic: “Dearest Miles, I love to be with you. What else would I stay for?” (Britten 294). In the words, the tension is palpable, but the music ironically stays sweet, with occasional dark hints below. One such hint occurs when the governess proclaims, “I stay as your friend, I stay as your friend. Miles, there is nothing I would not do for you, remember” (Britten 294-295). On the first syllable of “nothing,” the G-sharp, which would be expected in the key of A major, suddenly becomes G-natural, adding an eerie dissonance to the proclamation of devotion or intended possession (Britten 294). When the governess asks Miles, “tell me what it is you have on your mind,” a crescendo builds until the clarinet, flute and celesta suddenly announce the presence of Quint, with his characteristic E-flat undermining the governess’ last note, E (Britten 295-296).

According to the directions in the libretto, however, Quint is “unseen,” and Miles does not speak directly to him in this scene (with the possible exception of his final cry, which is also ambiguous). Quint’s invisibility to the audience in his most important scene leaves open the possibility that he may not even be there. The fact that Miles has to ask, “Is he there? Is he there?” (Figure 8) heightens the doubt (Britten 304). As in the “Flora” scene, the audience cannot see this figure of evil that the governess so adamantly tries to combat, and is similarly confused as to the figure’s existence. Quint’s warnings to Miles may be interpreted as either sinister or cautionary; his “Beware! Beware!” may

Figure 9 is a musical score for Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." It features three staves: the Governess (Gov.), Miles, and Peter Quint. The Governess's part has lyrics: "ver, e - ver. wig, e - wig." Miles's part is marked "MILES. *ff* (freely) Peter Quint, you de-vil! Peter Quint, Du Teufel!" Quint's part has lyrics: "waits, he waits! wacht, er wacht!" Below the Quint staff, there is a note: "The boy runs into the Governess Er läuft in die Arme der Gouvernän". At the bottom right, it says "[134] Broadly (♩ = 80) 28".

Figure 9
"Peter Quint, you devil!" (Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." Britten 311)

mean, as he later states, that he wishes to possess Miles for himself: "Miles! You're mine! Beware of her!" (Britten 297, 299-300). Or it may be that Quint somehow has a premonition that the governess' struggle to possess Miles will cost the boy his life. By this interpretation, what the governess perceives to be Quint could be the part of Miles' consciousness that is trying desperately to resist being possessed by the governess. She views this resistance as a threat, but she may not avoid becoming a similar threat herself.

When the governess asks, on her quick sixteenth notes on A, "Did you steal my letter? Did you steal my letter?" her repetitive insistence and the rhythm of her words are comparable to Quint's temptation of Miles to take the letter, "Easy to take, easy to take, easy to take..." (Britten 299, 251). When Miles finally admits, "Yes. I took it," the music reverts to the "romantic" theme used earlier in the scene, suggesting that the governess is relieved at the possibility of having a trusting relationship with the boy. However, the ominous music builds again, in A minor, as the governess asks "Why, why did you take it?" (Britten 305). The confrontation becomes immediate, with Quint and the governess taking turns speaking to Miles in every other measure, as the intensity and volume increase (Britten 305). As the governess asks, "Who? Who? Who made you take the letter?" Peter Quint tries his alluring E-flat melismas once again, under the words he spoke in Act I, "On the paths, in the woods, remember Quint! At the window, on the tower, when the candle is out, remember Quint!" (Britten 306-308). Even here, he is portrayed sympathetically. As Christopher Palmer, apparently a proponent of the second story, states, "We almost feel a twinge of regret when Quint is defeated...and wonder whether perhaps Miles would have done better to succumb to his blandishments rather than to the governess' neuroses" (qtd. in Howard 113). The governess, on the other hand, is insistent in her frantic des-

Figure 10 is a musical score for Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." It features two staves. The top staff has lyrics: "To - ge - ther we have de-stry'd him, Ge - mein - sam ward er ver - nich - tel." The bottom staff has lyrics: "Fare - well! Leb - wohl!"

Figure 10
The governess says "Together we have destroyed him." Meanwhile, Quint says "Farewell!" (Act II Scene VIII, "Miles." Britten 313).

peration to claim the child. "Only say the name...and he will go forever," the governess promises, while Quint sings, "He leads, he watches, he waits...he waits!" (Britten 309-310, 311). In the midst of these two forces, both apparently pulling him in opposite directions, Miles screams "Peter Quint, you devil!" (Figure 9) (Britten 311).

The ambiguity exists to the very end. Can Miles even hear Quint, or is he only in the governess' mind? Miles may be referring to Quint as a devil, or he may refer to the governess. These are his final words, after which he is discovered to be dead, so no one can answer the question of whom he is condemning. Howard points out that the governess' conclusion, "Ah, Miles...you are saved!" and Quint's lament, "Ah, Miles...we have failed!" are "a reversal of the truth," especially since Quint and the governess sing in an "unprecedented unison" on a "sustained 'Quint harmony'" in A-flat (Howard 101). The "almost unbearable unconscious irony" (Howard 101) continues as the governess says, "Together we have destroyed him, destroyed him" (Figure 10), on the same notes as Quint's "Farewell" (Britten 313). On the second repetition of "destroyed him," the low, sustained and ominous winds and strings imply the disaster that has befallen Miles. Ironically, the music is now in the key of A (Howard 101), which is the governess' "good" key. Quint now sings "Farewell" in E minor for the "first time," having always crooned to Miles in E-flat before (Howard 101). The music implies at one level that the governess has won, but also that something is wrong. This duality suggests that either the governess has unwittingly succeeded in destroying Miles, or that she has tragically failed to save him in spite of her good intentions, but through no fault of her own.

The governess' terrible realization occurs just after Quint's voice fades away, and the English horn plays the haunting "Malo" theme. She cries, "No, what is it, what is it? Miles,

“speak to me, speak to me! Why don’t you answer...Miles! Malo, Malo!” (Britten 314-316). At this point all her previous statements to Miles such as, “Only say the name and he will go forever,” become ironic because now both Miles and Quint are gone forever (Britten 316). Ambiguity surfaces once again. Her last question, “What have we done between us?” may mean that she has colluded with Quint in Miles’ destruction. However, as Bernard Gilmore points out, it may also be that she wonders what she and Miles have done that has unwittingly destroyed him (Personal interview). The governess reiterates Miles’ lament, “Malo, than a naughty boy...Malo, in adversity,” suggesting that she either believes herself to be bad and recognizes Miles as being innocent, or that she laments the entire tragedy and the possibility of her unwitting role in it. The listener cannot tell whether she believes the boy to be innocent or guilty, only that she laments the death as being “Malo.” She may still believe herself to be innocent in her desire to rid Miles of Quint; this question is never answered.

Conclusion

Howard notes that the final rendition of “Malo” is “unfinished, and the final bars bring the opera to an abrupt, whispered A major conclusion in the orchestra” (101). The unfinished, unresolved notes of the final Malo suggest that there can be no resolution to the problem of innocence and guilt Britten and Piper have raised in the opera, just as there is no resolution in James’ novella. The book ends with the words “his heart, dispossessed, had stopped.” With that abrupt last word, “stopped,” the plot ends. Questions are unresolved. Britten recreates this abruptness with the complete lack of a musical “finale” or conclusion. The “Screw” theme does not recur at the end in a grandiose reprise. Rather, the listener is left in the same ambiguity that the governess experiences, and s/he is not allowed a simple first- or second-story interpretation to answer the question. Unlike the governess, who cannot bear the uncertainty of not knowing whether she is innocent or guilty, and who tends to leap to easy explanations blaming the ghosts or herself, the reader/listener is challenged by an opera that does not allow for such simple solutions.

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