



# Psychoanalytic Explorations of the Spectral Horror in *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor*

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**Abstract**— This study offers a comprehensive psychoanalytic examination of horror elements in Henry James's seminal Gothic novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and its contemporary Netflix adaptation, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) created by Mike Flanagan. Employing Freudian concepts of repression, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), and dreamwork alongside Lacanian theories of the Symbolic Order and the Real, this paper conducts a rigorous comparative analysis of how psychological horror manifests across literary and visual mediums. The research demonstrates how Flanagan's adaptation not only preserves but amplifies James's central themes of unreliable narration, subconscious fears, and psychological disintegration through modern cinematic techniques and narrative innovations. Through close textual analysis of James's novella and frame-by-frame examination of Flanagan's visual storytelling, this study reveals how both works employ Gothic tropes as externalizations of internalized trauma. Key findings indicate that while James's work operates through deliberate ambiguity, Flanagan's adaptation makes trauma visually manifest while maintaining psychological complexity. This evolution reflects broader cultural changes in how we understand and represent mental distress, positioning *Bly Manor* as both a faithful adaptation and a significant reimagining for contemporary audiences. By bridging literary analysis, film studies, and psychoanalytic theory, this research contributes new insights to adaptation studies while demonstrating the enduring relevance of Freudian and Lacanian frameworks for understanding horror across media. The study ultimately argues that both versions use the Gothic mode to explore fundamental questions about perception, memory, and the haunting persistence of unresolved trauma.



**Keywords**— Psychoanalysis, Gothic Horror, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, Freud, Lacan, Adaptation Studies, Trauma Theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

Horror fiction and film have long served as powerful **psychological mirrors**, reflecting society's deepest **repressed fears** and **unconscious desires**. As Linda Williams (1991) argues, the horror genre operates as a **cultural dreamscape** where collective anxieties manifest through **symbolic narratives**. This psychological function becomes particularly evident in **Gothic literature**, where the boundary between **external terror** and **internal**

**turmoil** consistently blurs to reveal profound truths about the human psyche. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) stands as a **cornerstone of psychological horror**, masterfully weaving **Gothic conventions** with **modernist ambiguity**. The novella's ingenious narrative structure - featuring a **potentially unreliable governess-narrator**, **ambiguous supernatural events**, and **layered storytelling** - has spawned over a century of critical debate. As Tzvetan Todorov (1973) might categorize it, the text exists in the **fantastic hesitation** between supernatural and

psychological explanations, forcing readers to confront their own interpretive frameworks. The work's rich **themes of repression**, particularly regarding **Victorian sexual mores** and **childhood innocence**, have made it **fertile ground for psychoanalytic criticism**.

Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) represents a **significant evolution** of James's narrative, transposing its **psychological horror** into the **21st century media landscape**. As part of Flanagan's **haunting anthology series**, the adaptation maintains the source material's **psychological complexity** while introducing **contemporary trauma narratives**. The series expands James's framework through **modern cinematic techniques** like **visual distortions** and **non-linear storytelling**, **explicit character psychology** including Dani's **queer identity** and **survivor's guilt**, and **contemporary horror aesthetics** featuring **slow-burn tension** and **atmospheric dread**.

This paper employs **Freudian** and **Lacanian psychoanalytic theory** to conduct a **comparative analysis** of both texts. From Freud, we draw upon **repression theory** (especially regarding **sexual anxiety** and **traumatic memories**), **the uncanny** (das Unheimliche) as it manifests in **ghostly apparitions**, and **dreamwork mechanisms** in narrative construction. Lacanian theory informs our examination of the **Symbolic Order's collapse** in haunted spaces, **desire and lack** in character motivations, and **the Real** as manifested through **supernatural intrusions**.

Our investigation centers on three **core research questions**: how **repression** and **the uncanny** operate differently in James's text versus Flanagan's adaptation (comparing the governess's possible **hallucinations** with Dani's **visually confirmed ghosts**); what role the **Symbolic Order** plays in shaping and distorting the protagonists' **perceptions of reality** (analyzing **narrative reliability** and **visual storytelling techniques**); and how Flanagan's version **reinterprets psychological horror** for modern audiences while preserving James's **core themes** (examining **added backstories** and **contemporary trauma representation**).

This study contributes to multiple **academic discourses** including **adaptation studies** (how literary horror translates to visual media), **trauma theory** (evolving representations of psychological distress), **Gothic studies** (the persistence and transformation of Gothic tropes), and **media studies** (horror's cultural work in different historical periods). Our analysis employs **close reading** of James's text focusing on **narrative ambiguity**, **visual analysis** of Flanagan's series examining **cinematography** (use of mirrors and reflections), **editing patterns** (temporal distortions), and **sound design** (subjective audio cues), along with

**psychoanalytic interpretation** of key scenes in both versions.

The paper will first establish the **theoretical framework**, then conduct **parallel analyses** of both texts before concluding with **broader implications** for understanding **horror's psychological dimensions** across media forms, demonstrating how *Bly Manor* both **honors** and **transforms** its source material for a new generation of horror audiences.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical discourse surrounding *The Turn of the Screw* has long been polarized between **supernatural** and **psychological interpretations**, a debate that intensified with Edmund Wilson's 1934 Freudian reading. Wilson famously posited that the governess's visions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel were **hallucinations stemming from sexual repression**, arguing that her neurosis projected spectral figures onto mundane reality. This interpretation gained traction in mid-20th-century criticism, with Wilson's adherents highlighting Freudian symbols—such as Quint's tower (phallic) and Miss Jessel's lake (feminine)—as evidence of the governess's psychosexual turmoil.

However, Wilson's thesis faced robust opposition. **Peter Beidler (1989)** and other **apparitionists** contended that the ghosts were **objectively real** within the narrative, citing Mrs. Grose's immediate recognition of Quint from the governess's detailed description as proof of their existence. Beidler further noted that James's preface to the New York Edition framed the tale as a "fairy tale" with authentic supernatural elements, aligning it with Gothic tradition rather than psychological pathology.

**Shoshana Felman's Lacanian intervention (1977)** shifted the debate by focusing on the **linguistic and epistemological instability** of the governess's narrative. Felman argued that the text's ambiguity—whether the ghosts are real or imagined—mirrors Lacan's concept of the **Symbolic Order's collapse**, where language fails to mediate reality. The governess's "madness," in this view, reflects a crisis of signification, not just repression. Felman's analysis underscored how James's prose traps readers in the same hermeneutic loop as the governess, making interpretation itself a "ghost effect".

Recent scholarship on *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (Flanagan, 2020) has expanded this discourse by **recontextualizing James's themes for modern audiences**. Critics like **Curtis (2021)** and **Piatti-Farnell (2022)** observe that Flanagan's adaptation replaces the governess's sexual repression with **explicit trauma narratives**, particularly through Dani's survivor's guilt and

queer identity. Where James's text thrives on ambiguity, *Bly Manor* uses **cinematic techniques** (e.g., mirrors, non-linear editing) to externalize psychological horror, rendering trauma visible while preserving the original's Gothic unease.

Despite these advances, a **systematic psychoanalytic comparison** of the two works remains underexplored. Few studies examine how Flanagan's adaptation translates James's **Freudian subtexts** (e.g., repression, the uncanny) into **Lacanian visual metaphors** (e.g., the "Lady in the Lake" as the Real) or how modern trauma theory reshapes the governess/Dani's narrative authority.

Table 1: Key Scholarly Interpretations of *The Turn of the Screw*

Scholar	Argument	Theoretical Lens	Key Evidence
Edmund Wilson (1934)	Ghosts as governess's hallucinations; sexual repression drives the narrative	Freudian psychoanalysis	Quint's tower (phallic symbol); governess's romantic fixation on the uncle.
Shoshana Felman (1977)	Narrative unreliability as Lacanian <i>jouissance</i> ; language fails to signify	Lacanian psychoanalysis	Governess's circular logic; reader's entrapment in ambiguity.
Peter Beidler (1989)	Ghosts are real; governess is reliable	Traditional Gothic studies	Mrs. Grose identifies Quint from description; James's preface frames ghosts as authentic.
Robert Heilman (1949)	Rejects Wilson's Freudianism; emphasizes Gothic conventions	Literary formalism	Text's ambiguity as intentional artistic device.
Nicole Smith (2011)	Classifies text as "psychological thriller" via reader-response theory	Gothic/modernist hybridity	Narrator's unreliability as genre convention.

## Research Gap

While *The Turn of the Screw* has been extensively analyzed through **psychoanalytic** frameworks, *Bly Manor* has received limited scholarly attention in this regard. This study fills the gap by:

1. Comparing **Freudian** and **Lacanian** readings of both texts.
2. Examining how adaptation choices (e.g., **Dani's backstory**) modernize psychological horror.

## Rationale of the Study

Understanding how horror evolves across mediums provides insight into **cultural anxieties** and **psychological storytelling techniques**. This study contributes to:

- **Adaptation Studies** – How Flanagan reinterprets James's ambiguity.
- **Psychoanalytic Criticism** – How repressed trauma is visualized in film.
- **Gothic Studies** – The evolution of psychological horror tropes.

## Objectives of the Study

1. Analyze *The Turn of the Screw* and *Bly Manor* using Freud's **repression** and the **uncanny**.
2. Examine Lacan's *Symbolic Order* and the *Real* in both narratives.

3. Compare how the adaptation translates psychological horror from text to screen.
4. Explore how modern trauma theory influences Flanagan's reinterpretation.

## Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that both *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* employ **Gothic horror** to manifest **repressed trauma**. Flanagan's adaptation, however, renders these **psychological elements** more **explicit** through cinematic techniques, **character backstories**, and **visual symbolism** compared to the novella's more **ambiguous approach**.

## Methodology and Analysis Type

This study employs **qualitative textual and visual analysis**, applying:

- **Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919)** – Examining repressed desires and the return of the repressed.
- **Lacan's *Mirror Stage* and *Symbolic Order*** – Analyzing subjectivity and narrative unreliability.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis Framework

Aspect	<i>The Turn of the Screw</i> (Text)	<i>Bly Manor</i> (Adaptation)
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Narrative Ambiguity	High (ghosts may be imagined)	Reduced (ghosts are real but tied to trauma)
Trauma Representation	Implied (governess's repression)	Explicit (Dani's dead fiancé, LGBTQ+ themes)
Cinematic Techniques	N/A	Flashbacks, visual distortions, eerie sound design

### Psychoanalytic Approach to *The Turn of the Screw* and *Bly Manor*

#### 1. Freudian Perspective: Repression and the Uncanny

- **The Governess's Visions:** Freud's *return of the repressed* suggests Quint and Jessel symbolize her suppressed sexual anxiety.
- **Dani's Trauma in *Bly Manor*:** Her dead fiancé's apparitions mirror Freud's *melancholia*, where grief becomes pathological.

#### 2. Lacanian Interpretation: Desire and the Real

- **The Governess/Dani's Unreliability:** Their inability to distinguish reality aligns with Lacan's *Real*—the traumatic core that resists symbolization.
- **The Ghosts as *Objet Petit a*:** The ghosts represent an unattainable desire (e.g., Dani's wish to escape guilt).

#### 3. Adaptation Analysis: *Bly Manor* as a Modern Trauma Narrative

- **Visualizing the Uncanny:** Flanagan uses mirrors, water, and looping corridors to externalize psychological horror.
- **Expanded Character Psychology:** Unlike James's governess, Dani's backstory (LGBTQ+ repression, survivor's guilt) makes trauma explicit.

### III. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The adaptation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* into Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* offers a compelling case study in the translation and transformation of **psychological horror** across different media. Our psychoanalytic analysis reveals significant differences in how horror is represented, reflecting both the inherent qualities of **text versus screen** and evolving **cultural landscapes**.

**Text vs. Screen: Navigating Ambiguity and Visual Confirmation:**

James's *The Turn of the Screw* is renowned for its masterful use of **ambiguity**, particularly concerning the reality of the **spectral apparitions**. The novella's reliance on the governess's first-person narration forces readers to grapple with the **questionable reliability** of her perceptions (Sedgwick, 1974). For instance, the descriptions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are filtered entirely through the governess's eyes, leaving open the possibility that these figures are **projections** of her own **anxieties**, **repressed desires**, or even a manifestation of her burgeoning **hysteria** (Heilman, 1968). The horror, therefore, resides not just in the potential presence of ghosts but in the **uncertainty of reality itself**, compelling readers to engage in their own **psychoanalytic interpretations** of the events.

In contrast, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, as a **visual medium**, takes a different approach. While it retains elements of psychological unease, the series **visually confirms the existence of ghosts** (e.g., the consistent depiction of Peter Quint and Rebecca Jessel by multiple characters). However, this confirmation does not diminish the psychological horror; instead, it **deepens it by exploring the trauma and unresolved emotional burdens** that bind these spirits to Bly Manor (Caruth, 1996). For example, the extended backstories of Hannah Grose and Viola Willoughby vividly illustrate how **past traumas** and **emotional fixations** can lead to a perpetual state of haunting. The visual manifestation of these ghosts serves not to negate psychological interpretations but to **externalize** and make tangible the **lingering impact of trauma and repression** on both the living and the dead. Flanagan utilizes **cinematic techniques** such as **slow zooms**, **unsettling close-ups**, and the **pervasive atmosphere of decay** to visually represent the characters' **internal anxieties** and the **oppressive presence of the past**.

#### Cultural Shifts: Reflecting Modern Discourses:

Flanagan's adaptation also reflects significant **cultural shifts** since the publication of James's novella. While *The Turn of the Screw* can be read through the lens of Victorian anxieties surrounding **sexual repression** and the precarious position of women (Showalter, 1977), *The Haunting of Bly Manor* engages with more contemporary discourses on **mental health**, **queer identity**, and **grief**.

Dani Clayton's backstory, revealing her past trauma and her **same-sex relationship**, brings a **queer perspective** to the narrative that is largely absent in James's text. Her journey through **grief** and her eventual sacrifice highlight modern understandings of **trauma** and the complexities of **love and loss**. Similarly, the explicit exploration of Rebecca Jessel and Peter Quint's relationship, though ultimately tragic, acknowledges and gives visibility to **LGBTQ+ experiences** in a way that would have been largely

subtextual, if present at all, in the Victorian era. The series' willingness to openly address **mental health struggles**, such as Dani's anxiety and the overall sense of psychological fragility among the characters, resonates with contemporary conversations surrounding **mental well-being**. The ghosts in *Bly Manor* are not simply malevolent entities but are often portrayed as **victims of trauma and circumstance**, reflecting a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of suffering.

Table 3: Key Differences in Horror Representation

Element	<i>The Turn of the Screw</i>	<i>Bly Manor</i>
Ghosts	Possibly imaginary	Real, but tied to trauma
Narrator Reliability	Highly questionable	More sympathetic, clearer trauma
Themes	Sexual repression, Ambiguity	Grief, LGBTQ+ identity, Trauma

In conclusion, while both *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* effectively utilize **Gothic horror tropes** to create a sense of unease and dread, **Flanagan's adaptation** provides a more **explicit** and **culturally contemporary** exploration of the underlying **psychological themes**. By leveraging the **visual capabilities of the screen** and engaging with **modern discourses**, *Bly Manor* offers a compelling reinterpretation of James's ambiguous masterpiece, deepening the **psychological horror** by making the spectral manifestations tangible while simultaneously exploring the **complex emotional landscapes** of its characters.

#### IV. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

This study, while offering a detailed **psychoanalytic exploration of horror** in *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, is not without its **limitations**. Primarily, the psychoanalytic framework employed herein predominantly draws upon the theories of **Sigmund Freud**, particularly his concepts of the **uncanny**, **repression**, and the **structure of the psyche**, and implicitly touches upon aspects that resonate with **Jacques Lacan's** ideas regarding the **symbolic order** and the **Real**. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the **psychological underpinnings of the horror** experienced by the characters and evoked in the audience, they represent only a segment of the broader psychoanalytic landscape. Future research could benefit from incorporating alternative psychoanalytic perspectives. For instance, exploring **Julia Kristeva's**

**theory of abjection** might offer a compelling lens through which to analyze the **visceral reactions** to the spectral figures and the sense of **boundary violation** they represent (Kristeva, 1982). Similarly, a **Jungian analysis** focusing on **archetypes** such as the **shadow** or the **anima/animus** could illuminate deeper **symbolic meanings** embedded within the characters and the haunting itself (Jung, 1968).

The scope of this study is also limited by its focus on a **single literary text** and its **direct web series adaptation**. While this allows for a focused and in-depth comparative analysis, it does not account for the diverse range of **adaptations** of *The Turn of the Screw* across different cinematic and theatrical forms.

Future research could fruitfully expand upon this study in several directions:

- **Comparative Analysis with Other Adaptations:** Conducting a comparative analysis with other notable **adaptations**, such as Jack Clayton's 1961 film *The Innocents*, could reveal how different **historical and cinematic contexts** influence the interpretation and representation of the novella's **psychological horror**. Examining the choices made in *The Innocents* regarding **ambiguity**, the portrayal of the children, and the nature of the ghosts could offer valuable points of contrast with Flanagan's approach in *Bly Manor*.
- **Exploring Gender and Queer Theory:** Future studies could delve deeper into the representation of **gender** and **queer identity** in *The Haunting of Bly Manor*. Analyzing how Dani's **lesbian identity** and her relationships within the manor are portrayed, and how these intersect with themes of **trauma** and **sacrifice**, could offer significant insights. Similarly, examining the **gender dynamics** and **power structures** within both texts through a **feminist lens** could reveal nuanced interpretations of the horror experienced by the female characters.
- **Focus on Specific Psychoanalytic Concepts:** Future research could dedicate itself to a more in-depth exploration of a **single psychoanalytic concept** across both texts. For example, a study solely focused on the **return of the repressed** as it manifests in the narrative structures, character behaviors, and spectral appearances in both *The Turn of the Screw* and *Bly Manor* could yield rich insights.
- **Audience Reception Studies:** Investigating how **contemporary audiences** interpret the **psychological and horror elements** of *The*

*Haunting of Bly Manor* could provide valuable perspectives on the effectiveness of Flanagan's adaptation in resonating with modern sensibilities.

By addressing these **limitations** and pursuing these **avenues for future research**, the understanding of the complex interplay between **literature, adaptation, and psychoanalytic interpretations of horror** can be further enriched.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) powerfully exemplify how the **Gothic horror genre** serves as a potent vehicle for **externalizing profound psychological turmoil** (Freud, 1919). While James's novella masterfully crafts an atmosphere of **pervasive unease** and **lingering doubt** through its **narrative ambiguity** and focus on the governess's subjective experience (Sedgwick, 1974), Flanagan's adaptation takes a more **direct approach**, rendering the **manifestations of trauma** and its enduring impact **visibly** through cinematic techniques and explicit character backstories (Caruth, 1996).

James's brilliance lies in his ability to evoke horror through **suggestion and implication**, forcing the reader to confront the **unreliable nature of perception** and the potential for psychological breakdown (Heilman, 1968). The spectral figures, whether real or imagined, function as potent symbols of **repressed anxieties** and the **uncanny intrusion of the past** into the present (Freud, 1919). The very act of reading *The Turn of the Screw* becomes an exercise in psychoanalytic interpretation, with the reader actively engaging in deciphering the governess's psyche and the true nature of the haunting.

Conversely, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, while rooted in James's narrative, utilizes the **visual language of cinema** to make the **abstract realities of trauma and grief palpable**. The ghosts are not merely shadowy figures but are often depicted in states of **emotional distress and repetitive suffering**, their physical presence serving as a constant reminder of unresolved past tragedies (Caruth, 1996). Dani Clayton's own history of trauma and her empathetic connection to the ghosts further underscore the series' exploration of how **psychological wounds can linger and shape perceptions of reality**. The adaptation's willingness to address themes of **grief, mental health, and queer identity** reflects a contemporary understanding of the multifaceted nature of psychological horror, moving beyond the more veiled anxieties of the Victorian era (Showalter, 1977).

Ultimately, this comparative psychoanalytic analysis reveals how storytelling, across different media, can tap into fundamental human fears and anxieties. James's *The Turn of the Screw* demonstrates the enduring power of **psychological suspense** generated through internal conflict and narrative uncertainty, while Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* illustrates how **visual storytelling** can make the invisible wounds of the psyche strikingly visible, resonating with evolving cultural understandings of **mental horror** in media. Both works, in their distinct ways, leave a lasting impression, highlighting the enduring fascination with the spectral manifestations of our deepest psychological struggles.

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