

Middle-school-level working thesis: The governess is highly influenced by the halo effect in the story “the turn of the screw”

Intro paragraph:

In the story *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess undergoes alarming encounters with the ghosts of caretakers past and is left to come up with a way to protect the children in her care.

finish this later

What the heck is the halo effect??

Put easily, the halo effect is a “type of cognitive bias in which our overall impression of a person influences how we feel and think about his or her character.” To explain briefly, our first impressions of a person will impact how we feel about their specific traits. For example, if we perceive a person as nice, we may assume them to be intelligent as well. The biggest example of the halo effect in our society is our impressions of celebrities. Because they are often viewed as attractive and successful, the general public perceives them to be knowledgeable, kind and funny as well. The halo effect is also commonly referred to as the ‘physical attractiveness stereotype’ as physical attractiveness factors greatly into the halo effect. We tend to think highly and place more trust in those we perceive to be physically attractive

When attractiveness= innocence

- Despite the fact that she possesses hard evidence proving Miles’ capability of wayward behaviour (the letter), the governess fails to face the reality that Miles has done any wrong.
 - “...I had seen him on the instant, without and within, in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his little sister. He was incredibly beautiful, and Mrs. Grose had put her finger on it: everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence. What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child -- his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love. It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence...” (36-37).
 - Because of his “indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love” and his incredible beauty, the governess is stricken with the halo effect, she completely overlooks Miles’ recent transgression
- In the governess’ eyes, the beauty of the children represents innocence. She is blinded by the halo effect toward the dark doings of the ghosts through the children.
 - “To gaze into the depths of blue of the child’s eyes and pronounce their loveliness a trick of premature cunning was to be guilty of a cynicism in preference to which

I naturally preferred to abjure my judgement and, so far as might be, my agitation. I could n't abjure for merely wanting to, but I could repeat to Mrs. Grose -- as I did there, over and over, in the small hours -- that with our small friends' voices in the air, their pressure on one's heart and their fragrant faces against one's cheek, everything fell to the ground but their incapacity and their beauty" (60)

- Here, the governess would rather retract her suspicions than to suspect a child of such beauty to be guilty of anything nefarious. She feels that to "pronounce their loveliness a trict of premature cunning was to be guilty of cynicism". Her inability to place blame on the kids is the result of the halo effect.
- Despite her knowledge of Miles' misbehavior, she can't seem to think of him as anything but an angel because of his adorable face and angelic demeanor. After one exchange with Miles, she recounts,
 - "I can still see his wonderful smile, the whites of his beautiful eyes and the uncovering of his clear teeth, shine to me in the dusk. 'If I tell you why, will you understand?' ... He was gentleness itself, and while I wagged my head at him he stood there more than ever a little fairy prince. It was his brightness indeed that gave me a respite... 'Well,' he said at last, 'just exactly in order that you should do this.'
 - 'Do what?'
 - 'Think me -- for a change -- *bad!*'" (75)
- In this excerpt, we get a feel for exactly what the governess is thinking. In the midst of discussion Miles' mysterious wrongdoings, she can't seem to focus on anything but his beauty. We also get the sense from this passage that Miles, knowing he is not himself, is trying to get through to the governess. My asking her to this him "for a change -- *bad*," he is acknowledging the fact that the governess cannot see past the halo effect, and he is trying to get help.

When ugliness= evil

- Introduce this in some way plzzz you dummy
 - "Another person -- this time; but a figure of quite as unmistakeable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful -- with such an air also, and such a face!" (56).
 - The halo effect causes us to assume positive traits with those we find attractive, but it also has the opposite effect on those we find physically unattractive. This excerpt is a good example of the flipped version of the halo effect because the governess knows nothing about the woman she sees across the lake, but because of her "pale and dreadful" face, the governess concludes that this spirit must be one of "unmistakable horror and evil".

- We can see the halo effect in action again as the governess only truly sees the evil in Flora when her childish beauty falls away.
 - God to forgive me for seeming to see that, as she stood there holding tight to our friend's dress, her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished. I've said it already -- she was literally, she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly.... The wretched child had spoken exactly as if she had got from some outside source each of her stabbing little words, and I could therefore, in the full despair of all I had to accept... 'Of course I've lost you' (103-104).
 - Here, it is clear that the governess can fully see the impact of the ghost on the child she loved. Despite this, the reality remains that she wasn't able to see it sooner because of the halo effect and the impact it had on her ability to see the truth. Because of the halo effect's tendency to make people see the best in those we find physically attractive, the governess was unable to see the whole truth until "her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed".