

Alaina Salas

Dr. Pennington

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The Governess' Bias:

The Halo Effect in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*

In Henry James' *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. During her task of ridding the house of ghosts, she faces the struggle of overcoming her own biases in the form of the halo effect. The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is unable to see the impact of the ghosts on the children because she is blinded by the halo effect. Under the influence of this psychological phenomenon, she is only able to equate beauty with innocence. The halo effect impacts the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* by preventing her from being able to see the ghosts corruption within the children..

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” (Cherry). To explain briefly, one's appearance will impact how others feel about their specific traits. For example, if one perceives a person as nice, they may assume them to be intelligent as well. The halo effect is also commonly referred to as the “physical attractiveness stereotype” as physical attractiveness factors greatly into the halo effect. People tend to think highly and place more trust in those they perceive to be physically attractive. This bias actively prevents the governess from being able to identify the corruption that the ghosts have caused within the children in *The Turn of the Screw* due to their physical attractiveness and well-mannered behavior.

The governess faces her greatest challenge in her inability to see the influence of the ghosts on the children. The halo effect prevents her from seeing the evilness of the ghosts inside the children. Despite the fact that she possesses hard evidence proving Miles' capability of wayward behavior—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... (James 36-37).

In this excerpt, the governess repeatedly references Miles' physical appearance. She mentions his "great glow of freshness" and his "fragrance of purity" along with the fact that "everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence." When she mentions this, she explains exactly how the halo effect is influencing her impression of him. 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, which causes her to completely overlook Miles' recent transgression.

In a similar manner to how the governess overlooks the potential for bad behavior in Miles, she refuses to see how the ghosts have corrupted Flora because of the halo effect. In the

governess' eyes, the beauty of the children equates them with innocence. The halo effect blinds her 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... everything fell to the ground but their incapacity and their beauty (James 60).

Here, the governess would rather "abjure [her] judgement" than suspect a child of such beauty to be guilty of anything nefarious. She feels that to "pronounce their loveliness a trick of premature cunning was to be guilty of cynicism." Her inability to place blame on the kids because of their physical appearance and sweet behavior is the result of the halo effect, which is why "everything [falls] to the ground but their incapacity and their beauty."

Despite her knowledge of Miles' misbehavior, the governess cannot 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*!" (James 75).

In this excerpt, the governess explains to the reader exactly what she is thinking. In the midst of discussing Miles' mysterious wrongdoings, she cannot seem to focus on anything but his beauty. She tells of his "wonderful smile, the whites of his beautiful eyes, and the uncovering of his clear teeth," and of his "brightness." Here, she is unable to see past Miles' glow. The glow of his smile, the glow of his youth, and the glow of his innocence are all highlighted by the glow of the halo placed upon him by the halo effect through the eyes of the governess. This passage also shows that Miles, knowing he is not himself, is trying to get through to the governess. By asking her to think 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.

While the halo effect prevents the governess from being able to see corruption in the beautiful, it also prevents her from being able to see beauty in corruption. One example of this inverse halo effect is when the governess first stumbles upon the ghost of Miss Jessel. She describes her as "Another person — this time; but a figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful — with such an air also, and such a face!" (James 56). The halo effect causes us to equate positive traits with those we find attractive, but it also has the opposite effect on those we find physically unattractive. This excerpt exemplifies 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." The governess also describes the ghost as having "such an air," which gives the reader a clearer mental picture of the air chilling around the governess as she comes face-to-face with a spirit. We can see this negative halo effect in action again when the corruption in Flora finally becomes clear.

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" (James 103-104).

Here, it is clear that the governess can fully see the impact of the ghost on the child she loved. She describes the child as "hideously hard" and "almost ugly" as she begins to see the evil that Miss Jessel inspired in her. Despite this, the reality remains that she was not 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 they find physically attractive, the governess was unable to see the whole truth until "her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed."

In *The Turn of the Screw*, The governess demonstrates how the halo effect impacts people's biases by allowing it to dictate who she thought was innocent and corrupt. Her refusal to see the children as anything but innocent angels because of their appearance and their good behavior makes her a victim of the halo effect, and her immediate association of evil with ugliness further proves the same. By allowing physical appearances to influence her biases, the governess exemplifies the halo effect in *The Turn of the Screw*.

Works Cited

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