



Fantastic Narrations: A Comparison of the  
Structures of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*  
and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*

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## Introduction

Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) may not seem to have a lot in common on a first reading. The stories are set in different times, they have different kinds of narration, and the storylines differ markedly. But despite their differences, it can be argued that they belong to the same genre – that of fantastic literature. The term was introduced by the structuralist Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), and the genre deals with truly ambiguous literature - the cases where readers seem to find it impossible to decide between a natural and a supernatural explanation for the events taking place. Since this genre is based on the structure of the text rather than the plot, it contains novels which may seem very different from each other on a first reading.

When Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* was first published in 1898, most people perceived it as a pure ghost story. Not until some 20 years later did critics come up with other interpretations. Alexander E. Jones writes that “[a]lthough earlier critics had contented themselves with ‘reservations’ concerning the validity of the governess’ testimony, Henry A. Beers remarked in 1919 that he had sometimes thought ‘the woman who saw the phantoms was mad’” (113). Since then, the ambiguities of the text have been a matter of discussion amongst critics, and the main subject of the discussions has been the reliability of the narrator. Can the governess really be trusted? Does she actually see ghosts or is she just mad? Is there a supernatural or a natural explanation to the events in the novel? These are some of the questions that the reader has to struggle with throughout the text. What is it then that makes these different interpretations possible? What is it in the structure of the text that makes readers disagree?

In 1988, 90 years after the publication of *The Turn of the Screw*, Doris Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child* was published. This is also a novel which has been discussed a lot amongst critics and just as with *The Turn of the Screw*, people seem to have very different opinions. Some think that Ben is a monster and some think that he is simply mentally handicapped. Again, something in the novel makes readers hesitate when deciding between a supernatural and a natural explanation. Since this novel has a third-person omniscient narrator, many people would think that the reliability of the narrator should not be an issue. But although unreliable omniscient narrators are unusual, they do exist, and even if this is not the case in *The Fifth Child*, there is still something in the narration that makes it hard for

readers to agree. What is it then in the text that makes readers hesitate? Why is it so hard to understand what is going on?

The purpose of this essay is to show that although these novels are written 90 years apart and have completely different storylines, they have a similar structure; a structure which makes it possible for us to put them in the genre of fantastic literature. I will compare the structures of these novels to see if and how they fulfil the conditions required for belonging to the fantastic genre. There will also be a discussion about what part these different kinds of narrations play in the creation of the ambiguities.

### The fantastic as a literary genre

Theorists argue whether the fantastic should be treated as a genre or as a literary quality. Two important names in this area are Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson, and they have slightly different definitions for this literary phenomenon. Jackson describes the fantastic as a literary mode which can appear in a variety of genres, while Todorov treats the fantastic as a genre in its own right. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov also points out that “a work can [...] manifest more than one category, more than one genre” (22), and if one agrees with that, there should be no reason for not treating the fantastic as a genre in its own right. While Todorov’s main focus is the structural aspect, Jackson tries to develop his theory. Jackson thinks that Todorov “fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms” (3), and this is what she tries to do in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. In this essay, the focus will be on the structure of the text. Therefore, Todorov’s definition will be used and the fantastic will be treated as a literary genre.

According to Todorov there are three conditions which a work has to fulfil to be considered fantastic. The first condition is what Todorov describes as “the heart of the fantastic” (25), and this is the condition which will need the most focus. Todorov states that the story must be set in “a world of living persons,” and that the reader should “hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). This world must have the same laws of nature as our own. For example, when reading Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the existence of elves and orcs is normal, whereas in a novel which is set in our world, the appearance of an elf could have two different explanations: Either the elf is not

real and the laws of our world are intact, or the elf is real but then the laws of our world have changed (25). So this first condition is that the story has to be set in the world as we know it and that the reader must hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation.

The second condition concerns the possible hesitation of a character. Todorov argues that the ambiguities that are experienced by the reader are often experienced by a character too. In this way, the hesitation is represented within the work. This is not a necessary condition, however; Todorov points out that most of the works that fulfil the first condition also fulfil the second one (31). This can thus be seen more as a tendency than an actual condition.

The third condition has to do with the reader's attitude towards the text. Todorov explains that the reader has to "reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations" (33). According to Todorov, there are two types of texts that can contain supernatural elements which the reader does not question because he knows not to take them literally. These two types of literature are poetry and allegories which because of this cannot be seen as examples of fantastic literature (32). Todorov further argues that the fantastic only can occur in fiction (60). Of these three conditions, Todorov states that the first and the third "constitute the genre" and the second may or may not be fulfilled (33).

Not all critics agree with Todorov's constraint on allegorical interpretations. Christine Brooke-Rose, for example, thinks that Todorov simplifies the definition of allegory (155), and suggests that "the Fantastic, as defined by Todorov [is] a modern development [...] of medieval allegory" (156). Although this is an interesting argument it does not change the fact that if that an allegorical reading of the text destroys the possibilities for the fantastic to exist.

Todorov describes the fantastic as existing between two other genres: The uncanny and the marvellous. Many novels that create hesitation offer a solution for this in the end. This is often the case with Gothic literature. As soon as the reader chooses to believe in either solution, the fantastic is gone. The uncanny, or the supernatural explained, is the genre in which the events turn out to have natural explanations, and the marvellous, or the supernatural accepted, is the genre in which the events turn out to have supernatural explanations (41-42).

The definition and the conditions required for the fantastic genre should now be clear, but there are also some different varieties of the fantastic. The first kind of fantastic narration creates hesitation between what Todorov calls the real and the illusory. In this variant, strange events can be explained by coincidences, tricks and illusions. The reader does

not hesitate as to whether the events have taken place or not, but as to his interpretation of them. The reader is uncertain if his understanding of the events is correct. The second form of fantastic narrative creates hesitation between the real and the imaginary. In these kinds of stories, the reader doubts if the events described actually have taken place or if they are a product of the character's imagination. The episodes could for example have taken place in a dream, or the protagonist is mad and hallucinates, or the protagonist experiences things under the influence of drugs (45). In these two types of fantastic narratives the hesitation is created in different ways.

*The Turn of the Screw* and *The Fifth Child* are both novels which contain a lot of ambiguities, but that alone does not make them fantastic. The following part of this essay will focus on examining these novels to see if they fulfil Todorov's conditions and what kind of fantastic literature they belong to. There will also be a discussion about what kinds of narrations the novels have and what part the narration plays in the creation of the ambiguities.

### The fantastic and *The Turn of the Screw*

When *The Turn of the Screw* was published it was simply perceived as a ghost story, and for the first 20 years after its publication most critics assumed this approach. Edward J. Parkinson argues that the criticism of this novella is dominated by what he calls "the apparitionist/non-apparitionist controversy", and that this debate really got going after the publication of Edmund Wilson's Freudian essay "The Ambiguity of Henry James" 1934 (ch. 3), where Wilson claims that "the young governess who tells the story is a neurotic case of sex repression and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations" (qtd. in Parkinson ch. 3). Critics have come up with valid arguments for both the apparitionist and the non-apparitionist interpretation and until this day readers of *The Turn of the Screw* disagree on the nature of the events.

Todorov's theory of the fantastic offers a solution for this problem. Todorov considers *The Turn of the Screw* to be a "remarkable example" of a fantastic novel (43), and this explains why critics have found it so hard to agree about the nature of the ghosts. The reason that critics disagree may in fact be that there is not enough evidence in the text to prove either the apparitionist or the non-apparitionist interpretation. But does *The Turn of the Screw* fulfil Todorov's conditions for being fantastic?

The first of Todorov's conditions concerns the world in which the story is set and the reader's hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation. Although the world in *The Turn of the Screw* is not as realistic as the world in *The Fifth Child*, it is a world with the same laws of nature as our own, and ghosts are not to be seen as a natural part of this world. This is shown from the governess's reaction to Mrs Grose believing in her story: "She herself had seen nothing, not the shadow of a shadow, and nobody in the house but the governess was in the governess's plight; yet she accepted without directly impugning my sanity the truth as I gave it to her" (24). If ghosts were a natural part of the story world, there would be no reason for the governess to worry about Mrs Grose believing in her story; there would be no reason for Mrs Grose to doubt her. Because the appearance of ghosts is not normal, the reader questions the nature of the visions. Are the apparitions real or are they a product of the governess's imagination – a product of a mental illness? By examining issues which have been debated amongst the critics, and discussing different interpretations of the events, this essay will investigate if the story is uncanny, marvellous or an example of a purely fantastic novella.

The governess has been described by many critics as hysterical and early in the novella, she admits that she is "rather easily carried away" (8). This might support the claim that her visions are a product of her imagination. The first time the governess sees what she later learns is the ghost of Peter Quint, she is out taking a stroll in the grounds, daydreaming that the master of the house will come home. When she suddenly sees a man she describes it as "a sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real" (15). This also suggests that the man could just be a product of her imagination, and she proves that she is, in fact, very easily carried away when she after this event states, "[w]as there a 'secret' at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?" (17). Instead of believing that she might have been tricked by the light to see something that was not there, or that the man in fact was someone who works there, she immediately begins to suspect that there is some kind of secret. The direct reference to Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and the indirect reference to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), which contains many Gothic elements, suggest that the governess somehow identifies herself with the protagonists of those novels, finding herself in a situation not that different from that of Jane Eyre at Thornfield. The governess' vivid imagination may cause the reader to hesitate whether or not her narration is reliable.

The governess is the only one who states that she sees the ghosts. She claims that the children also can see them, but whether or not that is true is never revealed by the

text. Edmund Wilson asks us to “[o]bserve that there is never any evidence that anybody but the governess sees the ghosts” (170), and this argument holds. Mrs Grose consistently denies having seen any ghosts and the children never say a word about it. Jones argues that the fact that Mrs Grose cannot see the ghost does not prove anything. Instead, Jones claims that it “indicates that the governess somehow possesses a psychic power that the stolid housekeeper lacks” (121). Jones further states that this is a common way to deal with supernatural events in literature and therefore there is no reason to question it (121). Both Wilson’s and Jones’ arguments are valid, but the text lacks support for both arguments. It is clear from the text that Mrs Grose cannot see the ghosts, but since the governess never brings up the question with the children, we cannot be sure if they see the ghosts or not.

This leads us to another important issue; the governess jumping to conclusions. Not only does she assume that the children see the ghosts, she also jumps to conclusions about the ghosts’ intentions. For example, the second time she sees Peter Quint, she states, “[o]n the spot there came to me the added shock of a certitude that it was not for me he had come there. He had come for someone else” (20). Another example occurs after she sees Miss Jessel for the first time by the lake. The governess tells Mrs Grose that Flora has seen the ghost of Miss Jessel, and when Mrs Grose asks if Flora has told her that, the governess answers, “[n]ot a word – that’s the horror!” (30). How can the governess be so sure that Flora has seen Miss Jessel? The governess noticed that when she felt the presence of the ghost, Flora had turned her back against the lake and had fallen into silence in her play (29), but these actions may have been a natural part of her play. Similarly, when the governess sees Miles at the lawn one night, looking at the tower above her she says, “[t]here was clearly another person above me – there was a person in the tower” (42). She makes these statements as if they are absolute truths, without having any evidence for them. Goddard points out that this last statement is “even ‘thinner’ than in the case of Flora and Miss Jessel, for this time the governess does not see, she merely infers” (165). These incidents indicate that she is indeed carried away. Jones disagrees with this and claims that what the governess is really saying is that she *believes* that Flora saw, that the governess “has pondered the incident at the lake and then expressed her considered opinion” (120). Jones further argues that although she did not see anyone in the tower she felt that there was someone there (120). Even though the governess may draw the right conclusions, this behaviour suggests that there is a possibility that she is not trustworthy, and thus hesitation is created.

One of the most debated issues is the governess’ description of Peter Quint. After seeing the unknown man a second time she provides the housekeeper Mrs Grose with a

description of him. Mrs Grose identifies him as the late valet Peter Quint, whom the governess has never met. If she is hallucinating, how can she possibly describe him as accurately as she does? Some critics suggest the possibility that the governess already knew about Peter Quint, and John Silver argues that “[i]t can be shown [...] that James has carefully dropped four hints which, to say the least, allow the possibility that the governess has already learned about Peter Quint before her seemingly amazing description of the dead man” (210).

The first of these hints occurs in a conversation between the governess and Mrs Grose, concerning the former governess:

“The last governess? She was also young and pretty – almost as young and pretty, miss, even as you.” “Ah, then, I hope her youth and beauty helped her!” I recollect throwing off. “He seems to like us young and pretty!” “Oh, he *did*,” Mrs. Grose assented: “it was the way he liked everyone!” She had no sooner spoken indeed than she caught herself up. “I mean that’s *his* way – the master’s.” (12)

Silver suggests that this conversation makes the governess wonder about this mysterious other person which Mrs Grose may have referred to (210). Goddard, who agrees with Silver’s argument, claims that it is clear that Mrs Grose speaks of someone else than the master (163). The passage does suggest that Mrs Grose at this moment is thinking of someone other than the master, but as with so much else in this narrative, it is not possible to claim that it is clear.

Silver argues that the next hint is the piece of information that the village is only 20 minutes away from the estate. The governess could easily have walked there and asked around about this other man (211). This information is connected with the third hint, which Silver explains is when Mrs Grose asks the governess if the man she saw is not in fact someone from the village. The governess answers, “[n]obody – nobody. I didn’t tell you, but I made sure” (22). The fact that the governess says that she has “made sure” (22), indicates that she has investigated the issue, but it does not prove that she has actually been to the village, even if that is a possibility.

The fourth hint, Silver suggests to be the fact that the governess knows the circumstances of Peter Quint’s death, without Mrs Grose having told her. However, this is a relatively weak argument. If James chose to leave out the part where the governess went in to the village, he might as well have left out certain conversations between the governess and Mrs Grose, and thus Mrs Grose could have told the governess about the circumstances surrounding the death of Peter Quint without the readers’ knowledge. These arguments offer

an explanation but they are not strong enough to exclude the argument that the governess did not know about Peter Quint before Mrs Grose told her.

The last issue that must be considered is the circumstances surrounding Miles' death. Jones concludes that "[u]nless we accept the story as a fantasy, Miles's death is absurd – in real life, children do not drop dead merely because someone insists a ghost is peering in the window" (122). Wilson, on the other side, claims that the governess scares Miles to death (172). But the reason for his death is not the only aspect that is discussed in this scene. Miles' last words are, "Peter Quint – you devil!" (86). Since the governess never speaks about the ghosts with the children, how can Miles, if he does not see Quint himself, know who the governess is referring to in this last scene? One possibility is that Flora, who knows that the governess saw Miss Jessel at the lake, has spoken to Miles about that incident. Since Miss Jessel and Peter Quint are closely connected it is not impossible that Miles draws the conclusion that it is Quint the governess speaks about. Jones argues against this theory and points out that the only time the children meet each other after the incident at the lake is at breakfast and then they are "under the watchful eye of Mrs Grose" (121). Therefore, it would have been impossible for Flora to tell Miles what happened at the lake. However, how watchful Mrs Grose's eyes are is never told, and one cannot exclude the possibility that the children spoke about the matter or that they have overheard some of Mrs Grose's and the governess' earlier conversations. If Miles is addressing Peter Quint or the governess when he says, "you devil" (86) is not clear either. As with everything else, this wholly depends on which way you choose to read the novella.

*The Turn of the Screw* is ambiguous throughout, and that is at least something that many critics agree on. Although Wilson provides us with a Freudian reading of the text he concludes that "everything from beginning to the end can be taken equally well in either of the two senses" (172), and this is the only conclusion that is reasonable. The hesitation is withheld throughout the text and thus Todorov's first condition is fulfilled.

The second of Todorov's conditions concerns the possible hesitation of a character. Todorov explains that this is an optional condition but that the hesitation the reader experiences is often shared by a character too (32). However, as mentioned earlier, this is not a necessary condition but more of a tendency. The protagonist in this story does not hesitate. On the contrary, she is convinced that the ghosts are real. Goddard claims that after the governess has provided Mrs Grose with a description of Peter Quint, she "clings to it as unshakable proof that she is not mad" (164) and early in the novel, when the governess

describes her time at Bly before the ghosts appeared, it is clear that she still believes it was all real:

There had been a moment when I believed I recognized, faint and far, the cry of a child; there had been another when I found myself just consciously starting as at the passage, before my door, of a light footstep. But these fancies were not marked enough to be thrown off, and it is only in the light, or in the gloom, I should rather say, of other and subsequent matters that they now come back to me. (8)

However, it can be argued that the hesitation in the novella is represented by Mrs Grose. Goddard feels that “Mrs Grose, it appears, though she seems to accept her companion’s account of her strange experiences, has moments of backsliding, of toying with the hypothesis that the ghosts are mere creatures of the governess’ fancy” (164). Indeed, Mrs Grose seems to doubt the governess from time to time, but since even these passages are ambiguous, it is equally possible to claim that Mrs Grose believes in the governess’ story. The second time the governess sees Miss Jessel at the lake, Mrs Grose seems to doubt the governess. When the governess claims that Miss Jessel is present, Mrs Grose cries out, “[w]hat a dreadful turn, to be sure, miss! Where on earth do you see anything?” (70). Mrs Grose obviously gets upset and tries to comfort Flora, assuring her that there is no one except the three of them there. However, if Mrs Grose is upset because she distrusts the governess or because she wants to protect Flora is not clear. The following day Mrs Grose confesses that she has heard “horrors” from Flora which they both agree indeed justifies the governess (75-76). The possible hesitation of the character that Todorov is speaking of is, as we can see, a matter of discussion in this story. Because the governess is the narrator, the reader can never be sure of what Mrs Grose believes. An interesting remark is that Todorov claims that *The Turn of the Screw* is one of few examples of a purely fantastic story, even though the hesitation experienced by the reader is not shared by the protagonist; a condition which is optional, but which Todorov still assumes that most fantastic narrations fulfil.

Todorov’s third condition concerns the reader’s attitude towards the text. He states that the reader must “reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations” (33). Todorov claims that fiction, of which the fantastic is a subdivision, stands in opposition with both poetry and allegory, and that the fantastic cannot exist within these genres (58). When it comes to the difference between poetry and fiction, the property which is Todorov’s main concern is “the nature of discourse, which may or may not be representative” (59). Todorov further explains that fiction contains representative elements which poetry lacks, and although

poetry contains some representative elements, the fundamental opposition still exists (59). Most people would agree that *The Turn of the Screw* is a work of fiction rather than poetry but I will not claim that a poetic reading of the text is impossible. However, a poetic reading would destroy the fantastic elements.

When it comes to allegorical interpretations, what concerns us according to Todorov is the opposition between allegorical and literal meaning. Todorov explains that “[i]f what we read describes a supernatural event, yet we take the words not in their literal meaning but in another sense which refers to nothing supernatural, there is no longer any space in which the fantastic can occur” (63-64). While Lessing’s novel is frequently read as an allegory, this is not common with *The Turn of the Screw*. There have, however, been allegorical interpretations of *The Turn of the Screw*. Jones states that Joseph Firebaugh made an allegorical interpretation, claiming that the major theme is “denial of knowledge” (118). Firebaugh viewed the children as representing the human race and the ghosts as representing the serpent. (Jones 118). However, this interpretation never became popular; instead it shows that it is almost always possible to make an allegorical interpretation of a text. In this case, it is clear that an allegorical interpretation would destroy the fantastic, just as Todorov argues.

*The Turn of the Screw* fulfils Todorov’s conditions for being fantastic: It is set in a world which has the same laws of nature as our own, and it makes the reader hesitate between the natural and supernatural explanations of the events described. The hesitation is not shared by the protagonist in the story but it could be argued that it is shared by Mrs Grose. However, since this is not a necessary condition, it does not really matter when determining whether or not the work is to be viewed as fantastic. Although both poetic and allegorical interpretations may be possible, these readings destroy the fantastic elements and the novella has to be read as fiction in order to be fantastic, which is usually how this book is read.

What variety of fantastic narration do we then find in this novella? What the reader questions is if the ghosts are real or not – if the events have taken place or not. This makes it possible for us to place this story in the kind of fantastic literature in which the reader hesitates between what Todorov calls the real and the illusory (45). The events may be explained by the governess being mad and seeing hallucinations. This leads us to another important issue: What part does the narration in this story play in the creation of the fantastic?

When dealing with a first-person narrator, as the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, one should always be cautious: There is always a chance that the narrator is unreliable. To claim that a narrator is unreliable is not the same as saying that the narrator consciously lies, although that might also be the case. A narrator can be unreliable for several reasons: For

example because it is a child with a limited understanding of the events, or because of mental illness (Griffith 47). It could be argued that it is because the narrator in *The Turn of the Screw* might be unreliable that the novella becomes fantastic. Álvarez Amóros and José Antonio claim that “the ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw*, that is, the impossibility of opting on solid and definitive textual grounds for one of the two interpretive trends already [...] lies in the narrator’s lack of authentication authority, which turns her into an unreliable figure” (3). Had the reader not doubted the governess’ reliability, the story would have been marvellous, and had we known for sure that she was mentally ill, the story would have been uncanny. The hesitation and the fantastic are created because the narrator could be unreliable.

### The fantastic and *The Fifth Child*

Doris Lessing’s novel *The Fifth Child* was published in 1988 and has since then been interpreted in many different ways. According to Sharon Dean, “[s]ome insist that the novel is a political commentary on twentieth-century England. Others locate the child Ben’s behaviour in the facts that his mother took drugs and was tense during an unwanted pregnancy” (120). In addition to this, because of the way which he is described in the book, some people view Ben as a throwback, a goblin or a changeling. These different interpretations may be possible because *The Fifth Child*, just like *The Turn of the Screw*, belongs to the fantastic genre. This part of the essay will examine if this novel fulfils Todorov’s conditions for being fantastic. In addition, I will see if it is the same kind of fantastic narrative as *The Turn of the Screw*. Finally, there will be a discussion about the narration to see if the fantastic again is caused by unreliable narration.

When it comes to Todorov’s first condition, Roberta Rubenstein states that “[a]part from the character Ben, the narrative is resolutely situated in consensus reality” (71), and this is surely the case. Nothing in the setting of the novel indicates that the reality of the story world is any different from our own. The hesitation Todorov requests concerns the nature of Ben. Is he human or is he something else? Is there evidence in the text to prove either of the statements or are both interpretations equally valid?

The first issue which will need to be discussed is Harriet’s pregnancy with Ben. There are, even this early in the story, circumstances that are ambiguous and may cause the reader to hesitate. Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo explains that “Harriet’s fifth pregnancy is going

to mark the beginning of a series of unusual little events which function as prophetic signals that will help suspend the ordinary sense of the so far seemingly realistic plot” (116). Harriet’s fifth pregnancy is nothing like the previous ones and it causes her so much pain that she feels the unborn child is “trying to tear his way out of her stomach” (38). Throughout the pregnancy, Harriet’s suffering and the descriptions of it suggest that there is something unnatural about it: “Sometimes she believed hooves were cutting her tender inside flesh, sometimes claws” (41). However, Dr Brett insist that although the foetus is large, he is not he is not “abnormally so”, and that Harriet may simply be worn out by having four children in a short period of time (39). Gamallo argues that “[w]hile some fictional events begin to resist rational explanation, such as the unusual strength of the foetus [...] other strange and monstrous symptoms place the story in a fictional space between Todorov’s realm of the fantastic and the uncanny” (116), and this is exactly what happens. The strong, fast-growing foetus indicates that something supernatural is happening at the same time as the lack of proof and the doctor’s assurance point towards a natural explanation. This is the beginning of a continuously ambiguous narrative.

The next issue which will need to be discussed is Ben’s looks. Ben does not look like a human child, which is made clear as soon as he is born:

He was not a pretty baby. He did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyebrows to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in a thick yellowish stubble, while the side and back hair grew downwards. His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms. (49)

When the eleven pound baby is put in Harriet’s arms, her immediate words are, “[h]e’s like a troll, or goblin of something” (49). Rubenstein states that “[t]he words that come to mind when she observes him [...] suggests a figure from the pages of a myth, fairy-tale, or horror story, something Other and not human” (68). Throughout the novel he is described by both the characters and the narrator as something other than human. Harriet calls him such things as “[n]eanderthal baby” (53) and “throwback” (103), while the narrator for example compares him to “an angry, hostile little troll” (56), and “a squat little gnome” (71). Although Ben is constantly referred to as something other than human, there is never any proof that either of these descriptions reflects the fictional reality. As Gamallo points out, “[n]one of these

arguments, however, are ever given full confirmation by Lessing's narration" (121). Again, the lack of proof makes it unable for the reader to draw any definite conclusions.

It is not only Ben's looks that makes him different; his strange behaviour also makes him stand out. Richard Brock states that "[t]he figure of Ben is a complex one to interpret, representing a striking and violent incursion of the fantastic – if not to say supernatural – into the hitherto realist frame of the novel" (11), and Ben's behaviour does suggest that he is something other than human. This is something which becomes clear as soon as he is born. The child resists all of Harriet's attempts to cuddle him and it is stated that "[n]ever, not once, did he subside into a loving moment" (56), which is very odd for an infant. Ben ignores the other children's attempts to play with him (55), and after he sprains Paul's arm (58), they start to avoid him. Brock explains that "Ben remains a psychological outsider, and cannot be normalized into the routines and values which the other children have absorbed naturally" (11). Ben's unpredictable and violent behaviour makes the whole family fear and resent him, but although his behaviour is unusual, there is no evidence that he is not human and thus the ambiguity remains.

Ben does not only evoke strong feelings in humans; even animals are afraid of him. Because of this, Ben gets the blame when first a dog, and then the family cat are found strangled in the house (62). When a second dog is brought to the house, it is stated that "if Ben was in the room, the dog watched him carefully and went to his corner, his head on his paws, stiff with attention" (71). If animals had disliked him only because he was different from the other children, then they would have disliked Ben's cousin Amy who has Down's syndrome too. However, this is not the case, and that makes Ben seem even more different from the other children.

The whole family is convinced that something is severely wrong with Ben and they decide to put him in an institution (71). However, the circumstances around this are quite ambiguous. Since Dr Brett refuses to admit that there is anything wrong with Ben they have to get a second opinion from another doctor. Molly says that "[t]hese things can be arranged" (71), which might indicate that they will pay off a doctor to put him in an institution. If Ben is as bad as he is described, would it really be so hard to get a doctor to recognise this? Or is this proof that the family overreact and reject Ben just because he is different?

It is not only Dr Brett who refuses to see that there is anything wrong with Ben; although the family is convinced that Ben is not a normal child, authorities continuously refuse to acknowledge that he is different. Rubenstein states that "[i]n the face of evidence to the contrary, not a single doctor or other authority is willing to support the Lovatts' conviction

that Ben's behaviour is even mildly unusual" (68). After the incidents with the pets, Ben is taken to Dr Brett who says that "[h]e's a hyperactive child – that's how they are described these days, I believe" (63). After a month in school Ben is described by his teacher as "a good little chap" who tries really hard (99), and by the end of the term the headmaster tells Harriet that he has "extraordinary energy" and that "[h]is teacher has found him a rewarding little boy because he does try" (100). The school seems to think that he is hyperactive and a slow learner, but apart from that, they do not seem to think there is anything wrong with him.

The fact that authorities continuously deny that there is anything wrong with Ben supports the argument that the problem lies with the family. This is also exactly what Harriet gets to hear when she takes Ben to another doctor: "The problem is not with Ben, but with you. You don't like him very much" (103). However, during Harriet's meeting with this doctor, she also gets some kind of recognition for Ben's problem: When Harriet discusses the possibility that Ben is a genetic throwback and explains that she needs someone to recognise this possibility, Dr Gilly answers, "[c]an't you see that it is simply outside my competence? If it is true, that is?" (106). Dr Gilly's neither agrees nor disagrees with Harriet's claim that Ben is a genetic throwback, but just gives Harriet a prescription for a sedative that she can use on Ben when he is out of control. This suggests that although Dr Gilly does not want to say it out loud, she agrees with Harriet. Or maybe Dr Gilly just wants to get rid of Harriet. Watkins explains that "[t]hroughout the text we see the explanations that various characters offer for Ben's 'difference' as involving but ultimately limited" (7). The authorities and the family constantly provide the reader with different explanations of what is wrong with Ben, but because there is never any evidence to prove either of them, they are indeed limited.

A fact which may support that Ben is human is that he actually makes friends. He becomes the leader of a gang of youths which do not seem to think that there is anything wrong with him. Pifer argues that "[t]he fifth child appears to be the only genetic throwback in the novel, but the members of Ben's gang have clearly reverted to a comparable state" (145), but this is not the only possible interpretation. The fact that Ben makes friends could as well suggest that he is not a throwback, but "within the range of normality" (104), just like Dr Gilly says. If the family's description of Ben is correct, how could he then possibly have made friends? Again, different interpretations are possible.

As we can see, there are many possible explanations for Ben's behaviour, and as Rubenstein points out, "Lessing resists offering her readers a single answer for these possibilities" (69). Rubenstein further argues that "[i]n the context of Todorov's theory of the fantastic, readers of *The Fifth Child* are likely to hesitate between natural and supernatural

explanations for the physically and emotionally anomalous child” (69). The ambiguities concerning Ben are never resolved and the hesitation remains when the story ends. Therefore, the novel fulfils Todorov’s first condition.

Todorov’s second condition concerns the possible hesitation of a character. Is the hesitation represented within this story? What has been discussed so far is the family’s conviction that Ben is not human, versus the authorities’ assurance that he is normal or hyperactive at the most. However, all critics do not agree that this opposition is constant. According to Rubenstein, “Harriet, torn between these mutually exclusive positions, finds herself excruciatingly divided” (71) and that this is the reason why she decides to save Ben from the institution. Similarly, Watkins argues that “Harriet’s decision to rescue Ben from the institution where he has been incarcerated [...] demonstrates that she is unable literally to expel Ben from the family, the human, the suburban” (7). Harriet’s decision to save Ben from the institution would then be because she doubts whether or not Ben really is a genetic throwback. However, Pifer claims that “the fifth child is, Harriet soon realizes, a genetic ‘throwback’ to a prehuman species” (143), and that this is how she sees the child throughout the novel. It is stated that Harriet does not think of Ben with “love and affection” (77), but with “guilt and horror” (77). This suggests that she saves him because of guilt and not because she hesitates as to what he is. As we can see, it is not clear whether the hesitation is represented within the novel or not. Just as with *The Turn of the Screw*, even this issue can be interpreted in different ways. Since this condition is optional, we can be satisfied with this ambiguous analysis, however it does suggest that Todorov’s second condition might not be as recurrent as he claims it to be.

Todorov’s third condition concerns the reader’s attitude towards the text. As with *The Turn of the Screw*, it is safe to claim that most people would reject a poetic reading of this novel. However, many critics have made allegorical readings of *The Fifth Child*, and especially of the character Ben. A common interpretation is that Ben represents the increasingly violent English society. For example, Brock argues that “there are numerous indications [...] which suggest an allegorical reading of him as representative of all those aspects of ‘society’ against which the Lovatts have attempted to insulate themselves” (11). So should *The Fifth Child* be seen as an allegory or as a work of fiction?

While *The Turn of the Screw* is almost always read as fiction, *The Fifth Child* seems to be frequently read as fiction, but also frequently read as an allegory. Since Lessing’s novel is not seen exclusively as an allegory, it is still possible to claim that it belongs to the fantastic genre. It is entirely up to the reader to choose how to interpret the book. If the reader

chooses to view the book as an allegory, the fantastic cannot exist, but if the reader chooses to view it as fiction, it can be seen as a fantastic narrative.

Besides these arguments concerning the plot, it might be argued that the setting of the story encourages hesitation. Gamallo actually claims that the setting itself is fantastic (114-115). She argues that the Lovatts' old Victorian house "functions as a contemporary and pleasant suburban version of the spatial images of (usually female) enclosure of the gothic" (114). In other words, the setting of *The Fifth Child* is a modern version of the setting which we saw in *The Turn of the Screw*. The large house does also seem to have something magical about it: "There's something progenitive about this room, I swear it" (18). Gamallo explains that "[t]his fantastic setting recaptures the characteristics of the old Gothic secluded scenarios and their atmosphere of social and psychological confinement where the uncanny can become plausible" (115). This is an interesting point, and although it is hard to argue that the setting is really fantastic, it does show that the novels have similar settings.

If we look closer at the settings and the themes, the similarities between the novels become even more obvious. Both stories take place primarily in these secluded houses which the governess and Harriet almost never leave. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess alone has the responsibility for raising the children, and although she has Mrs Grose to help her, the children lacks a father figure. Similarly, in *The Fifth Child*, although Harriet often has her mother to help her, David spends most of his time at work and thus Harriet is left responsible for the children. It is possible that this detachment from the rest of the world has affected the governess and Harriet in a way that has turned them in to unreliable narrators. Although Harriet is not the narrator of *The Fifth Child*, the story seems to be told from her point of view, which I will come back to later. In addition to this, the reader has to struggle with the possibility of evil children. Since children are usually seen as pure and innocent, the occurrence of evil children might be hard for the reader to digest and s/he might try to find another possible explanation. As we can see, these thematic features can also contribute to the reader's hesitation concerning the nature of events.

If the reader chooses to reject the allegorical reading, Todorov's conditions can be considered to be fulfilled. The story is set in a world which has the same laws of nature as our own and it makes the reader hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation concerning the nature of Ben. Whether this hesitation is represented within the novel is not clear; it could be argued that it is, and it could be argued that it is not. Since allegorical readings are frequent it is not as clear a case of a fantastic novel as *The Turn of the Screw*, but

since a fictional reading is also possible, it can still be viewed as a fantastic novel. Both interpretations are equally valid.

Since the hesitation in the novel concerns the nature of Ben, this story is the kind of fantastic narrative that Todorov says creates hesitation between the real and the illusory. Todorov explains that in stories belonging to this kind of fantastic literature, “the events indeed occurred, but they may be explained rationally (as coincidences, tricks and illusions)” (45). The reader does not question whether Ben exists or not, but whether or not he is human. What part does the narration play in the creation of this ambiguous narrative?

In *The Fifth Child*, the story is told by a third-person omniscient narrator. Although the omniscient narrator has a “complete knowledge of the characters’ actions, thoughts and locations” (Griffith 45), the narrator in this novel tends to focus on Harriet’s point of view. Deborah Raschke argues that the narrative is “destabilized by the focalization, which is subtly situated primarily in Harriet’s observations and feelings. In this shift, a fixed, objective conduit to knowledge is undermined” (15). Although Griffith claims that we “can almost always trust omniscient narrators” (47), Raschke’s argument suggests that this may in fact be a case with an unreliable omniscient narrator.

The narrator focuses on describing Harriet’s version of the events, and Ben is consistently described in similar ways by Harriet and the unnamed narrator. Because of this, the reader might doubt the reliability of the narrator. As Gamallo argues, “the reader is left undecided about whether s/he can trust completely the centre of consciousness that has been chosen as the main focalizer of the narration” (122). The focus on Harriet makes the narration unreliable and thus the fantastic is again created because of unreliable narration.

## Conclusion

This essay shows that *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Fifth Child* actually have a lot more in common than one may see on a first reading, and that the genre of fantastic literature includes literary works from different times and with different plot lines. The structures and themes of these novels are similar and they can both be considered as belonging to the genre of fantastic literature. Both novels fulfil Todorov’s conditions, and they do so in similar ways. The stories, written 90 years apart, are both set in a world which has the same laws of nature as our own. In addition to this, both novels are set in a secluded Gothic environment that itself

may cause hesitation. In this secluded environment, the governess and Harriet are left responsible for children, which may or may not be evil. The ambiguities which are introduced early on in both narrations remain when the stories have ended. When it comes to Todorov's second condition, i.e. the possible hesitation of a character, it is not clear whether the stories fulfil this or not. This is interesting because it goes against Todorov's assumption that novels which fulfil the first condition usually fulfil the second one too. As for the third condition, it is easy to reject poetic interpretation with both novels, but allegorical readings complicate the matter. Since it is almost always possible to make an allegorical reading of a text, it cannot be claimed that allegorical readings are wrong. However, allegorical readings destroy the fantastic and both novels can also be read as fiction. Therefore they can also be seen as fantastic.

We are also shown two different varieties of fantastic stories. Although both novels are fantastic, they represent two different kinds of fantastic narration. In *The Turn of the Screw* the reader hesitates between the real and the imaginary, which means that the events taking place can either have a natural explanation or they can be explained by, for example, a mental illness. This is not the case in *The Fifth Child*, where the hesitation instead is between the real and the illusory. The events can have either a natural explanation or they can be explained by coincidences, tricks or illusions. In Lessing's novel, the reader hesitates whether he or she has interpreted the events in the right way, whereas in James' story the reader hesitates whether or not the events have taken place at all.

Finally, this essay shows the importance of paying attention to the narrator. Even though the novels have different kinds of narrations, the ambiguities are created in the same way – by an unreliable narrator. These two novels show that unreliable narration can be created both with a first-person limited point of view and a third-person omniscient point of view, and that it is important to pay attention, because you never know whom you can trust.

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