The Governess, Mrs. Grose and “the Poison of an Influence” in The Turn of the Screw

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In a well-known essay, Eric Solomon argues convincingly that Mrs. Grose, so often interpreted as the “solid, kindly, housekeeper,” 1 is actually an evil influence who deliberately encourages the governess’s nervous impressions of apparitions. Her motive is to drive the governess from Bly and regain her position as guardian of the children, especially Flora. 2 Other revealing essays demonstrate how Victorian readers would have understood in the story the “conventional wisdom” that promiscuous sexual behavior of all varieties was commonplace among Victorian servants: “the motives of [James’s] servant-ghosts overlaps with a general Victorian blank, the ‘open secret’ that connected servants to the sexual initiation of their master’s children.” 3 Paradoxically, while “servants were corrupters of children,” 4 a governess, also a servant though a high one, was expected to stand in loco parentis—delegate of the parents to protect the children from such corrupt influences. In fact, that the children are susceptible to evil influences from servants like Peter Quint (and, ironically, governesses like Miss Jessel) is one of the assumptions of the governess behind her own attempt to protect the children from the demon-ghosts.

In complement to these arguments, this essay shows that the evil is not ghostly, but human, emanating from the rivalry between the servants, a condition that, as Walter Houghton has explained, aroused in Victorian readers an “unmistakable note of horror and fear” of unrestrained sexuality. As James wrote to F. W. Myers, “the thing . . . I most wanted not to fail of doing . . . was to give the impression of the most infernal imaginable evil and danger—the condition, on their part, of being as exposed as we can humanly conceive children to be” 5 [emphasis mine]. Houghton has written that the Victorian fear of unrestrained sexuality stemmed from a belief that sexual misconduct can destroy society. 6 Furthermore, the subtle intricacy of the rivalry between the governess and Mrs. Grose for control of the children is compounded by bisexual attractions that result in disastrous consequences. Unnoticed by critics as far as I have been able to learn, misbehavior resulting from bisexual rivalry among servants reinforces the non-apparitionist interpretation of The Turn of the Screw based on the sexual repression of the governess.

Those who accept the non-apparitionist interpretation of the story agree in general that the governess displaces her passion for the master in such a way that it emerges as a vision of Peter Quint, and that she later switches that passionate attraction to Miles. 7 Nothing of that needs to be repeated or refuted. Everything here is in addition, but slightly refined, to suggest that even though each ghost’s appearance is explained as “coming for” the child of the same gender, the male ghost
is also a projection of the governess’s attractions to the master and Miles, and the female ghost a reflection of her attraction to, and competition with, Mrs. Grose.

According to Freud’s definition of the “uncanny,” repressed psychological material can emerge in one or any number of apparently unrelated ways at unexpected times. Interestingly, at one point the governess comments, “I cropped up in another place” (12), and immediately in the frame Douglas gives his word that the story is “uncanny”—especially dreadful for “general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain.” Just how uncanny the story is, Douglas deliberately does not say, refusing to reveal with whom the governess was in love, about whom she was repressed: “The story won’t tell,” he says, “not in any literal vulgar way” (3). Since James’s language does not exclude the possibility of sequential or even multiple attractions, it need not be assumed that the sexual oddities already identified in the tale represent the whole. Consider, for instance, the possibility of bisexuality in Mrs. Grose.

The attribution of solid wholesomeness to Mrs. Grose is the perception only of the governess, an unreliable narrator, reinforced in the frame by the admiring Douglas. Victorian servants like Mrs. Grose usually entered service (often in the kitchen) while still children, age fifteen. Mrs. Grose may have been even younger since the point made of her illiteracy shows that no time was spent educating her. She had worked up the servant hierarchy to personal maid to the master’s mother, but the master at Harley Street is described as still a “young man” (6). So in spite of her now responsible position in the Bly household, Mrs. Grose might be as young as thirty, even though many readers assume her to be a much older woman. Thus, like Douglas and the governess, and like the governess and Miles, the two women are about ten years apart in age, and Mrs. Grose probably not much older than the master, certainly within ten years of him.

The young master is described as “pleasant, offhand and gay . . .,” but he also has “charming ways with women” and a “house filled with the . . . trophies of the chase” (4, emphasis mine). Hence, the implication is that the master is bisexual. Moreover, as an observer of the master, Mrs. Grose would have been aware of the young man’s bisexuality. Mrs. Grose’s observation of, and possible victimization by, the master’s bisexuality is suggested when she responds to the governess’s comment, “He seems to like us young and pretty,” that “it was the way he liked every one” (14, italics mine). The comment can include both genders. If she had been his sexual victim, as servants often were, she would have been corrupted by him. By Victorian logic, that “corruption” consisted of an introduction to an evil pleasure so attractive that its victim would be compelled to continue its practice.

Added to the Victorian convention that associates servants with sexual evil, is James’s choice of the housekeeper’s name. The name “Grose” aligns the housekeeper with the forces of evil, for one of the meanings of “gross” is “in concord with sbs [substantives] of evil import and serving as an intensive of their meaning: Glaring, flagrant, monstrous.” It is important to recall, too, that the closeness between
the governess and Mrs. Grose was far from usual since governesses normally occupied a class above servants but below family, and were often isolated and lonely as a result.\textsuperscript{15}

Douglas has further said that the governess was a woman who “would have been worthy of \textit{any} whatever,” again a term that can include both genders (2, italics mine). If one is willing to accept, if only for the sake of argument, the proposition of the master’s bisexuality and his evil influence on Mrs. Grose when she was his mother’s young maid, it follows that he could easily influence the nervous, naive governess, scarcely more than a child herself. Douglas provides another hint about bisexuality when he tells her story in response to a tale told about “a visitation . . . fallen on a child” by one of the few guests identified by name—“Griffin” (1), a mythical creature, half eagle, half lion. Like the griffin, the governess is “half and half”; her confused and repressed sexuality has been influenced by the master in such a way that it can now “crop up” half of the time in attractions to men, and half of the time in attractions to women. The master’s bisexual influence can be inferred from the governess’s thoughts about her journey from London to Bly, when she recalls a “see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong” (6), and the “swinging coach” that carried her to the master’s country house. Besides “half,” all through the evidential passages cited below, James uses ambiguous sexual slang such as “queer,” “straight,” “climax,” “spasm,” “go all the way,” and “make it out” in discussing the governess’s various interactions.

Therefore, James has created a cause-and-effect situation. The master negatively influences Mrs. Grose, then the governess, places them in charge of the children, fails to clarify their responsibilities so that a rivalry results, then completely neglects servants and children. This type of sexual influence combined with the neglect of guardianship makes possible an attraction and a rivalry between the governess and Mrs. Grose, that can, and does, harm the children. Because of that, the atmosphere at Bly becomes permeated by a “poison of an influence” (63). Ironically, the governess feels required to withhold this information from the original source of that chain of influence, for there is no reason to suspect that he would either believe her or care. He has placed her “in supreme authority” and she is not to bother him. When objecting to Mrs. Grose’s suggestion that she write the uncle for help, the governess replies scornfully, “by writing to him that his house is poisoned . . . ?” (49).

As mentioned above, the rivalry between the governess and Mrs. Grose is subtle and intricate. After a first meeting the governess judges that Mrs. Grose “was glad I was there!” (9). Solomon challenges that naive interpretation on the grounds that “the housekeeper whose position is being usurped,” is “acting for the time as superintendent to the little girl, of whom, without children of her own, she was by good luck, extremely fond” (5). Furthermore, she is to be usurped by a woman who is younger, prettier, and has probably shared the attentions of a man who is, as seldom noted, also Mrs. Grose’s master. While Solomon finds the housekeeper’s tone threatening, it can also be read as flirtatious: “The last governess? She was also young and pretty—almost as young and almost
as pretty, Miss, even as you.” 16 James has created the stage for a competitive psychological attraction.

The competition between the women begins in earnest after the governess impunes Miles’s character by insinuating that he was sent home from school as “an injury to the others” (11). Mrs. Grose retaliates by attacking the governess’s pose as “a lady.” The governess, having “succumbed” to the “seduction exercised by the splendid young man” (6), and having admitted to Mrs. Grose that she had been “carried away” in Harley Street (as she is later to be “carried away by the little gentleman” [9]) is already “corrupt” in the view of Mrs. Grose. Her virtue has been compromised, as Victorians expressed it, so she asks scornfully, “Are you afraid he’ll [Miles] corrupt you?” (12). Then she turns her back on the governess.

Yet the self-absorbed governess, still flattered by a new sense of authority and personal attractiveness (she has just seen herself in a full-length mirror for the first time) feels it was not “a snub that could check the growth of our mutual esteem,” and refuses to allow the housekeeper to avoid her. We met . . . more intimately than ever on the ground of my stupefaction, my general emotion. . . .” (13, italics mine). At the end of a conversation in which, based on Miles’s angelic appearance, the governess pronounces him not guilty, Mrs. Grose seems to forgive her, for they vow “to see it out”: “Would you mind, Miss, if I used the freedom—” “To kiss me? No!” I took the good creature in my arms. . . .” They “embraced like sisters” after which the governess is “lifted aloft on a great wave of infatuation” (14). She is now enamored of both the master and Mrs. Grose, but the scene in which she is walking in the garden wishing the master would appear, indicates that her attractions to him are still strongest. That feeling is punctuated by the first apparition of the male ghost.

James’s choice of language to describe the governess’s reaction to seeing Peter Quint on the tower for the first time shows that she is struggling between two attractions. She notes that the tower is one of a pair—and “I remember two distinct gasps of emotion” (16). “Here was another affair; here, for many days after, it was a queer affair enough. There were hours from day to day—or at least there were moments, snatched even from clear duties—that I had to shut myself up to think” (18). “I had more pains than one” (20). Next, James’s selection of the word “gross” marks the beginning of the shifting balance of the governess’s passion from one sex to the other, the master to the housekeeper. She thinks “some one had taken a liberty rather gross” (18)17. Of course, Mrs. Grose had taken the “liberty” of kissing her, but at her own suggestion. “I call the sisterhood to witness!—I made constant fresh discoveries” (19)18.

One of these discoveries was made on the Sunday when she and Mrs. Grose had agreed to “attend together” a late service. She returns for gloves she had “dropped” in the dining-room and sees Quint in the window (20). The gloves function as a gauntlet, a challenge, which Mrs. Grose takes up. In addition, their having been “dropped” by the governess, like the traditionally flirtatious handkerchief, provides another
possible explanation for Mrs. Grose's having followed the governess back into the house. The image of the gloves has again combined rivalry with sexual attraction. So when the governess sees Peter Quint looking in the window and remarks, "I was beyond all doubt already far gone" (21), the implication is that her infatuation for the master is nearly over in favor of one for Mrs. Grose which would enable the governess to confront the male ghost. But when she gets outside Quint has vanished, and as she tests the view through the window, the governess sees Mrs. Grose come in from the hall. "I thought of more things than one" (21). Then the balance tips. Mrs. Grose meets the governess at the window in the garden. Her complexion changes from white to "flushed." She is "out of breath," as if sexually aroused. "I put out my hand to her and she took it; I held her hard a little, liking to feel her close to me." She asks Mrs. Grose, "did I look very queer?" (21-2). A few minutes later the governess associates the ghost with Mrs. Grose: "I saw him as I see you" (23), both "queer."

As Solomon points out, Mrs. Grose "controls the whole episode" deliberately taking command to influence the governess's impressions. Her motive is to rid herself of her rival, to watch and control her until then, but also to get whatever pleasure she can in the process. Even so, human motives are often mixed, and as James was a master of the complex, a genuine attraction cannot be ruled out.

In the midst of her conflicting feelings, the governess explains to Mrs. Grose what she has seen. What must the housekeeper think? Either the governess has seen a ghost, or she is a madwoman who thinks she has. Whichever the situation, Mrs. Grose must be frightened. Nevertheless, the housekeeper who has previously insisted that she "won't tell tales" (12) completely captivates the impressionable reader of Jane Eyre and other romances by telling the story of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.20

Disturbed by this sequence of events, the governess feels "unfit for church" (23), so the two women go to the schoolroom: "no attendance on any service but a little service to tears and vows, of prayers and promises, a climax to the series of mutual challenges and pledges that had straight-way ensued on our retreating together to the schoolroom" (25). The climactic little service of vows and promises in the schoolroom is like a marriage ceremony. In this way Mrs. Grose "gets possession of [her] hand" (67). The "mutual challenges and pledges" combine the competition with the sexual attraction.

Nevertheless, the governess thinks of the schoolroom as an evil place: Miles had been in "the little horrid, unclean school-world" (19). Later she feels that by mentioning the name of the apparition in her own schoolroom, she would "violate as rare a little case of instinctive delicacy as any schoolroom, probably, had ever known" (53). Yet it is there in an "unclean school-world" that the "ceremony" takes place, and the setting reinforces the potential for corrupt influence on the children. It is in the schoolroom that the women are in "awe-stricken tenderness," and the sense of love "has remained with me as that of the sweetest of human charities." The governess's infatuation has now switched from the master to Mrs. Grose who, after all, is available. "It took of course more than that particular passage to place us together in presence of what we
had now to live with as we could . . . a knowledge half consternation and half compassion” (25). The word “half” echoes bisexuality, hinted at once again as the women excitedly discuss the ghost of Peter Quint who had been not only too free with Miles, but “too free with every one” (26). Taken literally, “every one” includes men and women, Mrs. Grose and Flora. Again, the Victorian response to Quint would have been less a reaction to child abuse, than to influence. The person, especially the child, who experiences evil pleasures will wish to engage in them again. The point is repeated: “He did what he wished.” “With her?” [Miss Jessel]. “With them all” (33). The irony is complete when the governess remarks, “I was queer company enough—quite as queer as the company I received. . . .” (25). “How passionately, for a week, we came back together to the subject” . . . —It may be imagined whether I slept—” (27). During these passionate, exultant occasions with Mrs. Grose, the governess’s imagination expands to explore the idea of illicit behavior between Peter Quint and Miss Jessel and its influence on the children, while the housekeeper allows her to think “we were united in our danger” (28). But Mrs. Grose’s intuition is sharp: “Mrs. Grose’s large face showed me, at this, for the first time, the far-away faint glimmer of a consciousness more acute. . . .” (23). She has been alerted by the governess’s possessive language (“my little girl” [8], “the joy of my children” [20], and “my boy” [26]) to the likelihood that her rival will extend her passion to the children and try to hold them from her.

The first victim is to be Flora. Like the ghost of Miss Jessel, whom the governess describes having “a kind of fury of intention” to “get hold of [Flora]” (32), she will try to “possess” the child. So when, under the weight of her attraction to Mrs. Grose, the governess sees Miss Jessel, the female ghost, focusing on Flora from across the lake, the serious contest for possession of Flora begins. The next ghost will be female.

The ghost of Miss Jessel is a psychological projection of the governess’s subconscious recognition of the competition between herself and Mrs. Grose to “get hold of” Flora. Instinctively, she tries also to possess the housekeeper: “I got hold of Mrs. Grose as soon after this as I could . . . I fairly threw myself into her arms” (30). Describing the apparition of Miss Jessel, the governess associates the ghost with Mrs. Grose when she repeats her earlier remarks about Peter Quint, “she might have been as close as you!” She sees it reflected in Mrs. Grose’s eyes: “It was as if now in my friend’s own eyes Miss Jessel had again appeared. I seemed at any rate for an instant to trace their evocation of her as distinctly as I had seen her by the pond” . . . (33).

Angered, Mrs. Grose jibes the governess. “She was a lady,” she says (33, italics mine) as if to imply a second time that the governess who was compromised in Harley Street and in the schoolroom, is less a lady than Miss Jessel who was compromised only by Peter Quint. The governess ignores the insult, instead bringing the verbal contest to a draw by forcing Mrs. Grose to admit that the actual reason she criticized Miss Jessel, the “lady,” was that the former governess stooped to relate to Peter Quint, someone below her class. Of course, the double edge is that the governess is in exactly the same position in her attachment to Mrs. Grose.
At that “my power to resist broke down” (33). They burst into tears and hold one another, but for different reasons. The housekeeper fears losing “her” children, and the governess has decided that Miss Jessel has come for Flora and that she cannot save her.

But Mrs. Grose is not about to give up. She tries to control the governess. “Late that night while the house slept, we had another talk in my room, when she went all the way with me. . . .” (34)21 Yet the governess’s insatiable ego seems always to need more than one infatuation. To her attractions to the master and Mrs. Grose, she now adds an unnatural infatuation for the children, especially Flora, to whom she attributes many of the same qualities she had attributed to Mrs. Grose. Flora “could put her little conscious hand straight upon the spot that ached.” She loved in “fathomless charity” (34). As they are spending the night together, the governess, either thoughtlessly or cruelly, tells Mrs. Grose about how the children affect her: “as I did there, over and over, in the small hours,” about “their pressure on one’s heart and their fragrant faces against one’s cheek” (34). The women remain together the entire night with some concern about being detected by the household “before the grey dawn admonished us to separate” (36).

As Solomon suggests, Mrs. Grose will not endure anyone, not Miss Jessel, not Quint, not the governess, to usurp her in the children’s affections, especially Flora’s, and the governess’s intimate disclosures above once again cool the relationship between the two women: “I don’t wonder you looked queer,’ I persisted, ‘when I mentioned to you the letter from his [Miles’s] school!” Mrs. Grose angrily taunts her, “I doubt if I looked as queer as you!’ she retorted with homely force.” They part at the evil schoolroom door and, as if to avoid detection, Mrs. Grose takes “another passage, to her own place” (38). The governess’s concern about “how much I might betray” (38) now begins to have dual focus, her relation with Mrs. Grose, and her attraction to the children: “the little outbreaks of my sharper passion for them . . . a queerness in the traceable increase of their own demonstrations” (38).

As her attentions vacillate back and forth between Mrs. Grose and the children, she subconsciously realizes Mrs. Grose’s manipulation: “. . . if my pupils practiced upon me, it was surely with the minimum of grossness.” The word “gross” is further used to signal the upcoming appearance of a ghost, just as it was before the governess’s attentions altered from the master to the housekeeper. In a comment full of denial, she remarks, “It was all in the other quarter that, after a lull, the grossness broke out” (40).

The “other quarter” will be Miles, but there are several vacillations before the governess’s passion settles on him. In a typical Jamesian ambiguity, the governess reflects, “as I look back, the affair seems to me to have been all pure suffering.” It is quite possible that she is feeling uncomfortable about her homosexual affair with Mrs. Grose. Because of her ambivalent feelings, the ghost about to appear will be Quint, the male ghost. She sits up reading Amelia, Fielding’s novel about the unfaithful husband of a faithful wife. She is about to be “unfaithful” to Mrs. Grose, first with Flora and then with Miles, as she switches back to heterosex-
uality: “I have at least reached the heart of it, and the straightest road out is doubtless to advance” (italics mine) (40). She picks up her candle, a convenient phallic symbol, and leaves her room, encountering Peter Quint on the stairs, a projection of her wish to return to heterosexuality. She is unafraid and the ghost disappears.

But she vacillates again. When she turns and realizes that Flora is out of bed, her nearly orgasmic reaction must have frightened, even hurt, Flora: “I must have gripped my little girl with a spasm...” (42). In addition, it is clear that the governess is now spending nights with Flora, not with Mrs. Grose. She describes herself “almost sitting on [Flora] for retention of her hand” (43). She has control of the little girl and she is not about to lose it: “I had said in my talk with Mrs. Grose on that horrid scene of Flora’s by the lake... that it would from that moment distress me much more to lose my power than to keep it” (52).

The next spirit she sees is the female ghost on the stairs. Yet the description of the faceless apparition, assumed to be Miss Jessel, does not exclude the possibility of it being a figure of Mrs. Grose, grieving about the ending of her affair with the governess and her “loss” of Flora:

Looking down it from the top I once recognized the presence of a woman seated on one of the lower steps with her back presented to me, her body bowed and her head, in an attitude of woe, in her hands. I had been there but an instant, however, when she vanished without looking at me. (43)

The governess’s physical position “looking down” suggests her rank above Mrs. Grose, whom we have seen once before with her back to the governess.

Her fearless confrontation of this ghost temporarily exorcises it leaving the governess’s attention free to shift to Miles. “I had my eyes on her brother’s door... which indescribably, produced in me a renewal of the strange impulse that I lately spoke of as my temptation” (44). Now projecting an attraction to Miles, she sees him on the lawn with Quint’s figure on the tower above.

After these visions, the governess seems to want to avoid being alone with Mrs. Grose. She gives the reasons as not provoking suspicion on the part of the servants and children:

It was not till late next day that I spoke to Mrs. Grose; the rigour with which I kept my pupils in sight making it often difficult to meet her privately, and the more as we each felt the importance of not provoking—on the part of the servants quite as much as on that of the children—any suspicion of a secret flurry or of a discussion of mysteries. (45)

However, there is a tone of disgust in the description of Mrs. Grose that follows: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things... She offered her mind to my disclosures as, had I wished to mix a witch’s broth... she would have held out a large saucepan” (46). Sensing her withdrawal, Mrs. Grose accuses the governess of “changing” as if fickle or
unsettled in her sexuality: “Lord you do change!” cried my friend. “I don’t change—I simply make it out.” But of course the governess does nothing but change: “it was at least a change and it came with a rush” (48). In return, she taunts the housekeeper with her own possession of the children: “If on either of these last nights you had been with either child you’d clearly have understood” (48). Accordingly, the animosity between the women escalates. When Mrs. Grose threatens to appeal to the children’s uncle to protect them (from the governess), the governess arrogantly threatens to end their relationship: “’If you should so lose your head as to appeal to him for me—’ She was really frightened. ‘Yes, Miss? I would leave, on the spot, both him and you’” (50). Presumably Mrs. Grose would have mixed feelings about that.

The appearance of Miss Jessel in the schoolroom that occurs next is preceded by the following scene which suggests that the ghost is also a projection of the governess in the process, once again, of changing sexual allegiances, this time from female to male, Mrs. Grose to Miles:

Tormented, in the hall, with difficulties and obstacles I remember sinking down at the foot of the staircase—suddenly collapsing there on the lowest step and then, with a revulsion, recalling that it was exactly where, more than a month before, in the darkness of night and just so bowed with evil things, I had seen the spectre of the most horrible of women. At this I was able to straighten myself; I went the rest of the way up; I made, in my turmoil, for the schoolroom. . . .” (58, italics mine)

But when she arrives in the schoolroom she sees the “terrible miserable woman” she takes to be her “vile predecessor” (59). She is not yet sexually “straight.”

While the governess fluctuates, the stalemate between the women continues until one autumn day when together they seek Flora who, significantly, is lost. Still feeling that she has the upper hand, the governess continues to play cruelly with her lover: “Mrs. Grose took again, into the queer element I offered her, one of her plunges of submission.” Then the second lakeside appearance of Miss Jessel occurs and the competition erupts into open warfare. “The singular reticence of our communion was even more marked in the frank look she addressed me. ‘I’ll be hanged,’ it said, ‘if I’ll speak!’ . . . ‘Mrs. Grose’s suspense blazed at me, but it was too late now” (70). So over Mrs. Grose’s objections, the governess decides to pump Flora about Miss Jessel, regardless of any damaging influence on the child. She is about to exercise evil that has some of its source in bissexuality, “the poison of an influence I dared but half to phrase” (63). Her vacillating attractions between man, woman and little girl are reflected by the apparition of the sexually ambiguous Miss Jessel whose figure “rose erect” exactly “on the spot my friend and I had lately quittd” (71). As Mrs. Grose finds Flora, the female ghost appears again: “It was serious now . . . I at that moment envied Mrs. Grose the simplicity of her relation [with Flora]. . . . [and] she kept the child’s hand” (70). But when Mrs. Grose fails to see the apparition, she “breaks the spell,” clasps Flora to her, and “possesses” her from then on. “Mrs. Grose on
her feet, united [with Flora], in shocked opposition to me” (72). The governess now perceives Flora (and by association Mrs. Grose) as having turned “hideously hard, and ugly” (73), an immature response that suggests if she can’t have Flora, she doesn’t want her.

The conclusion has been foreshadowed by the scene in which, “walking to church a certain Sunday morning, I had little Miles at my side and his sister, in advance of us and at Mrs. Grose’s, well in sight” (54). Flora spends that night with the housekeeper, and the next day Mrs. Grose leaves, “mutely possessed of the little girl” (73), but abandoning Miles to her rival. “It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul” (85). Given the definition of “gross” above, Mrs. Grose can represent that demon as well as any apparition.

After this the other demon, the governess, is free to focus her full obsessive attention on Miles. Enough has been written about the governess’s passion for Miles that it need not be belabored. But note that the final transfer of the governess’s attraction from one gender to another, from Mrs. Grose to the boy, is signaled once again by the appearance of a male ghost and by the use of the transitionary word-clue, “gross.” Miles . . . had relieved me of all grossness of admonition” (81). At the sight of Peter Quint she says, “it represents but grossly what took place within me” (85).

Meanwhile, the governess is already having an evil effect on the boy thereby adding to any influences to which he may have been exposed in the past. Miles “could play no longer at perfect propriety. . . .” There beat in me indeed, with the passionate throb of this question, an equal dumb appeal as to how the deuce I should” (46). Subordinated in Miles’s chiding is her most serious offence: “What did you do, you naughty, bad thing? Why, in the world, to worry us so—and take our thoughts off too, don’t you know?—did you desert us at the very door?” (58). The governess, who was expected to stand in loco parentis between the children and the sexual evils of servants, has taken their thoughts off of innocent childhood and focused them on demon ghosts, deserting the children before they are safely at the door of adulthood. For the “demonstration of [her] work” (88), having seized “once more the chance of possessing” Miles (65), she apparently frightens him to death.23

Neglect and the evil influence of “mutual challenges and pledges” have had their disastrous consequences. The governess herself recognizes the “poison of an influence” (63). “What I had to deal with was, revoltingly, against nature” (80).24 Ironically, it is her own influence. The fight concludes in a draw—Mrs. Grose possesses Flora; the governess possesses Miles. Beginning with the bisexual uncle, the young maid, and the “fluttered anxious girl” (4), these adults have had pernicious effects on the children by exposing them, overtly or otherwise, to bisexuality, but even worse, to the complicated animosity of sexually involved adults competing for the “possession” of children, the ownership of human beings. For the children there is very little difference in result between “possession” by these women and supernatural possession. Possession by human “demons” is in every sense as horrifying for their physical and moral welfare as any actual demonic possession. Miles can only dispossess

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himself of "some influence operating in his small intellect" (39), which he calls "this queer business of ours" (62) through death. What might happen to Flora under the influence of Mrs. Grose and/or her uncle can only be guessed (as can the influence of an older, more sophisticated governess on Douglas and his sister). The governess tells Miles "the journey will dissipate the influence" (81), but the "success of the tempters is only a question of time" (49).

Not surprisingly, James's story infers social criticism on a larger scale. The upper classes are corrupting their servants then handing their neglected children over to them and such other inexperienced caretakers as valets and clergymen's daughters who can rarely replace a parent. This parental neglect creates an unending cycle of immoral influences, "filling the [social] house with the taste of poison" (88).

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NOTES


4. Elliot M. Schrero, "Exposure in The Turn of the Screw," Modern Philology 78.3 (February, 1981): 261-74. Given current gender studies, it is not my intention to assign normality or abnormality to sexual variables, but it seems necessary to read the story from the point of view of the Victorian writer and reader who would have done so. Additional citations are in the text.


9. Henry James, The Turn of the Screw (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966): 2. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

10. Like Solomon, I will refrain from the litany of articles pro and con the Freudian reading, assuming the reader is familiar with them. Anyone who is not might begin with A Casebook on Henry James's The Turn of the Screw, ed. Gerald Willen (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960).

11. Housekeeper is the highest rank below butler, and there is no Butler at Bly. Douglas lists the servants at Bly: "... there were, further, a cook, a
housemaid, a dairywoman, an old pony, an old groom and an old gardner . . .” (5).

12. In the nineteenth century the word “gay” referred to a female prostitute. It was coming into use as a term for homosexuality near the end of the century especially among the upper classes, but it was not yet common. James’s use of a word with a dual slang meaning reinforces a bisexual interpretation. See Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, ed. Paul Beale (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1984) and Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present (New York: Quartet, 1977): 190. Partridge shows “queer bitch” for “an odd out-of-the-way fellow” in use as early as 1772, while Weeks implies that it was common argot for male homosexuality during the Victorian period.

13. See Robbins and Schrero.


17. There are some textual variations. The first three editions, the periodical edition, the first English edition, and the first American edition, all use the word “gross.” However, the New York edition, upon which the Norton edition is based, substitutes “monstrous.” Since the word “monstrous” is included in the OED definition of “gross” quoted above, the point seems strengthened.


21. The phrase “to go all the way” as slang for completion of sexual intercourse seems to have been in use as far back as Shakespeare. See Eric Partridge, Shakespeare’s Bawdy (New York: Dutton, 1969): 115.

22. Solomon averts that Mrs. Grose avenged herself on Peter Quint by murdering him (242).

23. See, for instance, Wilson, 119.

24. Those who are interested in the cause of Miles’s death or whether illness was the reason for his being sent home from school, might consider “Go to Luke” (84) a command to the reader as well as to Miles. Luke 9:37-41 is the story of a child possessed by an evil spirit who is cured by Christ. The description of the biblical child’s symptoms suggest epilepsy. In contrast, Thomas Cranfill and Robert Clark, An Anatomy of The Turn of the Screw (Austin: U Texas P, 1965), Chapter 16, outline the governess’s “seizures.”

25. Robert W. Hill, Jr. argues provocatively that the governess’s behavior gives Miles the idea that she would like him to seduce her. See Robert W. Hill, Jr., “A Counterclockwise Turn in James’s ‘The Turn of the Screw.’” Twentieth Century Literature 27.1 (Spring, 1981): 53-71.