The Governoress
Turns the Screws

JOHN LYDENBERG

THE INTERPRETATION of The Turn of the Screw made by Edmund Wilson in the thirties is today a dead horse, oft beaten. Every reader of the exegeses of Henry James's most famous ghost story must by now be convinced that James did not intend it as an account of the hallucinations of a frustrated, sex-starved governess.

At present it is the fashion to read the story not as a Freudian analysis but as Christian myth, suggestive of “archetypal” religious experiences. Robert W. Heilman has given the fullest exposition of this symbolic interpretation in “The Turn of the Screw as Poem,” an essay as typical of late forties' criticism as the Wilson interpretation, now dubbed “overrationalistic,” was typical of criticism in the thirties. Heilman demonstrates most convincingly how James has laced his story with an intricate network of words and symbols carrying general religious connotations and specifically suggesting the Judeo-Christian myths of Eden, the Fall, and the Redeemer. The drama is played against a backdrop of the

John Lydenberg is an associate professor of English at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, N.Y.

1 Forms of Modern Fiction, ed. William Van O'Connor (Minneapolis, 1948), pp. 211–228. The Edmund Wilson piece appeared in The Triple Thinkers (New York, 1938) as part of “The Ambiguity of Henry James,” pp. 122–164. In a 1948 edition of The Triple Thinkers he added a postscript. In this he concedes that he “tried to force a point”; but he does not change his basic thesis—except to agree that James did not intend his governess to be seen as Wilson sees her (“not merely is the governess self-deceived, but... James is self-deceived about her”). There are, of course, many more discussions of this tale. Since I am not interested here in criticizing the critics, I make no attempt to mention or list them.
gardens of Bly, a summery Eden transformed by the cold, rainy blasts that bring the fall of the year. The children are essentially angelic creatures, bright, fresh, innocent, adorable, divine—and foredoomed. They have already been corrupted by Quint, with his red hair and fixed, snakelike eyes, and by Miss Jessel in her black garb, and they change as Bly changes, the angels becoming fiends, the divine, infernal. With selfless devotion, the governess dedicates herself as sister of charity, confessor, savior to the hopeless task of saving the souls of the blameless innocents from the anti-Christ who have risen that the children may not have life. In his attempt to achieve the purest distillation of horror, James inevitably drew upon our common religious heritage for words and images that would evoke the most intense feeling of evil. The story continues to live and to horrify new generations of readers because it recalls the archetypal religious experiences, and specifically because it suggests, subtly and delicately, our particular religious myth.

James’s own comments on The Turn of the Screw, in letters, notebooks, and his Preface to the New York edition, make it reasonably clear that he intended neither a psychological study of the governess nor a religious parable. He was simply writing a story of horror for horror’s sake. He refers to it as “a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation,” and discusses the devices he used to “give the impression of the communication to the children of the most infernal imaginable evil and danger. . . .” Most important of these devices was the negative one of refusing to specify the nature of the evil lest specification lessen the horror for any particular reader. “My values,” he says, “are positively all blanks.” Thus he tempts each reader to fill in the blanks with his own notion of the greatest evil. Though we can scarcely claim that “James meant so-and-so,” we are as good as invited to go on beyond his intent and interpret the story in whatever way our ingenuity permits.

Just as James left the evil undefined, so he tried to leave the governess’ personality undefined. He claims that his sole interest
The Governess Turns the Screws

in her was to make her a credible reporter of Bly's horrors. To do that, he says, "I had to rule out subjective complications of her own—play of tone etc.; and keep her impersonal save for the most obvious and indispensable little note of neatness, firmness and courage." Though Edna Kenton and then Wilson in effect denied that James meant what he said about her, many critics have not only granted that he intended the governess to be merely an objective recorder but even insisted that he achieved his intent. Representative of this familiar view is Pelham Edgar's assertion about the governess: "save for courage and devotion she has no discussable characteristics." But this is nonsense. Whatever James may have intended to do—or not do—he has made the governess a character with eminently discussable characteristics.

She is of course the narrator, and as such she is never seen from the outside (except briefly in the prologue). Neither author nor other characters give us ready-made characterizations of the governess; she alone provides the information from which we can deduce the essential facts about her personality. Here it is certainly true that, as Spinoza said, "What Paul says about Peter tells us more about Paul than about Peter." The more we examine the governess' account, the more we feel that she is very much, and very tragically, a person with will and passion of her own. The richness—and the confusion and ambiguity of the tale—lie just here: we can know the children and the apparitions only through the governess, and we can know the governess only through her own words: her observations and actions and conclusions. To understand the events we must evaluate the governess' evaluations, and to do this we must evaluate the governess herself.

Heilman is fully aware of this. He sees that the governess is no blank automaton but an actor with characteristics that go beyond mere "firmness and courage." And he considers her central to the religious interpretation of the story. The words applied to her, he says, "suggest that James is attaching to her the quality of savior, not only in a general sense, but with certain Christian associations."
It is at this point that his otherwise admirable analysis slips a crucial notch. These words are not simply words that James attaches to her; they are words that James has her attach to herself. And the words suggesting that the children are angelic creatures corrupted by infernal agents are her words, words that give us her vision—or version—of the fall of the house of Bly. Heilman is quite right in holding that “the center of horror is not the apparitions themselves ... but ... the children, and our sense of what is happening to them.” But when he says, “What is happening to them is Quint and Jessel,” he oversimplifies. What is happening to the children is what the governess says is happening, and more than that, what is happening to them is, clearly and terribly, the governess herself.

Our sense of horror is indeed aroused by the plight of the children. But what exactly do we sense their plight to be? We feel an undertone of sexual perversity—but to build an interpretation of the whole story upon that, as in essence Wilson did, is to give an explanation that is too rationalistic, too specific to accord with the full depth of the conveyed horror. We recognize that the children are symbols of the tortured state of mankind, and that the horror of their corruption is heightened by the fact that they are essentially such angelic children. But this Heilman interpretation is, if not too rationalistic, at least too abstract; it provides a symbolic interpretation that we can grasp intellectually but that we do not truly feel.

So it is for me, at least. Heilman’s conception makes sense intellectually but not emotionally. I do not truly feel the corruption of the children or the horror of their putative relations with Quint and Jessel. What I feel is the governess ever tightening the screws. I respond—intensely as James wants us to respond—to the plight of two children, potentially angelic but human like all of us, harried to distraction and death by an overprotective governess. The character and outcome of the struggle, as I feel it, is determined not by the infernal ghosts but by the character of the protecting...
The Governess Turns the Screws
governess: she is anxious, fearful, possessive, domineering, hysteri-
cal and compulsive. The children are pawns which she must pro-
tect and can use, but for which she has no real concern; she is
cconcerned primarily with herself. After seeing what she does with
and to them I would say, paraphrasing Emerson, “If they are the
Devil’s children, let them live then with the Devil.” Salvation by
such as the governess doesn’t save. And if it had saved the children
for the governess’ continued ministrations, that I fear would have
been the greater of the two evils.

If then we are to see her as a would-be savior—and I agree with
Heilman that we must—we see her as a false savior. And I rather
think, though I certainly cannot be sure, that James unconsciously
saw her so too. In theological terms, she embodies the sin of pride
in daring to take upon herself, unaided, the task of saving the
children. In other terms, she is a compulsive neurotic who with
her martyr complex and her need to dominate finally drives to
destruction the children she wishes to possess. Thus the Christian
myth becomes twisted: the religious interpretation gives us a story
which is, in some manner at least, antireligious. Or maybe, admit-
ting as I do the essential ambiguity of almost everything in the
story, I should more cautiously suggest that any religious signifi-
cance we find here is necessarily double-edged. To me the governess
is central; and although I grant that she puts up a heroic fight
for the souls of her charges, I find myself basically suspicious of
her, not of her good will and certainly not of her “firmness,” but
of her coolness, her judgment, her wisdom, and above all her
ability to cope with human beings who as human beings are in-
evitably a mixture of good and evil.

Let us now listen to the governess in some detail. One particular
paragraph merits careful reading.

I scarce know how to put my story into words that shall be a credible
picture of my state of mind; but I was in these days literally able to find a
joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me. I
now saw that I had been asked for a service admirable and difficult; and there would be a greatness in letting it be seen—oh, in the right quarter!—that I could succeed where many another girl might have failed. It was an immense help to me—I confess I rather applaud myself as I look back!—that I saw my service so strongly and so simply. I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most lovable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep constant ache of one's own committed heart. We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me, and I—well, I had them. It was, in short, a magnificent chance. This chance presented itself to me in an image richly material. I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw, the less they would. I began to watch them in stifled suspense, a disguised excitement that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness. What saved me, as I now see, was that it turned to something else altogether. It didn't last as suspense—it was superseded by horrible proofs. Proofs, I say, yes—from the moment I really took hold.

I would almost be willing to rest my case on this one paragraph alone, which exhibits in concentrated form all the major traits of the governess, traits that go far beyond James's simple qualities of "firmness and courage." It is her "state of mind" that she, and thus we, are first of all concerned with, and she recognizes that her audience will not easily find it "credible." She sees herself as "committed" to a "service admirable and difficult" and is determined not to miss this "magnificent chance" to display her dedication so that it will be recognized "in the right quarter"—that of the master. She and the children are isolated, "cut off" and "united"; if she has lost herself in them, she has also found herself by having them, to "protect and defend" and indeed to possess. Thus, for her relations with the children, the servants are at the same time a threat and a necessity. Though she talks of stifling her suspense and disguising her excitement, she can in no wise do so, for she has worked herself into such a state of mind that, as she admits, it is essential to her sanity and salvation for proofs of the rightness of her imaginings to be forthcoming. So she eagerly offers herself as a screen. She will receive the images of
The Governess Turns the Screws

the evil past, cut them off from the children—but the images will be there on that screen, and we might suggest that were the screen not there to bring them out, they would never become visible or effective.

Thus she “takes hold,” with a compulsive “joy” in her heroism, a determination that the children shall submit not to the dark apparitions but to her. And she appears as an almost classic case of what Erich Fromm calls the authoritarian character: masochistic in that she delights in receiving the tortures as an “expiatory victim,” a phrase she later applies to herself, and at the same time sadistic in her insistence on dominating the children and Mrs. Grose.

This statement of her compulsive dedication and the need that is almost a desire for the proofs to materialize is made after Quint’s first visitation. But even before she had been challenged by ghosts, before she had found any outlet for her nervous tension, she had already revealed something of her character. Her first words, describing her feelings as she drives from London to Bly, present us with a person doubtful of herself, highstrung, swinging from one extreme to another without apparent cause:

I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong. After rising, in town, to meet his appeal, I had at all events a couple of very bad days—found myself doubtful again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake. In this state of mind I spent the long hours of bumping, swinging coach that carried me to the stopping-place at which I was to be met by a vehicle from the house. This convenience, I was told, had been ordered, and I found, toward the close of the June afternoon, a commodious fly in waiting for me. Driving at that hour, on a lovely day, through a country to which the summer sweetness seemed to offer me a friendly welcome, my fortitude mounted afresh and, as we turned into the avenue, encountered a reprieve that was probably but proof of the point to which it had sunk. I suppose I had expected, or had dreaded, something so melancholy that what greeted me was a good surprise.

Once arrived, she remains “uneasy,” unwilling to take things for what they seem, finding Flora’s very charm and beauty cause for
wonderment and Mrs. Grose's friendliness cause for suspicion. No wonder she slept restlessly that night. She hears mysterious night noises, but aware of her hypertension puts them down to an overwrought fancy. When we learn later that Bly is really haunted, we know that these sounds were actually there to be heard. But this early in the story we construe them much as the governess does—as the result of her imagination—and they accentuate the impression, left by her first two pages of narration, that we have here a very tense and excitable young lady.

Whatever aspects of the story are ambiguous, there is no doubt that unrelaxed nervous anxiety is an essential trait of the governess. Casual comments after the opening paragraphs add steadily to the impression that this quality is not merely the result of the nerve-racking situation into which she is thrown: it is part of her normal character. She says she was "in receipt in these days of disturbing letters from home, where things were not going well." She refers to her previous life as "my small, smothered life." She lacks self-confidence: Miles "was too clever for a bad governess, a parson's daughter to spoil...." "I'm rather easily carried away," she says to Mrs. Grose very early in the story; "I was carried away in London!" After the apparitions have started she comments: "I was queer company enough." Reasonable all right for her to be queer by then; but one feels that she was not exactly relaxing company to begin with, that she would have been queer even without the other, ghostly company to aggravate matters.

Indeed James so effectively sets the mood for the horrible doings, through the governess' initial doubts and worries, that we come to feel the visitations serve her as a blessing in evil disguise. The apparitions satisfy a deep-lying need; they permit her to objectify her fears, to project her uncertainties onto something external; they give her a chance to be applauded for her heroic devotion. Quint's first appearance is preceded by two pages of troubled introspection. She is self-satisfied, almost smug, and at the same time a bundle of tensions straining for release. "I dare say I fancied myself,
The Governess Turns the Screws

in short, a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear.”

Though it takes her awhile to realize, or decide, that the evil figure on the tower is threatening the children, once decided she moves unflinchingly to save her charges. Her concern, she would insist, is only for them. But to the reader it often seems that her real concern is with herself. She paces the sunny paths and the dark halls of Bly as if always holding a mirror before her, in which to observe with care and admiration her displays of heroism, and in which to catch in the shadowy background the lurking figures visible only to someone with her preternatural acuity. We quite agree with her when she says, “The shock I had suffered must have sharpened all my senses.” Possessed by what she calls her “endless obsession,” and her “dreadful liability to impressions of the order so vividly exemplified” by the apparitions, she stalks her prey; but we are often uncertain whether the prey is Quint and Jessel, as she thinks, or Miles and Flora, as it finally seems, or even, in some perverse fashion, herself.

James meant the ghosts to be real. But what they are we can never quite decide. Sometimes indeed it almost seems as though they are creatures of what she calls her “mere infernal imagination,” as though she makes them or thinks she does. “There were shrubberies and big trees, but I remember the clear assurance I felt that none of them concealed him. He was there or was not there; not there if I didn’t see him.” Though that seems reasonable enough at first, on second thought one wonders why the evil one could not secrete himself, why his existence, or at least his presence, should be contingent on the governess’ recognition of him? Is her dread of the figures actually a disguised desire to see them? “There was many a corner round which I expected to come upon Quint, and many a situation that, in a merely sinister way, would have favored the appearance of Miss Jessel.” Or—horrible thought!—could it be that they are not evil? Once when she saw Jessel at the desk: “I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was I
who was the intruder.” “I” who was the evil intruding on Bly to destroy the children by possessing them?

Just as her words suggest that somehow she calls up the ghosts, and with them the evil, so they suggest that she imposes the meaning upon the events. Her long verbal struggles with Mrs. Grose are ostensibly attempts to make that woman of little understanding appreciate the true horror that surrounds and penetrates the children, but they appear equally as attempts to darken the light of the housekeeper’s common sense with the fearful suspicions of the governess. Her supersensitivity to the presence of the apparitions is complemented by her marvelous understanding of their intentions and of the pattern of the future. “It seems to me indeed, in retrospect, that by the time the morrow’s sun was high I had restlessly read into the facts before us almost all the meaning they were to receive from subsequent and more cruel occurrences.” All ambivalently, she makes her grisly interpretations and then tries to persuade herself that she has not done so. The “strangest if not the brightest thread in the pensive embroidery I just spoke of was the impression I might have got, if I had dared to work it out. . . .” “It suited me too, I felt, only too well; by which I mean that it suited exactly the particularly deadly view I was in the very act of forbidding myself to entertain.” Her conscious mind recoils in horror from the horrors that it discovers and that her subconscious wishes to evoke.

Such reluctance to foretell the worst is not usual with her. More often she sees through the deceptions of the children and the dullness of Mrs. Grose to the truth beneath—to her truth, welcomed with exaltation.

“He was looking for little Miles.” A portentous clearness now possessed me. “That’s whom he was looking for.”

“But how do you know?”

“I know, I know, I know!” My exaltation grew. “And you know, my dear!”

She didn’t deny this, but I required, I felt, not even so much telling as that.
The Governess Turns the Screws

She stalks the halls through the dark night, straining to discern the prowlers—and reasonably enough occasionally seeing them. She listens at doors and stands behind curtains to watch the children whom she suspects of slipping out onto moonlit lawns—and happily catches them at it once or twice. Then she can explain it to the obtuse housekeeper; it was worse than she had dared to expect.

“Lord, you do change!” cried my friend.

“I don’t change—I simply make it out. The four, depend upon it, perpetually meet. If on either of these nights you had been with either child, you would clearly have understood.”

“Clearly!” Could any word be more inappropriate as description of the understanding possible to anyone except this omniscient, determined governess? The most dramatic example of her marvelously clear prevision is the long dialogue with Mrs. Grose before the second trip to the lake to find Flora and Miss Jessel. Like a magician beguiling an expectant audience, the governess explains what the children and their tempters are up to and drags the housekeeper to the site at which she expects the new visitation.

By its ghostly nature the relation of the governess to the apparitions is inevitably hard to define. Much clearer, and essentially indisputable, is the iron control she increasingly exercises over the children. She is not the progressive teacher providing them with opportunities to develop according to their needs and to solve their own problems. She is not the firm disciplinarian teaching them to develop according to accepted standards. She is the authoritarian ruler denying any rights to her subjects, the Puritan certain that depravity inheres in everyone and that she alone is elected to fight it. The shock of the first apparition fortunately permits her to translate her diffuse nervousness into a stern dedication. “I have my duty,” she says to Mrs. Grose, shortly thereafter. And from then on the sense of rigorous duty increasingly pervades the story as she constantly tightens the screws, bearing down with a “rigid
control” and a “rigid will.” She freely admits that the children, beleagured by the ghosts, are prisoners of hers:

Something or other had brought nearer home to me that I had all but pinned the boy to my shawl and that, in the way our companions were marshalled before me, I might have appeared to provide against some danger of rebellion. I was like a jailer with an eye to possible surprises and escapes.

Never would she leave them alone: “I was careful almost never to be out of” their company. And she says that the final occasion on which Flora escapes to Miss Jessel and the lake “was the very first time I had allowed the little girl out of my sight without some special provision.”

Oppressive as this unrelenting surveillance would have seemed to the children, her love for them must have been an even heavier burden. The governess thinks she is enchanted and charmed by her little charges, imagines herself passionately devoted to them, and well-nigh smothers them in demonstrations of this love.

There were moments when, by an irresistible impulse, I found myself catching them up and pressing them to my heart.

I needed nothing more than this to feel the full force of Mrs. Grose’s comparison, and, catching my pupil in my arms, covered her with kisses in which there was a sob of atonement.

These caresses are not expressions of a spontaneous, relaxed affection. With their accompaniment of sobs of atonement and their nervous pressure, they must seem to the children compulsive and indeed frightening.

I was, of course, thoroughly kind and merciful; never, never yet had I placed on his little shoulders hands of such tenderness as those with which, while I rested against the bed, I held him there well under fire.

One of these [ideas of how to interpret the children’s actions], for a moment, tempted me with such a singular intensity that, to withstand it, I must have gripped my little girl with a spasm that, wonderfully, she submitted to without a cry or a sign of fright.
The Governess Turns the Screws

We can see the children as little devils who submit to these extravagant blandishments as the price they have to pay for their freedom to consort with their unearthly visitors. But I find myself more inclined to pity them as objects of a hysterical, possessive love that they accept, with remarkable imperturbability, as part of the strange world of strange governesses into which they had been born.

I threw myself upon him and in the tenderness of my pity I embraced him. “Dear little Miles, dear little Miles!”

My face was close to his, and he let me kiss him, simply taking it with indulgent good humor. “Well, old lady?”

The governess comments proudly on the tenderness they show toward her, little realizing that under the enforced demonstrations of a conventional love smolders a resentment and hatred that will burst out all the more violently because so long suppressed.

Beneath the governess’ displays of love and care lies her determination not merely to protect and control but fully to possess her charges. The idea of their having been “familiar” with Quint and Jessel is insupportable. “Too free with my boys?” she exclaims in horror and determination. Sharing is impossible; the children must be either hers or theirs. “They haven’t been good—they’ve only been absent. It has been easy to live with them, because they’re simply leading a life of their own. They’re not mine—they’re not ours. They’re his and they’re hers!” When Flora is irretrievably lost to her, she is almost happy because it means she will be left alone with Miles; it is Miles for whom her possessive passion is most acute, Miles whom she most fears and whom she most damages. “Won’t, if he has any chance turn on me? Yes, I venture still to think it. At all events, I want to try. Get off with his sister as soon as possible and leave me with him alone.” On any level the story is a struggle for the possession of the children, and once we begin to doubt the governess’ interpretation of events, once we see her as an agent with positive effects upon the children, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that what she is striving for is com-
complete authority, complete dominance, complete possession of the children, whose innocence may have already been besmirched by Quint and Jessel but who at least had a life and existence of their own before the arrival of their governess with her duty and her love.

Her complete possession of the children is contingent upon the continuation of the threat. I have already cited some of the passages that leave us feeling that she actually wants the apparitions to be there, wants the children to succumb, almost, to the pressures of their tempters. Always we see her waiting for new developments, consciously fearing the worst, but unconsciously fearing that the worst might not develop, that the threat might evaporate.

"Surely you don't accuse him—"

"Of carrying on an intercourse that he conceals from me? Ah, remember that, until further evidence, I now accuse nobody." Then, before shutting her out to go, by another passage, to her own place, "I must just wait," I wound up.

Note particularly the following sentence, which can be read as merely another example of Jamesian ambiguity or can be construed as clear Jamesian revelation of the governess' ambivalence:

Say that, by the dark prodigy I knew, the imagination of all evil had been opened up to him; all the justice within me ached for the proof that it could ever have flowered into an act.

In actuality, though she may think she is saying something else, she wants the worst to come true. As she worries the strange happenings over and over with Mrs. Grose, proclaiming always that it "was a pity" they had to talk about them and insisting on their "duty of resistance to extravagant fancies," she makes us feel that her disclaimers are gauze-thin veils for her fears that her fancies were unfounded. As she says, "It would distress me much more to lose my power than to keep it." For her power to sense presences that no one else senses is her power to coerce the children and to drag Mrs. Grose along with her in her fine perceptions. Power she must continue to exert, and she can do so only if her antagonists
continue their aggressions. Without ever sharper pieces of evidence, her case, her power, her sanity will collapse.

Thus the struggles with Mrs. Grose, who cannot safely be allowed to remain an innocent and uncommitted bystander, are as crucial as those with the children. The most puzzling passages in the book, masterpieces of Jamesian ambiguity, are the dialogues between the governess and this good, simple woman, whom we can interpret as representative either of gross insensibility to the forces of evil or of common-sense acceptance of the human mixture of good and bad. Whatever is ambiguous in these dialogues, however, there is no doubt that the governess forces Mrs. Grose into submission, "dragged her at my heels," as she puts it. She presses and presses—those are her words—probing for additional bits that can be forced into her predetermined pattern, often seeming to tell Mrs. Grose what to say, explaining the true, dark meanings that Mrs. Grose has failed to appreciate, ever fearful lest she lose Mrs. Grose as an ally. The apparent innocence of the children is a continual threat to Mrs. Grose's allegiance.

Flights of fancy gave place, in her mind, to a steady fireside glow, and I had already begun to perceive how, with the development of the conviction that—as time went on without a public accident—our young things could, after all, look out for themselves, she addressed her greatest solicitude to the sad case presented by their instructress.

The case must always be made to concern the "others," and the governess' imagination must always find ways to redirect Mrs. Grose's suspicions when they threaten to swerve toward the governess instead of the children.

Mrs. Grose watched them [being particularly manageable and angelic on the lawn] with positive placidity; then I caught the suppressed intellectual creak with which she conscientiously turned to take from me a view of the back of the tapestry. I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my superiority—my accomplishments and my function—in her patience under my pain. She offered her mind to my disclosures as, had I wished to mix a witch's broth and proposed it with assurance, she would have held out a large clean sauce pan.
So, hounding and loving the children, pressing ever harder on Mrs. Grose, she controls all her inferiors rigidly, until unable to bend, they break in the climactic scenes: the scene of Jessel’s second lake appearance, to which Mrs. Grose is dragged along, passively submitting to the governess’ authority until she finally wrenches herself free to comfort the sobbing, broken Flora with the assurance that no one was there after all; and the final scene of Miles gripped tight by the governess as she keeps demanding explanations and confessions and complete submission until finally he collapses dead in her arms—“his little heart, dispossessed” of the demons which kept her from possessing it herself, completely, until now she has it in death.

Along with the governess’ determination to make others submit goes a desire on her own part to relax in submission to something else. On her first night at Bly, she says: “I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was strangely, at the helm!” These are her feelings before any apparitions had appeared, even before the first breath of suspicion falls on Miles with the word of his dismissal from school. She is at the helm, she will steer, she will determine the course, and take her passengers where she wills. That she assumes authority and exercises it with implacable firmness we have seen. But the determination, so noticeable as the story progresses, to steer her passengers along her course is not the dominant aspect of this image. She is not only the helmsman; she is one of the passengers, lost with them, drifting.

Here we have the other face of the authoritarian character: the masochism that often accompanies sadism. Lacking any true direction or personality of her own, she tries to find and make her life, partly by bending others to her will, partly by submitting and in effect giving herself over to Quint and Jessel. Quint and Jessel permit her to escape from the freedom she showed herself fearful of in the opening paragraphs. They give her the necessary excuse to dominate the children and the housekeeper, and they give her a
The Governess Turns the Screws

way to lose herself in what she disguises, for herself as well as for Mrs. Grose, as dedication to a cause. If she feels herself at the helm, she also feels the ship drifting; and as we have seen in another image, she wishes to serve as a screen, to receive onto herself the evil ministrations of the apparitions, for whom she readily admits, nay insists, that she is searching.

This submissive aspect of the governess’ character appears more in the overtones of her narrative than in specific statements and is thus much harder to demonstrate by particular quotations than is her desire to dominate. There are two passages that make her desire for self-immolation reasonably explicit.

I had an absolute certainty that I could see again what I had already seen, but something within me said that by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquility of my companions.

Whether the children really saw or not—since, that is, it was not yet definitely proved—I greatly preferred, as a safeguard, the fulness of my own exposure. I was ready to know the very worst that was to be known.

We have seen that she seems really to want things to happen, wants her worst previsions to come true. Trouble and danger come as a welcome “relief.” They are a relief in part because they allow her to tighten the screws further each time, and also because they take her out of herself, making action automatic, something she does, not as herself but as an instrument. And when action fails, when she is unable to keep control, she responds with hysterical submission herself.

Of what first happened when I was left alone [after the second appearance of Jessel at the lake] I had no subsequent memory. I only knew that at the end of it, I suppose, a quarter of an hour, an odorous dampness and roughness, chilling and piercing my trouble, had made me understand that I must have thrown myself, on my face, on the ground and given way to a wildness of grief. I must have lain there long and cried and sobbed, for when I raised my head the day was almost done.

Beneath her overt firmness and her stern exertion of authority
lies a realization that what she is doing is dangerous, even evil. She is caught in a trap of her own making.

[Miles] couldn’t play any longer at innocence; so how the deuce would he get out of it? There beat in me indeed, with the passionate throb of this question, an equal dumb appeal as to how the deuce I should.

"By writing to him [the master] that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad" [she queries in answer to a suggestion of Mrs. Grose]?

"But if they are, Miss?"

"And if I am myself you mean?"

Within a minute there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he were innocent, what then on earth was I?

Thus she throws herself weeping into Mrs. Grose’s sheltering arms or she lies sobbing on the ground, and gains as much satisfaction by such self-abasement as she does by controlling her companions. For she lives in a world of extremes, a world composed only of masters and slaves, and if she fails to demonstrate the objective existence of those she claims have enslaved the children, she is left helplessly dangling, alone in a normal world of normal people, a world in which she cannot operate.

The children, however, cannot live in this hysterical world which she has to create. They want to escape her. But their first indications of this she construes as a desire to leave her kindly surveillance that they may be with the evil others; and even the reader finds that he can go along with her construction.

"I thought you wanted to go on as you are" [she says to Miles]....

"I don’t—I don’t. I want to get away."

But finally it is obvious that it is the hounding rather than the haunting that they must get away from.

"Take me away, take me away—oh, take me away from her!"

"From me?" I panted.

"From you—from you!” she cried.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Flora was so markedly feverish that an illness was perhaps at hand; she
The Governess Turns the Screws

had passed a night of extreme unrest, a night agitated above all by fears that had for their subject not in the least her former, but wholly her present governess. It was not against the possible re-entrance of Miss Jessel on the scene that she protested—it was conspicuously and passionately against mine.

The governess cannot fail to admit now that they fear and hate her. But she cannot admit that she is the cause; they hate only because they are completely corrupted, completely enslaved by evil. So when Mrs. Grose reports that she has heard from Flora “horrors” about the governess, the governess engages in one of her most nimble bits of interpretation.

It was in quite another manner that I, for my part, let myself go. “Oh, thank God!” She sprang up again at this, drying her eyes with a groan, ‘Thank God’?
“It so justifies me!”
“It does that, Miss!”
I couldn’t have desired more emphasis, but I just hesitated, “She’s so horrible?”

Recall again the last long scene of Miles’ death—or murder. She will make him confess, by whatever third-degree methods prove necessary; she will find a way to demonstrate that all actions, all explanations prove his guilt. He will not escape like Flora. She will hold him tight and keep him all for herself, even though she can possess him as she wishes only in death.

In conclusion let me return to the point from which I started. I am convinced that James was not intending to write an allegory, or a story with a moral—James seldom if ever did anything as simple as that. Nor was he writing a nouvelle of his usual sort: “realistic,” in the sense that it was designed to convey the feeling of recognizable experience in all its complex density. He was trying to write a horror story, to communicate by all the mechanisms he could devise a sense of pure evil rather than real life. But his genius was such that he could not create something that, like an inferior Gothic novel or modern whodunit, would give the impression of merely mechanical contrivance. Hence the feeling of life crept in,
and critics are properly compelled to attempt explications and definitions of this life, and of the nature of this horror.

The greatest difficulty arises when we try to discuss the "reality" of the ghosts, and here my interpretation is in most danger of coming a cropper. As long as I do not hold that the ghosts are mere hallucinations of the governess, I have to grant them some sort of reality. And if they are real and evil, neither the governess nor I have any right to treat them lightly. Once grant that the evil spirits have really returned to haunt the children and it would be preposterous to ask the governess to remain calm, collected, and normal; instead her heroic self-dedication should be deemed wholly admirable and proper.

But this question of the ghosts' reality is a thorny one. If we conceive of them as real, it is hard to find rational grounds on which to judge how she should have faced such a ghastly and impossible situation. Presumably her realistic reaction to real invaders would have been promptly to wire the master, the police, maybe also a priest, or better a witch doctor. But then there would have been no story. Indeed, such a view of the intruders makes any interpretation superfluous. We could take the story only as sheer horror, mere contrivance, and enjoy it on that level.

The reality we impute to the ghosts must instead be somehow symbolic. Then we have to ask what they symbolize. But we have seen that James denied that they were allegorical figures, insisted that he carefully refrained from assigning them specific symbolic meaning. The meaning we ascribe to them will depend, as James meant it to, upon our own reading of the story and our feeling of its drama, which in turn depends upon our view of human life and its attendant evils.

I do not feel that Quint and Jessel represent pure evil: James does not say so, nor does his presentation of the struggle make me feel it dramatically. The governess may indistinctly consider the ghosts as the essence of evil, and, as Heilman points out, she certainly chooses words which identify them with Satan and herself with
The Governess Turns the Screws

the Savior. But our vantage point is different from the governess': we see her as one of the combatants, and as the story progresses we become ever more uncertain who is fighting whom. We have to grant that she really sees Quint on the tower. But from then on the confrontations are increasingly subject to other interpretations; we feel more and more that Quint and Jessel are creatures haunting her, desired by her, almost controlled by her.

This is not to deny that evil is present; it is undoubtedly there somehow. It seems to me that the ghosts symbolize not so much some particular evil attacking the children as a more generalized evil that is part of man, of the governess as well as the children, an evil we must all continually fight. The nature of this evil is not something given; it is developing and malleable. The way it is treated or combated determines the way it actually affects people. And it is the governess who determines and carries out the treatment. Though she neither imagines nor creates the evil, she seems to exacerbate it. She makes active, effective, dominant what might have remained quiescent; she forces issues which—for all we can see in the story—need not have been forced. The story is drama as well as fable, and more than poem. As drama it presents not so much perverted innocents as a frightened, frightening governess struggling with her wards. We don't really know or feel what Quint and Jessel are doing to Miles and Flora. But we know and feel that the governess is hounding them, pressing them and Mrs. Grose, helping (at the very least) to create such an atmosphere of tension and suspicion that finally they hate and fear her and want only to be left alone. This is not a study of the governess' unstable psyche—it is not a study of anything. It is a story in which a hysterical woman turns a quiet summer into a fall of dark hatred and tragedy.

I have attempted to demonstrate that the governess is an authoritarian character: hysterical, compulsive, sado-masochistic. Some readers may, however, prefer to use the terms she chooses in describing her actions: duty, service, expiatory victim, torment, atone-
ment, savior. They may insist that the actions and attitudes I have characterized as authoritarian are simply those of the true Christian. They may hold that her incessant vigilance, unrelenting pressure, selfless submission, and refusal to compromise in any manner with evil are entirely proper and necessary in the unremitting struggle against the forces of evil. This would be to adopt what we loosely call the Puritan view of Christianity, and to say that the governess is essentially a Puritan. She would indeed have been worthy coadjutor of Paul or Augustine or Luther (though she is too blind to the possibilities of there being sin in her to have been wholly approved by them). If we accept this view of her, the important thing to note is that James pictured her battle as futile and fatal. If he approved her methods, he certainly did not deem them effective; if he approved her self-dedication as savior, he did not think that she could save.

Readers who do not have a predilection for this variant of Christianity will almost certainly see the governess differently, and believe that James saw her differently. Through her insistence on recognizing only the extreme whites of Edenlike innocence and the extreme blacks of Quint and Jessel, and her refusal to accept the shaded grays that are necessary for any true human understanding and sympathy, she alienates the children so completely that they have no alternative but to go to the devil. She looks upon them first as angelic then as infernal, never as something in between. Unable to offer them the positive, sympathetic love which might have helped them develop as humans and accommodate themselves to the evil with which all men must by their nature live, she can only strive to recast them in her rigid authoritarian mold. She turns the screws of Puritan discipline and suspicion until the children fatally crack under the strain. Whatever the multitude of ambiguities in this story, one thing is not ambiguous: once one fills the blanks with Christian values, one must see the story as a covert, if unconscious, attack on one strain of Christianity, a New England strain with which James was most familiar.