"Henry James's 'General Vision of Evil' in The Turn of the Screw"

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The Turn of the Screw is a ghost story in which the fantasy of one level of meaning ironically reveals the moral and psychological reality of another level of meaning. The symbolic significance of the ghosts should be sought in the governess's reaction to them, as it is ironically qualified by the logic of the narrative itself. Neither hallucinations nor representatives of a Manichean dualism or a Puritan asceticism, the ghosts symbolize the origins of human fear in the adult's sense of sexual guilt—a sense which is inevitably passed on to the child. Thus the governess is neither mad nor abnormal, but quite tragically typical, in her inability to accept the genuine innocence of the children. The loss of innocence, James felt, could be understood only as a failure in the individual's personal life—failures which, like Original Sin, are self-perpetuating as they are passed from generation to generation.

ONE HESITATES TO EMBARRASS the scholarly world with yet another explication of The Turn of the Screw. This story, which James described in his preface as a "fairy tale pure and simple" and an "amusette to catch those not easily caught," has inspired a corpus of critical commentary and debate which seems vastly out of proportion to the real difficulties which the story presents. Yet, simply because so much has already been written about the tale, because issues have been raised and problems solved in widely divergent ways, a good deal will probably still be written by those who have been properly "caught" by James's artistry. The Turn of the Screw seems destined, like Hamlet and the fourth book of Gulliver's Travels, to supply us with an inexhaustible source of critical controversy.

The major issue of that controversy to date has concerned, of course, the reality of the ghosts and the sanity of the governess. In taking a position on these questions, critics have tended to impose upon the tale, and upon James himself, two diametrically opposed views of evil and the nature of human experience. Ghosts are inevitably creatures of some metaphysical significance, and just as the reality and theological

1The Novels and Tales of Henry James, 26 vols. (New York, 1907-17), vol. XII, pp. xvi, xviii. All further page references are to this edition and will be indicated within the text.
ambiguity of the ghost in *Hamlet* indicates something important about Shakespeare's universe, so the reality or unreality of the ghosts at Bly must be a crucial factor in our determination of *The Turn of the Screw*’s ultimate meaning.

The psychoanalytic interpretation, consequently, implies more than it might seem at first. For if the governess is mad and the ghosts hallucinatory, we then have a world in which evil is an illusion, an irrelevant value judgment, the externalization of inner psychological forces which are, in themselves, neither good nor evil but empirical facts. *The Turn of the Screw* becomes then, in this reading, a pathological case study by an objective and morally neutral analyst of human aberrations. The apparitionist interpretation, on the other hand, sees the tale as a moral and religious allegory in which evil is given the force of actuality in actual ghosts, and is explicitly associated with human sexuality. Most of the apparitionists have consequently imposed upon the tale either a Manichean fatalism, in which evil operates as a positive, dominant force in human affairs and in the universe, or a Puritan asceticism, in which evil is somehow the correlative of human flesh. The ghosts have thus become, to use a favorite Jamesian term, *ficelles* in which the critic may see his own philosophy, but—quite possibly—little of James’s own.

Both the apparitionists and the psychoanalysts have, it seems to me, exceeded the boundaries of legitimate textual evidence in developing their theories, and their refutations of one another seem too well established to need recapitulation here.² James’s practice in fiction, it should be noted however, was never to let his reader take pertinent information for granted (a form of rhetorical anarchy he is sometimes credited

²The cream of the controversy has been collected in Gerald Willen’s *A Casebook on Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw”* (New York, 1960). Robert Kimbrough’s *The Turn of the Screw: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1966) is a valuable supplement to the earlier compilation. The most exhaustive single interpretation (which finds the governess hallucinated and neurotic) is T. M. Cranfill’s and H. L. Clark’s *An Anatomy of “The Turn of the Screw”* (Austin, Texas, 1965). For examples of the apparitionist view with Manichean and Puritan overtones, see: Robert G. Heilman, “*The Turn of the Screw* as Poem,” and Charles G. Hoffman, “Innocence and Evil in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*” (both in Willen). Although I have attempted to draw fine and, I hope, crucial distinctions between my interpretation and those mentioned above, I am indebted to all these earlier critics for arousing my interest in the problem and for channeling it toward important areas of evidence.
with inventing, but which his criticism shows he would not have understood), but rather to allow the established facts to speak for themselves, and to indicate ironic alternatives and shades of meaning with great precision. Furthermore, neither the apparitionists nor the psychoanalysts have, it seems to me, adequately described James's vision of evil in *The Turn of the Screw* in a way that corresponds to his characteristic approach to this problem in the rest of his fiction. The purpose of this study, then, is to reassess the evidence of the tale itself, and to define as closely as possible the nature of evil and human sexuality as James presents them in dramatic terms.

Considering first of all the rival interpretations of what actually happens at Bly, I think the controversy can be set aside easily enough by a slight refocusing on the method and avowed purpose of the tale. As a ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* attempts to evoke the thrill of the unknown and the unknowable, and to render the invasion of the unknown perfectly credible. James accomplishes this feat by sustaining two mutually exclusive interpretations of the events—a natural one and a supernatural one. By thus simulating an "actual" case of ghostly visitation, in which a natural explanation arises to challenge the supernatural one, and almost—but of course not entirely—dispels it, *The Turn of the Screw* achieves its hold on the imagination of those "not easily caught."

It is hard to see how any reader at all accustomed or sensitive to Jamesian irony can read *The Turn of the Screw* without forming his suspicions of the governess's sanity; yet the dramatic effect of these suspicions—if we read the story without recourse to Freudian theories—is not to discredit her story; it is rather to render her account more credible by keeping the natural explanation of her madness constantly before us. This, I assume, is what James meant in his preface by claiming that he had given the governess "authority" (xix)—authority, that is, as a plausible narrator of implausible events. It is precisely because we are allowed to suspect for a while that the ghosts may not be real that—modern sceptics that we are—we believe in the story enough to be frightened by it, and our final acknowledgment of the supernatural is made possible. To write the last of "the good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost stories" (xv) in an age that, as a general rule, does not believe in ghosts—this
was just the sort of technical challenge James loved and to which he was capable of devoting a seemingly inexhaustible ingenuity.

Yet even ghost stories, in their recourse to the psychology of fear and wonderment, may be vehicles of artistic truth. In a comparatively recent and persuasive analysis of The Turn of the Screw, Mark Spilka offers a new "Freudian" reading which turns not upon the neurosis of the governess herself but upon her symbolic role as a representative of the Victorian conscience, with all its sexual self-consciousness and anxieties and repressions. Spilka’s interpretation may require too rigid a social and Freudian scheme of reference for most readers, yet it is highly valuable in that it indicates an alternative to the bootless controversy over the reality of the ghosts. Following Spilka’s example, we may examine the story as a parable in which the fantasy of one level of meaning ironically reveals the moral and psychological reality of another level of meaning. We can thus accept the events of the tale as they are given to us. We need not quibble about what the governess has suppressed, or what James has consciously or unconsciously suppressed about her. We may assume that she is telling the truth without assuming that her view of the universe is necessarily James’s own. In other words, we may follow James’s own contention that, while the governess has kept "crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities," the philosophical conclusions we can draw from them may be altogether “a different matter” (xix).

The story which the governess tells us indicates, I think, a pattern of events which is perfectly compatible with the action she describes but of which she is nevertheless unaware. A young woman of twenty, the daughter of a country parson, with little experience of the world, she becomes the guardian of two orphans. The children’s uncle has informed her in no uncertain terms that he does not wish to be bothered with them, and that their welfare is her sole responsibility. She is only too willing to assume this responsibility, since she has an

"Turning the Freudian Screw: How Not to Do It," reprinted in Kimbrough, pp. 245-253. Spilka further distinguishes between the “dramatic” ambiguity of the ghosts’ reality and the “moral” ambiguity of the children’s depravity (p. 253)—a distinction which is essential to any coherent reading of the tale, in that it is only the second of these ambiguities which, as Spilka points out, “engages James and the reader in serious issues—his evasive preface to the contrary notwithstanding.”
intense desire to prove herself a capable and responsible woman. Whether or not the uncle has aroused her romantic interest, her primary motivation seems clear and completely natural. A young governess in her first position, she is anxious to prove her competence to herself.

The domestic circle at Bly is thus marked by the conspicuous absence of any adult masculine authority. It is a feminine world, presided over by a young, eager, naive governess and an ignorant and aging housekeeper. Miles, a young man of ten, feels keenly this lack of masculine companionship and guidance. As he tells the governess, “I want my own sort. . . . I want to see more life” (251). He exhibits increasing signs of restiveness as he is kept from returning to school by the governess's inability to cope with the complications of his expulsion from his last school, but she rationalizes her first significant failure by telling herself that “he was too clever for a bad governess, a parson's daughter, to spoil” (219). The governess betrays a notable lack of insight into the psychology of adolescent males when she tells herself further that Miles is “too fine and fair for the little horrid, unclean school-world” with its “stupid, sordid headmasters” and “vindictive” majority of common boys (182). The governess here reveals both the maternal protectiveness and sexual self-consciousness which will distinguish her throughout the tale.

When the tranquility of their life at Bly is threatened by the apparitions, the governess feels keenly how much the welfare of the children depends upon her courage, her devotion, and her good judgment. Certainly, this young woman is a model of courage and devotion, but her judgment is open to question. Instead of sending for aid, or removing herself and the children from Bly, the governess sets out in a rather naive and melodramatic way to protect the children by exposing herself:

I had an absolute certainty that I should 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 the rest of the household. . . . I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would. (195, 199)

This is the governess's first mistake in judgment, for by de-
termining—with a lack of logic almost comic, were it not so frighteningly typical of all self-appointed censors—that the children, at all cost to herself, shall know nothing of the ghosts, she has made their knowledge, rather than their physical or moral welfare, the crucial issue. She has equated innocence with ignorance and knowledge with corruption, and she has assumed, in the greatest non sequitur of all, that her exposure to corruption will in some manner make it impossible for the ghosts to corrupt the children. The obvious and more logical alternative, which she seems never to consider, is that the ghosts will corrupt the children through her. We may just invert her proposition: the more she sees, the more, ultimately, will they be forced to see.

Her determination to shield the children causes the governess to watch them with a “stifled suspense, a disguised excitement that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness” (199). Here we cannot fail to be aware of the possibility which James explicitly places before us, yet the particular madness which begins to afflict the governess seems not that of imagining ghosts which do not exist, but rather the more common madness of imagining sophisticated depths in the children which the resources of eight and ten year olds render highly unlikely. She finds in their “portentous little activities” and their “greater intensity of play” and “invitation to romp” a sure indication that they are aware of the ghostly presences (211). And before long she is convinced not only that the children are “talking of them—they’re talking horrors!” but also that their “more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness” is all a “policy and a fraud” (236-237). Ultimately, she sees herself and the children engaged in a fierce contest of wills:

There were times of being together when I would have been ready to swear that, literally, in my presence, but with my direct sense of it closed, they had visitors who were known and were welcome. Then it was that ... my exaltation would have broken out. “They’re here, you little wretches,” I would have cried, “and you can’t deny it now!” (76-77)

Thus a very odd relationship develops between the governess and the children, for the more she loves them and pities them and desires to save them, the more she begins to suspect them of treachery, until at last she is convinced that they, in league
with the ghosts, are ingeniously tormenting her.

The animosity and sense of persecution which an adult—especially one inexperienced and insecure in a position of authority—may feel toward her young charges seems indeed too common and natural an experience to be called madness. Yet we should recall that the governess's hostility toward the children is the direct consequence of her desire to shield them from knowledge rather than harm. All she really suspects them of, it seems, is of somehow knowing about the ghosts in spite of all her efforts. And if they know, she automatically concludes they must be corrupt.

Few critics have asked why the governess makes such an issue of the children's knowledge—fewer still why, before we have advanced very far into the novel, we, the governess, Mrs. Grose, and apparently even James himself, have associated that knowledge with some kind of sexual taboo which, in some vague and unspecified way, must result in the violation of the children's innocence. Although the ghosts may well be objective presences and although they may constitute a real threat to the children, it is the governess herself who, with an assist from Mrs. Grose, invests the ghosts with their sexual significance. It is she who instinctively identifies sex with the powers of darkness and evil, and who conjures up the murky atmosphere of sexual perversity which infests Bly. The ghosts themselves remain, as it were, asexual. They appear; they glare at the governess; they look around, apparently for the children; they go away. And no matter how promiscuous and vile Peter Quint and Miss Jessel may have been in life, it is never clearly explained why the vices of the living should appeal so very much to the dead, for whom it is surely difficult to postulate sexual offenses. "The grave's a fine and private place, but...."

Perhaps with this anomaly in mind, James qualified the nature of his apparitions in the preface:

1 This observation was first made by Dorothea Krook in The Ordeal of Consciousness (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 109-110. Miss Krook bases her interpretation on the inaccessibility of the child's consciousness to the adult mind—an ambiguity, as it were, drawn from life.

2 Joseph J. Firebaugh approaches this question in "Inadequacy in Eden: Knowledge and 'The Turn of the Screw'" (Modern Fiction Studies, III (Spring, 1957), 57-63). Firebaugh rightly rejects the Puritanical interpretation of the tale, but overemphasizes, it seems to me, the governess's culpability by diminishing the significance of the ghosts.
Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not "ghosts" at all, as we now know the ghost, but goblins, elves, imps, demons as loosely constructed as those of the old trials of witchcraft; if not, more pleasingly, fairies of the legendary order, wooing their victims forth to see them dance under the moon. (xx)

This may help us to clarify the erotic quality of the ghosts, and it suggests further—since James refers Quint and Miss Jessel to both Puritan and pagan mythologies—that their sexual connotations somehow involve us in a more or less universal tendency to associate the horrific and the erotic, an association which the psychologist would doubtless explain through the origins of fear in the individual's sense of sexual guilt. Modern fiction, from Hawthorne to Faulkner, has investigated this association in depth, and it is not necessary to impute any special, technical knowledge of Freudian theories to James in order to see that he has drawn upon this residue of unconscious guilt not only in his characterization of the governess, but in his direction of the reader's response to the ghosts. "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough," James claims to have taken for his working rationale, "... and you are released from weak specifications" (xxi-xxii). Yet it is surely the governess herself, not the ghosts or the children, who introduces us to this "general vision": we follow the implications of her tone throughout when we associate the ghosts with nameless sexual perversities and aggressions.

The range of possibilities as to the relationship of the ghosts and the children is in fact very wide. They may not be aware of the ghosts at all—at least, not at first. Or they may be, as the governess believes, wickedly in league with them from the start. Or, as an alternative which strangely never occurs to the governess, they may be aware of the ghosts' presence but untroubled and uncorrupted by it—immune, in their very innocence, to fear and guilt. The ghosts are there; perhaps the children see them, perhaps they don't. There is no way for us to be sure, but in either case their apparent innocence may still be innocence. Untroubled by sexual guilt, they are unaware of evil and unafraid. It is, however, otherwise with the governess. Her horror must be seen as a result of her own intense vision of sexual evil.

This view gains credence, it seems to me, from the many symbolic relationships between the governess and the ghosts. James has so contrived the tale that the governess frequently
finds herself occupying the same position in which she has seen one of the ghosts, or recreating their movements and actions. She appears, both to the housekeeper and the children, with the same fierce and frightening aspect with which the ghosts have appeared to her. During a crucial exchange with Miles on the subject of his returning to school, the governess sinks down upon a tombstone; and twice, after encountering the ghosts, she refuses to go to church. Surely, these are not all accidental relationships, and James’s efforts to call attention to the many resemblances between the governess and the ghosts cannot be ignored. Their implication, since the thesis that the governess is simply hallucinating has proved ultimately untenable, is that the ghosts are haunting her, and not the children. They are her ghosts, seen only by her, meaningful only to her, and hostile only to her—at least in so far as the events of the tale give us definite and concrete evidence. What then—since ghosts are generally supposed to want something when they appear to mortals—do Peter Quint and Miss Jessel want with the governess? Let us review some of their encounters.

Quint first appears to the governess from the tower which, in addition to its critically famous phallic symbolism, suggests also the dominance and power of the male set in station above the female. She sees him a second time peering in through the dining room window, and this reinforces her first impression of him as a hostile aggressor in the domestic circle—an interloper challenging her authority in the home. Their third encounter takes place on the stairway, and although she assumes he is seeking the children, the stairway leads to her bedroom as well as to theirs, and it is this circumstance which accounts, perhaps, for her peculiar description of a supernatural visitation: it was “as human and hideous as a real interview: hideous just because it was human, as human as to have met alone, in the small hours, in a sleeping house, some enemy, some adventurer, some criminal” (223). Peter Quint characteristically appears to the governess, then, as a masculine invader of the feminized domestic circle, and his handsome brutality, his fixed stare, and his aggressive aspect all reinforce our sense that the animosity between them is inherently sexual. The governess’s fear and hatred of Quint seems based not so much on his ghostliness as on his masculinity.

Her attitude to Miss Jessel, on the other hand, betrays an
instinctive identification with this “vile predecessor” who has dishonored herself, her profession and her sex, by submitting to the dominance of a man—and a mere valet at that—and who furthermore violated her trust as the feminine protector of the home by allowing Quint to associate freely with Miles. The governess shows less hostility to this ghost, and less fear, but reveals instead an almost fascinated disapproval. When she meets her in the schoolroom, seated at her desk and writing with her implements, the governess responds to Miss Jessel’s “indescribable grand melancholy of indifference and detachment.” She thinks of her as “dishonored and tragic,” and feels compelled to pronounce a moral judgment which is more than slightly defensive:

Dark as midnight in her black dress, her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. . . . I had the extraordinary chill of feeling that it was I who was the intruder. It was as a wild protest against it that, actually addressing her—“You terrible, miserable woman!”—I heard myself break into a sound that, by the open door, rang through the long passage and the empty house. (257)

I think we can safely say that, whatever the ghosts hope to accomplish by haunting the governess, she feels their presence as a personal challenge to her chosen role as a defender of innocence and the domestic hearth; they prey upon her insecurity in that role and upon her sexual fears, hostility, and sense of guilt.

There is one further and supremely important connection between the governess and the ghosts. While it is her greatest fear that the ghosts will in some unspecified way participate in intimacies with the children, it is she herself who fawns over them, kisses them and caresses them and seeks to possess them both emotionally and physically. Flora and Miles are “extravagantly and preternaturally fond” of her—which, she reflects, “was no more than a graceful response in children perpetually bowed over and hugged” (218). Her maternal affection for them, quite natural in itself, is perverted by her sense of jealous rivalry with the ghosts and turns gradually to hostility and self-doubt—a nagging sense of her own hypocrisy and uncertain motives: “There were moments when, by an irresistible impulse, I found myself catching them up and
pressing them to my heart. As soon as I had done so I used to say to myself: ‘What will they think of that? Doesn’t it betray too much?’” (217). As usual, the governess is highly suggestive in her vagueness: betray too much of what?

With Miles, in particular, the governess’s affection and possessiveness partakes of a sexual ambiguity which becomes more explicit and fearsome as the ghosts work upon her imagination. She has such an “absolute conviction of his precocity” that he appears to her “as accessible as an older person . . . as an intelligent equal” (264). Thus her treatment of the boy paradoxically combines her desire to keep him sexually ignorant and innocent, and her impulse to act as if he were a mature and knowledgeable adult. Miles himself shows a tendency, quite natural and harmless in itself, to flirt with his governess, to attempt to act older than his years, but the governess’s response, in its intensity and anguish, seems inevitably confusing and disturbing to the boy. Visiting him in his bedroom at night, she catches “for the very first time a small faint quiver of consenting consciousness” and drops on her knees beside the bed to “seize once more the chance of possessing him” (267). Here, as elsewhere, the language the governess uses to describe her moral ardor is heavily laden with sexual connotations, and these connotations intensify as the tale nears its conclusion. Dining alone with Miles after Flora’s departure, the two of them seem to the governess “as silent . . . as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter” (297). And when at last she thinks she has achieved a greater influence over Miles than that of Peter Quint, she cries out: “What does he matter now, my own?—what will he ever matter? I have you . . . but he has lost you for ever!” (309).

The horror of this final, climactic scene arises, I think, from the reader’s awareness that the governess indeed does have Miles, and that it is her jealous grasp which is strangling him. Yet it is not necessary to convict the governess of paranoia or schizophrenic delusions in order to see that the ghosts have preyed upon her own sexual fears and guilt, and have thereby used her as the medium through which to haunt the children. The governess’s final and fatal error in judgment is her assumption that, in order to be saved from the apparitions, the children must be brought to feel her own sense of guilt and horror—must see the ghosts as she sees them. It is this adult
THE TURN OF THE SCREW

awareness of evil that she labors to produce in them, and which she finally succeeds in inflicting upon them. Caught up in her effort to force some acknowledgment of her own vision from the children, she loses all sense of restraint and screams at Flora: “She’s there, you little unhappy thing—there, there, there, and you know it as well as you know me!” (279). And again, with Miles, in a similar moment of evangelical frenzy: “But it’s at the window—straight before us. It’s there—the coward horror, there for the last time!” And then she forces from Miles’s terrified breast the “supreme surrender” of the unutterable name: “Peter Quint—you devil!” (309).

And just who, we might ask, has been playing the devil’s game? Before her zeal has gotten the better of her, the governess herself has a sudden “perverse horror” of the confession she feels she must wring out of Miles:

To do it in any way was an act of violence, for what did it consist of but the obtrusion of the idea of grossness and guilt on a small helpless creature who had been for me a revelation of the possibilities of beautiful intercourse? Wasn’t it base to create for a being so exquisite a mere alien awkwardness? (301-302)

And again, when she is well along with her interrogation, there comes to her “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?” (307)

James’s point in these rather pointed passages, it seems to me, is not that the governess somehow induces the children to see ghosts which do not exist, but simply that it is she who interprets the apparitions for them according to her own fears and guilt, who invests them with her own sense of sexual horror. Thus the ghosts—whatever they were to the children before—become, through the governess’s prodding, definite, frightening, corrupting realities. It is their awakened sense of guilt which enables them to feel fear, anger, hatred—which destroys their innocence and introduces them at last to evil.

Yet neither the governess’s errors of judgment nor the sexual associations which she habitually makes seem, upon review, psychologically abnormal or uncommon for a young woman in her circumstances at the turn of the century. If we define madness as a significant departure from normative human behavior, then the governess is not mad. If we define
it as a temporary warp in one’s rationality and self-control, then perhaps she is—but in that case it is a madness which is shared by most of the adults in her culture. For it is this very normality of the governess and the inevitability for her reactions which account for our deep sense of horror and tragedy in the tale. The governess truly loves the children and courageously strives to save them from a real evil, yet because her love is imperfect—because it is haunted by feelings of sexual guilt—it becomes an implement of evil, a destructive force more potent than the ghosts themselves.

What then are we finally to make of the ghosts and their metaphysical significance? Although they may represent a principle of evil in the universal order of things, we must assume—since they are incapable of destroying the children’s innocence without the governess's intervention—that it is an evil which is, in itself, impotent, obliged to act through human agents. The Turn of the Screw does not commit, in other words, the Manichean heresy; its evil spirits are not to be construed as a positive force dualistically opposed to the powers of good. James's approach is firmly within the traditions of Christian Humanism, and evil appears in this tale as a negative principle (in this sense quite appropriately symbolized by the incorporeal figure of the ghost), an absence of good, a failure of human love and understanding. Evil is neither a prime (that is, causeless) nor an eternal principle of being, but rather an inevitable byproduct of the human condition, limited and temporal for all its tragic consequences.

Nor is evil to be intrinsically tied, in this story, to the flesh and human sexuality. That is the governess's aberration, not James's. We should recall that a basic element of the human family is missing at Bly, and it is this absence of masculine authority and strength which accentuates the governess's weaknesses and makes it possible for the ghosts to haunt her and to distort her relationship with the children. The Turn of the Screw may be seen as both a social commentary and as a statement on the requirements of the human soul, for it is precisely the incompleteness of the sexual basis of the family which is the ultimate cause of the tragedy. The ghosts are there because the conjugal love of a mother and father—strong, natural, life-giving—is not, and the irresponsibility of the children’s uncle may thus stand as symbolic of a far-reaching disorientation of the family and its abandonment of
the basic human needs it was formed to serve. As a parable of the loss of innocence, The Turn of the Screw tells us that everything human is essentially innocent and remains innocent until contaminated by fear and guilt. And such contamination can be explained only by failures in the individual's social and personal life—failures which, like original sin, are self-perpetuating as they pass from generation to generation.

The Turn of the Screw is one of several stories Henry James wrote around the turn of the century—as if in memoriam to a passing era—about innocence and its plight in a corrupt world. What Maisie Knew, The Awkward Age, and The Sacred Fount all approach the question of innocence in vastly different contexts, and yet in each of them we have a genuine innocence which is denied and destroyed because the sophisticated adult mind, with its "mere alien awkwardness," is incapable of recognizing the truly innocent and must impose upon it its own sense of guilt. These works might thus be seen as explorations of the human condition in the vanguard of James's "major phase." Innocence and its plight is still very much a part of The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl, but in these three great novels of sin and redemption the loss of innocence is mitigated by a new capacity on the part of the individual to love, to understand, and to reach out across social and psychological barriers to achieve a new community of being with his fellow mortals. For this reason, the later novels of Henry James should be seen—if not always in doctrine, then at least in spirit—as uniquely Christian works of art.

Yet, for all that, James was a complex and many-sided novelist, and it would be a mistake, I think, to gloss over his capacity for the demonic, the grotesque, the erotically horrific. There must be something less than angelic—something profoundly human and tortured—in a writer who could master, as James mastered, the subliminal sensuality and eroticism of his tortured governess. His ambition, as he tells us, was to write one of "the good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost-stories . . . of a nature to rouse the dear old sacred terror" (xv). The later nineteenth century was of course

*There are two studies known to me which treat The Turn of the Screw as primarily a ghost story: Donald P. Costello's "The Structure of The Turn of the Screw" (Modern Language Notes, LXXV [April, 1960], 312-321) which emphasizes the use of ambiguity for horror and mystica-
one of the great ages of the ghost story, and that nonpareil in erotic horror, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, predates *The Turn of the Screw* by only one year. Whether or not James knew of Stoker's lusty vampires, a writer so aware of literary techniques and traditions was not likely to miss the undercurrent of erotic excitement in the decadent gothicism of his day. But ultimately, it must have been James's personal recognition of guilt as a psychological reality, and as the source of human fear, that enabled him to draw upon the deep inner anxiety of his readers, that common store of dread which is the legacy of our own lost innocence, and create a fantasy that would compel belief by whispering truths to our imaginations. "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough," James told himself, "and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy . . . and horror . . . will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars" (xxi). For almost seventy years now that strategy has proved sound enough. James's readers have seldom failed to supply him with all the particulars the story demands, thus proving that the ghosts which haunt the governess, and which finally come to haunt the children, are the ghosts which—to some extent, at least—must haunt us all.

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*Manfred MacKenzie's "The Turn of the Screw: Jamesian Gothic" (Essays in Criticism, XII [January, 1962], 34-38) which considers the tale as part of a tradition.*