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# Ghosts Real and Imagined: Detecting Genre Diversity in *The Turn of the Screw*

Andrew Armour

Henry James famously taunted his readers with the remark that his sensational 1898 ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* was a trap for the sophisticated,<sup>1</sup> and over a century after its publication the search for “the truth behind the tale” continues unabated. Ambiguous on several different levels, this much-studied novella has broadly divided critics into two opposing camps—the apparitionists and the non-apparitionists, the traditionalists versus the modernists. The former see the ghosts as objectively “real”, tormenting the governess and involving her in an epic battle between good and evil to save the souls of her two young charges, Miles and Flora. The latter argument—notably championed by Edmund Wilson in his 1934 essay, “The Ambiguity of Henry James”—is that the protagonist is obsessed, sexually repressed, and increasingly deranged; the ghosts are figments of her own “infernal imagination”.

The debate inevitably hinges on the interpretation of the identification scene in Chapter 5, when the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, appears to recognize

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1 James wrote in his Preface to Volume X11 of the 1908 New York Edition that the tale “is a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught” (125).

the governess's description of Peter Quint, a "portrait on the exhibition of which she had instantly recognised" (33). This contrasts with the much less detailed description of Quint's erstwhile paramour, Miss Jessel, whose ghost is never actually identified by Mrs. Grose. Unwilling or unable to come down firmly on one side or the other, many modern readers opt for a middle position, involving varying amounts of suspicion and compassion—for the governess on the one hand, and the two children on the other—with some admixture of Freudian interpretation.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to avoid the issue of whether the ghosts are real or imagined and simply recognize that innocence and evil coexist within the protagonist and/or her charges.<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that even after more than a century of intense scrutiny, nagging questions remain unanswered. Why was Miles expelled from school? How did Peter Quint and Miss Jessel actually meet their deaths? Why do the two ghosts never appear together? Why does the governess relate an incident like the appearance of Miss Jessel in the schoolroom, and then describe it quite differently to the housekeeper,

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2 While *The Turn of the Screw* predates Freud's major publications (*The Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1900), the Viennese doctor's account of the English governess Lucy R., who suffered hallucinations while looking after two children in Vienna, had appeared in *Studien Über Hysterie* in 1895. There is nothing to suggest James knew of this work, but he may have been motivated to read it as his own sister, Alice James (d. 1892), had suffered from mental illness.

3 Early reviews of *The Turn of the Screw* suggested it was the equal of the widely popular *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson's nightmare-inspired "bogey tale" published in 1886. Based on the infamous Deacon Brodie (1741–1788), this is a tale of the coexistence of good and evil within one man. In his essay "*The Turn of the Screw* as Poem," Robert N. Heilman states that the "real subject is the dual nature of man, who is a little lower than the angels, and who yet can become a slave in the realm of evil" (Willen 177–78).

supposedly her confidante? If, as the governess suspects, the children are in constant communion with the ghosts, why is the boy petrified at the possibility that one of them has appeared outside the window in the final scene? And why does he then call the governess a “devil”? Even after the publication, James appears to have deliberately tried to mislead his readers with his several and, on occasion, contradictory pronouncements. As Glenn Reed points out, “To James this obscurity was of the utmost importance in allowing the reader's imagination fertile ground in which to pullulate” (423).

To attempt to offer any new reading of *The Turn of the Screw* is necessarily to fall into the trap laid by James, yet few can ignore the lure of such an exquisite puzzle which, in essence, can be boiled down to the simple question “Is it a ghost story or a tale of mental illness?” Yet there is another possibility, a third genre. A careful reading, with a focus on the differences between the two phantoms, sheds new light on this enigmatic tale, suggesting that the real “turn of the screw” may not be the inclusion of an additional child, as the prologue suggests, but rather the inclusion of an additional plot, one that would be more appropriate in a Conan Doyle detective story.<sup>4</sup>

The work begins with a framing device often referred to as the tale’s

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4 James’s most famous ghost story appeared during the famous hiatus following the untimely “death” of Sherlock Holmes when the reading public was no doubt hungry for puzzling mysteries. Conan Doyle’s own tale of a young governess who is unusually well paid but who has to submit to strange conditions, “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”, had previously appeared in *Strand Magazine* (June 1892). The similarities do not end there: a mysterious man stares at the governess through the windows of the Hampshire house, the young boy she looks after has an evil streak, and there is an unpleasant manservant who is frequently inebriated.

“prologue”, but the bulk of *The Turn of the Screw* consists of a first-person account, written long after the events it relates,<sup>5</sup> yet in such detail that the memory must have haunted the narrator for the rest of her life. On her first appointment, this unnamed governess is engaged to look after two seemingly angelic orphans, Miles and Flora, at a house in the country. She is keen to win the approval of her handsome, absentee employer, despite his admitted lack of interest in the children. However, she suffers a setback: Bly is haunted by the ghosts of a valet and his lover, the previous governess.<sup>6</sup> The former appears as a hatless man, the latter as a woman in black—but, curiously, only to the governess. Scared yet nevertheless determined to become “the angel (of salvation) in the house”,<sup>7</sup> and thus to earn the gratitude—and possibly the love—of her master, the governess takes it upon herself to save the “lost hearts” of Miles and Flora.<sup>8</sup>

Enlisting the aid of the unimaginative but goodhearted housekeeper Mrs. Grose, the governess battles what she sees as the forces of evil for the souls of the children, but eventually fails. Flora falls sick and has to be removed from the house, leaving the governess with Miles, who she believes

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- 5 When referring to the unposted letters written by the children, the governess writes “They were too beautiful to be posted; I kept them myself; I have them all to this hour.” (52)
  - 6 To the contemporary reader, the name “Bly” might have suggested the globetrotting Nellie Bly (1864–1922), an American newspaper reporter noted for her daring undercover reportage, which included being committed to a women’s lunatic asylum in 1887.
  - 7 The phrase “angel in the house” derives from the title of a popular poem by Coventry Patmore, originally published in 1854, about his “perfect” Victorian wife, Emily. The line “Through passionate duty love springs higher” might refer to what the governess hopes to achieve through “the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms”(48).

is ready to confess what she has come to suspect—an unholy communion between ghosts and children, hitherto obscured by their feigned innocence. At the critical moment, however, the hatless man returns and Miles appears to die from shock.

When thus reduced to a summary, the tale would seem to be far from ambiguous. But this is misleading. Firstly, the prose style is not as clear as one would expect of an M. R. James ghost story from the same period. The style James employed for *The Turn of the Screw* can be characteristically convoluted at times; he was by this time already dictating,<sup>9</sup> a practice that may have indirectly contributed to the conscious “process of adumbration” that James explains in his Preface of 1908:

Only make the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough... and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends)<sup>10</sup> will supply him quite

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- 8 In “Lost Hearts” (published in the December 1895 issue of *Pall Mall Magazine*), M. R. James tells of a young orphan, Stephen Elliott, who is being groomed for death by his elderly cousin and pagan expert Mr. Abney. Stephen is saved at the eleventh hour by the ghosts of two previous victims, a boy and a girl; these two innocents exact a horrible revenge. It will be noted that the position has been reversed by Henry James: the innocents are still alive and being threatened by the dead Peter Quint.
- 9 The story was taken down by the stenographer William MacAlpine during the autumn of 1897 in London, and it was first published in serial form in the American periodical *Collier’s* in 1898 (January to April), having been inspired by a fragmentary tale of dead servants and haunted children told to James by Archbishop Benson at Addington Park on January 10, 1895.
- 10 This might suggest that the governess is a “false friend”, supporting the Wilsonian argument, and that the housekeeper is one too, supporting the argument presented in this paper.

sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications. [original emphasis] (128)

However, it is not the style that produces the ambiguity in this tale, but its many blanks—unexplained events, indistinct references, and uncompleted sentences. For example, when Mrs. Grose complains “Yet you didn’t tell me?” (of the first ghost sighting), the governess responds “No—for reasons. But now that you’ve guessed—” (21). Mrs. Grose has not guessed, but that is what James asks of his reader, time and time again, in order to amplify the “portentous evil” lurking under the smiles of the children, or in the dark recesses of the human psyche.

James is renowned for his subtle treatment of psychological subjects, so whereas *The Turn of the Screw* was initially received, enthusiastically, as a traditional ghost story in the English Yuletide tradition, many twentieth-century readers—in the Wilsonian camp—came to see it as the tale of a tortured, sexually repressed Victorian governess.<sup>11</sup> Finding themselves in a social limbo, belonging neither above nor below stairs, English governesses were perceived to be lonely outsiders, educated yet isolated. Moreover, they could be seen as sexual violators as well as victims—especially if they were young and pretty—posing a threat to the marital harmony of the household. In one of Conan Doyle’s stories, “The Problem of Thor Bridge” (*Strand Magazine*, 1922), Holmes proves the innocence of the attractive governess Grace Dunbar, accused of the murder of Maria, the wife of her amorous

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11 Freudian symbolism has been discovered in the tower on which the hatless man first appears (15), and in a toy boat Flora is making (29).

employer. The detective soon reveals that the jealous wife committed suicide in such a way as to incriminate the woman employed to look after her two children. Whatever the reality, the Victorian governess was often portrayed as being a necessary evil lodged within the fragile shell of respectable bourgeois life.

James was clearly interested in the dual nature of this familiar character from English literature:<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Ryves in “Sir Dominick Ferrand” (1892) is the illegitimate child of a seduced governess, while in “Master Eustace” (1871) he introduces a scheming governess. Combining the two, the narrator of *The Turn of the Screw* is emotionally seduced by her employer, after which she schemes to win him over. At Bly, there is no jealous wife to feel threatened, but there is a “lady of the house” of sorts—namely, the housekeeper, who has enjoyed full authority over the household and children following the mysterious demise of the valet and previous governess.<sup>13</sup>

Although having no children of her own, Mrs. Grose is a mother figure, who has grown very close to the little girl in particular:

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12 The most famous governess tale, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), is hinted at in James’s novella when the protagonist wonders “Was there a ‘secret’ at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (17)

13 It could conceivably be argued that Mrs. Grose was somehow instrumental in the deaths of both Quint and Miss Jessel. The former was killed, when drunk, by a blow to the head, while the latter fell sick, though Mrs. Grose pointedly claims “She was not taken ill, so far as appeared, in this house.” (12) A possible motive might be to protect the children from the corrupting influence of the two lovers, in which case any “real” ghosts would be a threat not only to the children but also to the housekeeper herself. In the ill-advised cinematic prequel entitled *The Nightcomers* (1972), all ambiguity is stripped away, revealing that Flora drowned Miss Jessel and Miles murdered Quint.



[The employer] had placed at the head of their little establishment—but below stairs only—an excellent woman, Mrs. Grose, whom he was sure his visitor would like and who had formerly been maid to his mother. She was now housekeeper and was also 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)

She has thus risen through the ranks of the domestic hierarchy at Bly, but now she is to come under the “supreme authority” (5) of the new governess, a “fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” (4). To make matters worse, one of the first actions of the new governess on her arrival is to take Flora away from the housekeeper; by the end of the tale, Mrs. Grose will have corrected this situation, albeit at the cost of Flora’s health.

Although trusted by the children’s bachelor uncle, the possibility exists that Mrs. Grose is one of the “false friends” mentioned by James, that she is feigning innocence. The governess herself remarks on this talent: “There was nothing in her fresh face to pass on to others my horrible confidences.” (43) If we admit that Mrs. Grose may in fact be jealous, possessive and manipulative, we must also acknowledge that she is in an ideal position to deceive the impressionable, younger woman, who is on her first appointment as a governess and overly anxious to please her handsome employer. As the confidante, Mrs. Grose alone is responsible for identifying the hatless man as Peter Quint, for characterizing him as evil, for suggesting the lingering sin of an indecent liaison between him and the former governess, and for providing “evidence” of the corruption of the two young children.<sup>14</sup> So although she appears to be playing a supporting role, she is in fact of central importance in the unfolding of the tragedy.<sup>15</sup>

Let us now look more closely at the story, examining it afresh for

evidence that (a) the hatless man is “real”—that is, no ghost but an accomplice working in league with the housekeeper, and (b) Miss Jessel’s ghost is imagined, a hallucination triggered by severe stress.<sup>16</sup>

According to the prologue, the employer explains little of what has happened at Bly. That the previous governess, who was “a most respectable person” (5) died, creating the vacancy, is all the narrator learns of Miss Jessel prior to setting off for the house in Essex. There she meets Mrs. Grose and Flora, Miles being still at school. Flora is “the most beautiful child” (7), and Mrs. Grose also creates a favorable impression. Not surprisingly the governess has been anxious about the older woman, whose authority she must claim, and is thus relieved to find that she is amiably disposed toward the new arrival. A friendship soon develops between the two women. The governess admits to being “rather easily carried away” (8), and the housekeeper for her part appears curiously glad that such an inexperienced young girl has been appointed to the job: “Mrs. Grose assented so heartily that I somehow took her manner as a kind of comforting pledge—never falsified, thank heaven!—that we should on every question be quite at one.” (9)

Despite her notional position of authority, initially the newcomer is

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14 It is Mrs. Grose who describes the appalling language supposedly used by Flora prior to her removal from Bly, and it she who emphatically declares that Miles was expelled for stealing, though she has no proof of this.

15 In “Another Twist to *The Turn of the Screw*,” C. Knight Aldrich sees Mrs. Grose as the villain of this tale.

16 Another possibility is that the governess only pretends to see the woman in black; this would mean that she is aware of the Quint conspiracy, which she is countering with her own drama to fool Mrs. Grose into believing that she has indeed gone mad. However, this would call into question the reliability of the entire account.

totally dependent on the housekeeper, the other domestics playing virtually no role in the story. Mrs. Grose is the sole source of information, which she can divulge, intimate, or hide as she wishes. And having established herself as a friend, she is well placed to manipulate the younger woman. Nevertheless, the latter is sufficiently perceptive to realize that “Mrs. Grose was aware, I could judge, of what she had produced in me” (11). Not long after suggesting the innocence of Miles, yet to appear on the scene, it is the same Mrs. Grose who, after avoiding the topic, admits that she has known Miles to be “bad”—the word “naughty” is used by the governess, not Mrs. Grose. The housekeeper emits an “odd laugh” and almost taunts the governess “Are you afraid he’ll corrupt *you*?” (12). It is almost as if she is priming the new arrival, and not always in a subtle way:

But the next day, as the hour for my drive approached, I cropped up in another place. “What was the lady who was here before?”

“The last governess? She was also young and pretty—almost as young and almost as pretty, Miss, even as you.”

“Ah then I hope her youth and her beauty helped her!” I recollect throwing off. “He seems to like us young and pretty!”

“Oh, he *did*”, Mrs. Grose assented: “it was the way he liked every one!” She had no sooner spoken indeed than she caught herself up. “I mean that’s *his* way—the master’s.”

I was struck. “But of whom did you speak first?”

She looked blank, but she coloured. “Why, of *him*.”

“Of the master?”

“Of who else?”

There was so obviously no one else that the next moment I had lost my impression of her having accidentally said more than

she meant; and I merely asked what I wanted to know. “Did *she* see anything in the boy—?”

“That wasn’t right? She never told me.” [original emphasis] (12)

The supposedly inadvertent remark by Mrs. Grose about the proclivities of the mysterious “him” is strangely clumsy considering the great pains that James went to in composing and revising this story. The governess’s use of the present tense (“seems”) should preclude any possible reference to the dead valet, who in any case is unknown to the new arrival. Moreover, if Quint had indeed been seen as a Lothario, then “I hope her youth and her beauty helped her” would hardly conjure up memories of his seducing the previous governess. Rather, this “accidental” reference to Quint seems calculated to incite curiosity or perhaps even anxiety in the mind of the young girl. It is as if Mrs. Grose is preparing her for the appearance of Quint’s ghost. It should be remembered that the employer has made no mention of a valet, alive or dead.

After Miles returns to Bly, expelled from school but looking as angelic as his younger sister, the governess is ecstatically happy with her two charges. But the honeymoon does not last long: it is after only a few weeks that she sees the hatless man on the tower. It is worth noticing here that the visitant was “looking at me hard all the while” (16). Later we are led to believe that it is Miles whom the dead Quint is looking for, but in this first instance the governess herself is the object of his gaze—perhaps because she is “young and pretty”, or perhaps because she has been deliberately targeted. Indeed, the governess fears she may have been the victim of a prank engineered by the staff at Bly, for she senses nothing supernatural about the hatless man. She keeps quiet about the tower incident, not even mentioning it to Mrs. Grose, despite the trust she has supposedly invested in

her. It is not long before the hatless man reappears, on a terrace looking in through a window. He again stares at the governess, though this time he also seems to be looking for someone else.

Interestingly, the first and second appearances of the hatless man could well have been engineered. The governess made it a habit to stroll about the gardens at the same hour every day, and, in the second instance, she had already arranged with Mrs. Grose to attend the late service at church. On going outside to search for what she imagines is a real person, the girl finds herself staring in through the same window, this time at the face of Mrs. Grose. What follows is the identification scene; yet, the only piece of information that Mrs. Grose seems to require in order to identify Peter Quint is that the visitant was not a gentleman.<sup>17</sup> The identification having been made in her mind, Mrs. Grose then asks “What’s he like?” Notable here is the governess’s impression that the man looks “like an actor”. Mrs. Grose appears particularly shocked at this word: “‘An actor!’ It was impossible to resemble one less, at least, than Mrs. Grose at that moment” (23). She recovers her calm, however, and explains that Quint is dead. This sudden revelation leaves the younger woman prostrate for an hour.

Perhaps the hatless man was merely playing a role, planned for him by the housekeeper. Little attention appears to have been paid to the use of the word “actor” in this scene, the average reader presumably taking it to

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17 The governess later emphasizes the former valet’s “red hair, very red” with “rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair,” presumably details of more importance in identification than his hatless condition. One might even suspect that James is making reference to Conan Doyle’s famous “The Red-headed League” (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1892), in which a red-headed man, Jabez Wilson, is unwittingly recruited to play a part in a criminal conspiracy.

describe the self-assurance of a gentlemen combined with the appearance of something less reputable. The governess has led a sheltered life and thus has never seen a real actor, but her intuition tells her that the hatless man is adopting a persona and that she is the intended audience.

There is nothing ambiguous, however, about Mrs. Grose's statement "Mr. Quint's dead," and the hypothesis eventually developed by the governess is that the valet has returned to the world of the living to prey on the innocent children, Miles in particular. The process of corruption that began when he was alive will continue until it is complete and her young charges are forever doomed. It is peculiar, then, that the hatless man pays such attention to the new governess. His first two appearances, both executed with a certain dramatic flair, seem designed solely for her benefit, since the children are elsewhere. Could it be that there is a conspiracy to frighten her off?

If James was at this point playing with the idea of creating a crime mystery along the lines of a Conan Doyle story, we are only lacking a professional detective to solve the queer affair at Bly. This role is taken, in a sense, by the governess herself. When she puzzles at the silence of the children on the subject of Quint, Mrs. Grose is suspiciously quick to explain:

"Oh the little lady doesn't remember. She never heard or knew."

"The circumstances of his death?" I thought with some intensity.

"Perhaps not. But Miles would remember—Miles would know."

"Ah don't try him!" broke from Mrs. Grose. (25)

Clearly the housekeeper is trying to contain the situation. We can guess at several possible motives, some of which may be selfish: Quint was "admittedly bad"—"*I* knew it—but the master didn't." [original emphasis]

(26) When the governess accuses her of dereliction of duty, the housekeeper vigorously defends herself as being powerless in the face of Quint's authority, until his death: "a catastrophe explained—superficially at least—by a visible wound to his head". Mrs. Grose fills in the picture of Quint as devil with mention of "strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected" (27). We are thus entirely reliant on the word of the housekeeper regarding not just the nature of the former valet, but of his very existence, both before and after death. The other servants at Bly are kept in the dark.

These revelations only serve to stiffen the resolve of the younger woman: she will act as a screen "to protect and defend the little creatures" (27). She almost rejoices at the challenge, but before long the strain begins to tell. Courageous though she is, the governess admits to suffering such suspense that it might "have turned to something like madness". Ironically she is "saved" by a new twist to the tale—the appearance of a second phantom, the woman in black. Here we appear to enter the realm of the traditional ghost story.

From the outset, the woman in black is described in ways quite different to the hatless man. She is an "alien object" (28), "black, pale and dreadful", a figure of "unmistakeable horror and evil" (30) sensed by the governess before she is even seen. Curiously, the governess is convinced simultaneously of the identity of the apparition and of the fact that Flora pretends not to see it. Unlike the hatless man, the woman in black does not look at the governess, only at Flora, her target. This pleasing symmetry—Quint after Miles, Miss Jessel after Flora—fits in neatly with the governess's hypothesis.

The space of two hours passes before the excited governess reports to her "honest comrade" (24), the latter understandably bewildered by what

she at first thinks to have been an unplanned appearance of the hatless man: “Mrs. Grose took it as she might have taken a blow in the stomach. ‘She has told you?’ she panted.” (29) But no: Flora said nothing. Relieved, the housekeeper recovers enough to hazard a “grim joke”: “‘Perhaps [Flora] likes it!’” (30) She tries to calm the panic-stricken governess with an alternative solution: Flora is not merely feigning innocence; she is innocent and thus unable to see the woman-in-black apparition. This interpretation would suggest that the governess herself is not innocent, or at least that she is mad. Mrs. Grose takes this opportunity to provide the last piece of the puzzle, suggesting pregnancy and suicide as the ignominious end of Miss Jessel, the fallen woman. The housekeeper unburdens herself of the secret of the illicit relationship between Quint and Jessel: “‘They were both infamous,’ she finally said.” (31) That Miles and Flora were privy to this same secret is something that Mrs. Grose refuses to believe at first, but the governess abandons herself to the idea that both children are “lost”—though at this stage she has little reason to suspect Miles—and she bursts into tears of despair.

After another midnight “discussion of mysteries” with the housekeeper, the governess believes she has convinced her companion of the reality of the apparitions. Yet there is a nagging doubt in her mind: “a small shifty spot on the wrong side of it all still sometimes brushed my brow like the wing of a bat”. (34) Miles has proved to be nothing less than “an imperturbable little prodigy of delightful, loveable goodness,” so what misbehavior has Mrs. Grose been hinting at? The housekeeper eventually explains how Miles had lionized Quint, lied about the times he spent with him, and treated Mrs. Grose as a “base menial”. So although the governess has had no direct reason to doubt the innocence of the boy, save the unexplained letter of expulsion, the housekeeper now paints a very different picture, out of



keeping with her initial, almost unreserved, character reference for the lad.

The third confrontation with the hatless man, again without any witness, occurs on the landing in the early morning hours. Tellingly, he is “absolutely, on this occasion, a living, detestable, dangerous presence.” (39) This revelation—that “the thing was as human and hideous as a real interview”—and the fact that he does not vanish but rather turns back down the staircase—is consistent with “Quint” being corporeal. Some time later a brief glimpse of the woman in black, head in hands on the same staircase, ends when the phantom vanishes. In other words, James stresses that she is not a living presence.

Mrs. Grose, shocked by the revelation that Miles and Flora are in league with the dead, comes to the conclusion that their uncle must be summoned. But despite having just convinced the housekeeper of her suspicions, the governess pauses, unwilling to break her contract and admit defeat:

Standing there before me while I kept my seat she visibly turned things over. “Their uncle must do the preventing. He must take them away.”

“And who’s to make him?”

She had been scanning the distance, but she now dropped on me a foolish face. “You, Miss.”

“By writing to him that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad?”

“But if they *are*, Miss?” [original emphasis] (48)

Again Mrs. Grose seems to be talking out of character. If we are to entertain suspicions regarding her true motives, it might appear that the culmination

of the housekeeper's plan is for the governess to forfeit the trust invested in her and bring the uncle to Bly, where naturally he will conclude that the young woman is insane and must be dismissed. She would be counting on "his derision, his amusement, his contempt"; however, the housekeeper's victory is delayed, for the governess refuses to call for aid:

I quickly rose and I think I must have shown her a queerer face than ever yet. "You see me asking him for a visit?" No, with her eyes on my face she evidently couldn't. Instead of it even—as a woman reads another—she could see what I myself saw: his derision, his amusement, his contempt for the breakdown of my resignation at being left alone and for the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms. She didn't know—no one knew—how proud I had been to serve him and to stick to our terms; yet she none the less took the measure, I think, of the warning I now gave her. "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." (48)

The housekeeper is wary of the governess, over whom she now has little control. If the younger woman were indeed to flee, Mrs. Grose would have won, her authority restored. But the girl is strong-willed and unstable; it is difficult to predict what she will do. The hatless man is withdrawn, while Mrs. Grose watches and waits.

By now Bly has become "like a theatre after the performance" (50), empty of both the hatless man and the woman in black, yet the governess is still in full possession of the "conviction of the secret of my pupils", and in particular that of the older Miles. She skirts the edges of sanity during this

interlude, which serves to foreshadow “the last act of my dreadful drama” (53). This time it is the children who gently urge her to write to their uncle in Harley Street; their own letters—“charming literary exercises”—are withheld from the post.

The climax is precipitated when the assertive Miles brings up the subject of returning to school. On the governess admitting that the uncle is unconcerned, Miles declares that he will do what the governess has refused to consider: “But who’ll get him to come down?” “*I will!*” (55). So unwilling is she to confront the issue of his expulsion and more especially “the horrors gathered behind” the issue that she seriously contemplates flight, as she had earlier threatened. It is in this heightened state of anxiety that she sees the woman in black, but only after her own position—sitting slumped at the foot of the staircase—reminds her of the earlier vision. The confrontation is brief and again entirely consistent with the views of the Wilsonians, an impression reinforced by the obvious inconsistencies between the initial description of the incident and the later, embellished recounting of it to Mrs. Grose—her “companion, with less imagination”.

It is notable that the final appearance of the woman in black, again by the lake, is something that the governess predicts. The shock is therefore all the greater when it becomes clear that Mrs. Grose does not see it: “with this hard blow of the proof that her eyes were hopelessly sealed I felt my own situation horribly crumble” (69). Ironically, it is the living governess who has become the object of fear. In her desperation, she still clings to her false friend, Mrs. Grose: “I’m not sure of anything but *you*.” (73) This is reinforced when the housekeeper admits to believing, not because she has seen anything but because of the foul language she says has come from the mouth of Flora.

Yes, it was a joy, and we were still shoulder to shoulder: if I might

continue sure of that I should care but little what else happened. My support in the presence of disaster would be the same as it had been in my early need of confidence, and if my friend would answer for my honesty, I would answer for all the rest. (75)

But the housekeeper is no longer content to play the role of mere companion and character witness: she becomes uncharacteristically bold in her assertions, revealing that Miles has stolen the letter and suggesting this is a clue to the expulsion. “It strikes me that by this time your eyes are open even wider than mine,” confesses the governess.

Under great strain, the young woman has by now decided to call Miles’s bluff, summon the uncle and exhume the matter of the expulsion. Flora is lost, expelled from Bly in a mirror image of what happened to Miles. He, in contrast, is on the point of salvation, at least as the governess sees it. Miles begins to confess his sins—admitting to the theft and destruction of the governess’s letter to the uncle, and hinting at the reason for his expulsion from school. With Inquisition-like prompting from the governess, the boy names both Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, despite the fact that he himself sees neither. This very naming is for her a “supreme surrender”: she has prevailed in the battle of wits and courage. Just then Peter Quint reappears to the governess and the shock of learning this is what kills the little boy. Salvation has come at a high cost.

What then transpires can only be guessed. Whether the governess—reviled as a “devil” by Miles just before he dies<sup>18</sup>—believes that she has

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18 This is conveniently misinterpreted by the governess as “his tribute to my devotion” (85). However, if “you devil” had been directed at Peter Quint, Miles would surely not then have asked “*Where?*” before turning from the governess toward the window.

been vindicated or not is unclear, though we can deduce that she meets neither her employer nor Flora again. We do know from the prologue that, presumably after a suitable period of convalescence, she is able to continue her career. But then perhaps her “memoir” is nothing more than an unpublished work of fiction concocted by the woman, or even by Douglas, the prologue storyteller. Who has been duped? This question is essentially meaningless, but, at least within the confines of the framed tale, the possibility exists that the governess was initially tricked by the housekeeper and her actor-accomplice.

This is the sort of plot that the celebrated detective Sherlock Holmes would be summoned to investigate. In such tales, the inheritance of the orphans might be the ultimate goal of the villains.<sup>19</sup> In this case, there is no internal evidence for such a pecuniary motive, and all investigation and interrogation is carried out by the victim herself, with the aid of the housekeeper whom she believes to be every bit as unimaginative as Holmes’s companion, Dr. Watson. Halfway through the tale, however, James adds to this conventional mystery something else—a woman in black, described very much as one would expect in an M. R. James ghost story. Such genre diversity would belie Henry James’s claim that his story “has the small strength—if I shouldn’t say rather the unattackable ease—of a perfect homogeneity, of being, to the very last grain of its virtue, all of a kind.” (123) However, by now we are used to being misled.

In conclusion, while critics have focused on the key question of whether James intended to write a ghost story or a story of mental illness—

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19 An example is “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1892), in which the villain is a stepfather, who has returned from India and attempts to kill his two stepdaughters using a venomous snake.

that is, whether Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are really ghosts or merely the creations of an insane, self-deluded governess—there is another possibility. A careful reading suggests that the two apparitions should not be treated as equal: the hatless man and the woman in black share little in common, and never appear together. The former may indeed have been an actor in a charade played out at the instigation of the false friend and confidante Mrs. Grose. In contrast, the woman in black is described as if she were the creation of a fevered mind that had been well primed for the appearance of revenants. In addition to the ghost story and psychological thriller, James may thus have been “turning the screw” on his readers by experimenting with a genre made famous by his contemporary Conan Doyle. The evidence may be circumstantial, but the queer affair at Bly would surely have excited the interest of Sherlock Holmes.

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