

CHILDHOOD MORAL INSANITY: ANOTHER *TURN OF THE SCREW*

BY

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Abstract:

Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* has never been an easy story to analyze due to the author's penchant for ambiguity. Since it was published in 1898, the novella was read as a terrifying ghost story until 1934, when scholar Edmund Wilson muddied the waters by proposing that James' tale could be best understood by a Freudian reading wherein the governess was sexually repressed and the "ghosts" mere hallucinations resulting from her repression. Ever since, scholars of Henry James have engaged in heated debate over which interpretation of the story is the correct one. In this essay I choose not to embroil myself in this unsolvable argument, but instead take up a reading that does not contradict nor support either side, but instead takes an altogether different route to take a closer look at the often-overlooked children. I explore the possibility that they are not victims of either the ghosts' or the governess' evil (as is usually the case), but may be quite evil in their own right as victims of moral insanity. With the writings of Victorian mental scientists as guidance, examinations of contemporary reviews, and a close reading of the text as support, I come to the conclusion that Miles and Flora can be read as something other than innocent. James purposefully filled his text with ambiguity. The story is so horrifying because the reader never knows if the ghosts are real or if it is the insane governess who is really terrorizing Bly. I believe, however, that by writing the children just as ambiguously as everything else in the novella, James intended to give the horror screw still another turn by portraying the children as morally insane.

Innocence is perhaps the quality we value most highly in children. Childhood is seen as a sacred, safe time reserved for imagination and play, free from evil and corrupting knowledge of the world. To protect and preserve this innocence, we guard our children fiercely, not only from abductors and molesters, but from movies, music, television, unsavory language, questionable acquaintances and anything else we deem “inappropriate.” From our own experience, we know that real knowledge of the world will come inevitably and soon, and with it a good deal of pain and worry. When we are confronted with the story of an abused or mistreated child in the news, we shudder, shake our heads in disbelief, and perhaps hold our own children a little closer. What we fear, perhaps more than physical harm, is for our children to be ripped from childhood too soon, to be exposed to things children shouldn’t see or hear; in short, to prematurely lose their innocence. Whether it is abuse or watching an R-rated movie, the biggest clue that a child has, at least in part, lost his innocence, is often knowledge or the use of language or actions that are too mature for his age. Though some degree of precocity is termed cute, we tend to find children with knowledge beyond their years to be unsettling and unnatural. Whether the precocity is intellectual or, far worse, sexual, we are unnerved by the loss of innocence such intelligence demonstrates.

Our equation of childhood with innocence is not a new concept. Thanks, in part, to writers like Rousseau and Wordsworth, innocence was firmly entrenched in the ideology of childhood by the Victorian period. Much like today, Victorians wanted to protect the innocence of childhood (or at least the childhood of the middle

and upper classes). They were equally unsettled by extremely precocious children and the loss of innocence such children demonstrated. With the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution came the use of reason, science, and rationality to comprehend and manage a variety of societal problems. Using the emerging field of “mental science” (precursor to today’s psychology and psychiatry), Victorians sought to identify and label a central childhood fear, loss of innocence, with a scientific diagnosis, “moral insanity.” By naming what they couldn’t understand, Victorians could perhaps exert some power and control, if not prevent, the loss of innocence they found so unnerving.

The Turn of the Screw (1898) is one of Henry James’s most well-known and well-loved works. The thrilling tale of children caught in a web of evil and corruption has both horrified and titillated readers for well over a century. Based on the ambiguous text of *The Turn of the Screw* itself, we cannot conclusively know if James intended the governess or the ghosts to be the primary source(s) of terror, but it is also significant that he wrote the children with distinct characterizations that have been almost collectively ignored by scholars focused on the ghosts versus governess debate. Concentrating their attention on the ghosts and governess, and the havoc they wreak on the poor, harmless children, most scholars ignore the fact that though the children are repeatedly referred to as innocent, they are characterized as anything but. In fact, the children are described as exhibiting the symptoms of moral insanity, a mental malady all too familiar to Victorian readers. Because our current understanding of childhood mental illness is drastically different from the Victorians’,

modern readers look at the tale through a very different lens than did their Victorian counterparts. I wish to reapply that lens for modern readers. With a better understanding of the cultural and scientific climate James was writing in, we can better understand his work. Just as we cannot be certain of the ghosts or governess, we do not know for sure that James meant the children to be morally insane; however, a look at the contemporary psychological writings on children offers an alternative reading of little Miles and Flora as victims, not of evil ghosts or a psychotic governess, but of their own moral insanity.

Before readers can tackle the ghosts, governess, and children, they must deal with the writing style James uses, what he says and, more often than not, what he doesn't say, to tell his story. The ambiguity and subtlety of *The Turn of the Screw* has both intrigued and frustrated readers and critics for over a century.¹ *Life* magazine wrote in November 1898 of James's style in the novella that "seldom does he make a direct assertion, but qualifies and negatives and double negatives, and then throws in a handful of adverbs, until the image floats away upon a verbal smoke When he seems to be vague he is by elimination creating an effect of terror, of unimaginable horrors" (306). Scholar Kelly Cannon identifies a shift in James's style in the mid-1890s when he adopts what is termed his "dramatic style" characterized by an increasing ambiguity of idea and expression. *The Turn of the Screw* fits neatly into this description. The style "paradoxically reveals as it conceals, teasing the reader

¹ For this study I have used the Norton Critical Edition of *The Turn of the Screw* (1999). From 1906-1910, James revised many of his works for what is known as the New York Edition of his complete works. James revised *The Turn of the Screw* in 1908 for this project, and this is the version used in the Norton.

with partial images that suggest rather than name, by way of ellipsis, abstraction, and metaphor.” Towards the end of his career, James’s texts defy absolute interpretation, “asking the reader not to find, but to imagine” (2).

From its first publication, James and *The Turn of the Screw* were applauded, even when readers found the ambiguous style to be simultaneously challenging and intriguing. England’s *Athanaeum* wrote in 1898:

Here the author makes triumphant use of his subtlety; instead of obscuring, he only adds to the horror of his conception by occasionally withholding the actual facts and just indicating them without unnecessarily ample details. A touch where a coarser hand would write a full-page description, a hint at unknown terrors where another would talk of bloody hands or dreadful crimes, and the impression is heightened in a way which would have made Hawthorne envious on his own ground. (303)

The ambiguous writing style that *Life*, *Cannon*, and *Athanaeum* describe is in large part what makes the story so fascinating. Jamesian scholar Hazel Hutchinson offers an explanation of the function of ambiguity in James’s writing:

. . . this novel requires a reading technique that does more than map its ambiguity. Yes, this is clearly an ambiguous text, but the uncertainty of this narrative has a function, which is to display the relative nature of experience and to explore what happens when physical events appear to have a supernatural cause. No quick solution to this problem is made available. The

reader is not offered a simple binary choice between truth and deception. The constant adjustment of focus effected by the narrator's observations, doubts, convictions, contradictions, [and] deceptions . . . creates a plurality of possible viewpoints and interpretations. (58)

Indeed, James himself wrote of his purposes for the ambiguous style in his 1908 Preface to the New York Edition that to describe "the offered example, the imputed vice, the cited act" is to make evil limited and credible: "[o]nly 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 . . . will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications" [James's parentheses and emphasis] (128). Even if we find it, at times, difficult, readers recognize the purpose of James's ambiguous writing style. Despite the fact that we may desperately want the author to come right out and tell us what's going on or what he means to happen, we enjoy not knowing for sure. James was counting on the fact that our imaginations will create horrors more terrible than even he could write.

Particularly terrible to most readers is that the horror is enacted on young children. When the primary narrative begins, little Miles and Flora are orphaned and living at Bly, their absent uncle's country estate, under the supervision of the housekeeper Mrs. Grose. Their previous governess, Miss Jessel, had died unexpectedly the year before, as did Peter Quint, the uncle's valet who had befriended Miles. During life, both Miss Jessel and Quint seemed to be of

questionable moral integrity. After the new governess arrives, strange things begin to happen. Visions of Miss Jessel and Quint appear to the new governess, and she fears the ghosts seek to continue the corruption of the children they began when they were alive. She makes it her personal mission to save the children and stops at nothing to do so. Over time, an alternative reading of the text has gained popularity, particularly in light of Freud's theories on repression and the advent of literary application of psychoanalytic theory. This reading finds the visions of Miss Jessel and Quint to be hallucinations of the sexually repressed governess. If the ghosts are really hallucinations, then the governess's increasingly desperate attempts to protect the children become more sinister in nature as she actually harms rather than helps them.

In addition to the style ambiguities in *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James also created a maze of narrative frames for his reader to pass through to reach the central story. The preface to the novella opens with a group of men and women gathered around a roaring fire, terrifying each other with ghost stories on Christmas Eve. Among them is an unnamed first-person narrator, as well as a man named Douglas. The narrator recounts how, in the process of the group telling ghost stories, Douglas volunteers that he possesses a "quite too horrible" tale that he has never told anyone. He refuses to tell the story outright and instead sends to town for the written version that he keeps under lock and key. While they wait for the manuscript to arrive, Douglas informs the assembly how he came to possess it. The events of the story were written down by a governess who both experienced them and later went on to be governess to Douglas's young sister while Douglas was in college, forty years

earlier. At the time, the governess was around ten years older than he was. She was twenty at the time of her employment at the manor house Bly, where her story takes place. It's difficult to say for certain given the ambiguity of the details, but most scholars place the action of the governess's story at least fifty years in the past, roughly the late 1840s. After Douglas retrieves the governess's manuscript, he regales the group with his reading of it. Time passes and Douglas dies, leaving the manuscript to the first-person narrator who has himself transcribed it. This transcribed copy is what is presented following the preface. In it, the governess tells the story of her time at Bly, and it is this narrative that most readers think of when they contemplate *The Turn of the Screw*. Indeed, after turning the final gripping page of the governess's tale, few readers even remember the framing narrative of Douglas and the Christmas party even existed.

But the frame narratives do exist and in so doing cause the scholarly community much consternation. Like many aspects of *Screw* scholarship, opinions are split. Some see the passing of the original tale from one narrator to the next as confirmation that we are to question the governess's reliability. Others find much evidence of her authority and it is with this group that I must side if I am to continue in my investigation. Throughout the story, James drops hints intended to convince the reader that the governess is a thoroughly trustworthy witness. She is a parson's daughter and, as Douglas describes her, "a most charming person, . . . most agreeable woman I've ever known . . . she'd have been worthy of any whatever . . . awfully clever and nice (2)." The fact that she is presented as a charming woman of good

breeding whom Douglas meets *after* the events at Bly give her credibility. It's hard to imagine a set of circumstances where a mentally unstable woman would be again hired as a governess after the terrible occurrences at Bly, yet when Douglas meets her, she is governess to his sister and presumably fulfills that position satisfactorily. Scholar Glenn A. Reed observes that "by having the story recorded after the events had happened [James] gives the governess the chance to weigh her evidence objectively and at the same time removes the possibility that the data were the product of emotional hysteria" (195). Also persuasive are the moments in the text when the governess questions her own reliability. Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, plays the role of the incredulous reader whom the governess confronts: "I found that to keep her [Mrs. Grose] thoroughly in the grip . . . I had only to ask her how, if I had "made it up," I came to be able to give, of each of the persons appearing to me, a picture disclosing, to the last detail, their special marks – a portrait on the exhibition of which she had instantly recognized and named them [the ghosts]" (33) Because Mrs. Grose accepts the evidence and believes the governess, we as readers are likely to do the same.

The governess is also the primary narrator writing in the first person, so consequently our readerly inclination is to trust her. In his article "Point of View in *The Turn of the Screw*," scholar Alexander E. Jones argues that "unless James has violated the basic rules of his craft, the governess cannot be a pathological liar. To the contrary, he has gone to great pains to give her authority, and there is no reason to consider her less reliable" (122).

We also can see in some of James's other writings regarding *The Turn of the Screw* how he perhaps intended the governess's reliability to be perceived. He discusses, in an 1898 letter to his friend and fellow writer H. G. Wells, that he chose "to take a very sharp line" and make the governess's character quite impersonal "save for the most obvious and indispensable little note of neatness, firmness and courage" (116), because without these traits, the reader would be unlikely to trust her and her "data." In his 1908 Preface to the New York Edition, James writes that "[s]he has 'authority,' which is a good deal to have given her" (126).

Of course, few things in *The Turn of the Screw* are irrefutable, and the argument for the governess's unreliability is also compelling. I mention the scholarly dispute over the (narrative) preface and the framing narratives, not to become further embroiled in the confusion and debate, but to establish that there is reason and evidence to trust the main narrator, to take her account at face value. I leave it to others to interrogate her reliability. However, as Robin P. Hoople points out in *Distinguished Discord: Discontinuity and Pattern in the Critical Tradition of The Turn of the Screw*, "we must accept the governess's word, but we must not allow ourselves to be restricted to her field of vision" (225). James suggests this reading himself in the 1908 Preface when he discusses ". . . the general proposition of our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities – by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them" and refers to the explanation of the "intense" events as "a different matter" (126). In other words, though we can trust our governess-narrator to report her experiences as she perceived

them, we must work hard as readers to examine what she describes to us through alternative lenses. We can take the details that the governess provides us regarding the events at Bly and draw our own conclusions.

The question of the reliability of the governess narrator is central to the larger enigmas the novella presents, which have been debated throughout its history. *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James's enigmatic tale of ghosts, children, and governesses, first appeared as installments that ran January 27 to April 16, 1898 in the weekly magazine *Collier's*. Later that same year, the story was published in a book entitled *The Two Magics* along with another short piece, *Covering End* (Cranfill and Clark 3). James later revised *The Turn of the Screw* to be published for a 1908 New York Edition with three other stories. Scholarly comparisons between the original serial version and the 1908 revision yield opposing viewpoints regarding the intentions behind the revisions. This should not be surprising given that such controversy is typical of *Screw* criticism. Peter Beidler observes that, when it comes to *The Turn of the Screw*, "two different scholars read exactly the same words but reach exactly opposite conclusions about what the words say" (xvii).

Early criticism of *The Turn of the Screw* focused on the horrors of two evil ghosts who battle a heroic, young governess for the souls of two innocent children. England's *Athanaeum* ran an October 1898 review of "Mr. James's New Stories" wherein *The Turn of the Screw* is described as "one of the most engrossing and terrifying ghost stories we have ever read" (303). The same month, *Literature* echoed this sentiment and further described the tale as "so astonishing a piece of art that it

can hardly be described” (301). The reviewer for *Critic* anticipated the later controversy over the governess’s state of mind when he wrote: “the reader who begins by questioning whether she is supposed to be sane ends by accepting her conclusions and thrilling over the horrors they involve” (qtd. in Hoople 47). These contemporary reviews foreground the critical controversy that would explode in the decades to come. The majority of early readers shuddered at the thought of ghosts corrupting innocent children, but by the 1920s, Jamesian scholars started to explore and articulate an alternative psychoanalytic reading in which the ghosts are seen as hallucinations of the governess (brought about by hysteria induced by sexual repression), and it is she who ultimately harms the blameless children with her escalating insanity. Thus was born what early *Screw* critic Oliver Evans described as the “distinguished discord” between “apparitionist” and “nonapparitionist readers” (201). The apparitionists consider the text a ghost story while the nonapparitionists see something else. This rift is significant because it has shaped and narrowed *Screw* scholarship over the last century. Every scholar to enter the fray feels she has some new light to shed on the subject. Though the approaches and techniques vary widely, *Screw* scholarship focuses almost exclusively on this dispute. Is the governess protecting the innocent children from the corrupting advances of the ghosts? Or are the poor children at the mercy of a rapidly unraveling sex-starved young woman? A striking commonality to both sides, however, is the assumption of the children’s innocence. But, as we shall see, to call the children *only* innocent does not tell the whole story.

One way to approach the interpretative problem that James has set up in *The Turn of the Screw* is to consider the tale in the light of nineteenth century mental science, as many of his original readers would have. This century in Britain saw a number of significant social and cultural developments that consolidated into the intellectual discipline known as ‘mental science’, the predecessor of our modern fields of psychology and psychiatry. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were marked by a series of dramatic changes in society’s responses to madness. Chief among these changes were mental asylum reform and the transformation of the nature and limits of madness. The latter came about as a result of the medical profession’s shift away from the Hellenic tradition of treating bodily humors (illnesses and certain behaviors were caused by bodily fluids called ‘humors’) to a more modern understanding of medicine. In the nineteenth century, the empirical study of the body extended to the mind as well, with questions about the nature of consciousness, cognition, memory, self-knowledge, and personal will wrested from the domain of the metaphysical and subjected to scientific study. With empirical study came the increasing belief that madness was something which could be authoritatively diagnosed and treated by experts, chiefly medical doctors. Mental asylums transformed from holding places for the insane to centers for treatment (Taylor xiv; Scull 6-7). Mental science sought to deal not only with mental illness, but contemporary problems of religion and philosophy, as well.

The new discipline of mental science burst onto the intellectual horizon at just the right moment to achieve mass popularity. Its growing respectability was

augmented by the fact that by 1850, the middle class amounted to more than twenty per cent of the English population and the vast majority of this new middle class was literate (Heyck 20). With so much of the population educated enough to be able to read and write, the climate was ripe for the exchange of ideas on a grand scale. With this literate middle class came the advent of the periodical. Between 1800 and 1900 more than 1,000 new magazines of various kinds were started in London (Young 134). The aim of these periodicals, according to one publisher, was to bring “Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-tables and Coffee Houses” (qtd. in Yeo 41). Generalist magazines like *Quarterly Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, and *Westminster Review* supported a critical discourse about literature, science, philosophy, and politics. Because these disciplines had not yet developed their own specialized languages by which we identify them today, the periodicals were not filled with expert articles rewritten or “popularized” for a lay audience. A clear distinction between experts and laymen did not yet exist for most fields, and consequently many accounts were written for practicing professionals, who were reading side by side with a wider lay readership (Yeo 38-42). Indeed, neither the periodicals nor their contributors even made significant distinctions among the fields of literature, philosophy, theology, science, or politics as we see them today (Young 134). Contributors came from a variety of backgrounds and were not limited to writing only about their respective disciplines. Thus, a medical doctor could write a review of a collection of poetry, and a politician was free to discuss philosophy. The

journals were often written in an editorial style, which encouraged the idea of a community of authors and readers (Yeo 41). This style, combined with an examination of the periodicals' contents, creates a sense of a common intellectual context "which poured out controversy at an astonishing rate and a most surprising level of sophistication" (Young 134). The periodicals' readership was so broad and their contents so influential that "the history of the English mind and English public opinion cannot be written without careful attention to the influence and history of periodical literature" (qtd. in Young 134).

Mental science found a key position not only in the generalist periodicals, but also in the common Victorian intellectual context. Because mental illness knew no boundaries of social status, sex, or education, everyone was interested and concerned for themselves and their families. At the beginning, mental science was an unruly discipline, filled with dispute and without settled theories or methods of investigation (Rylance 7). The periodicals were just one site of many for an "unfolding public network of debate over psychological problems" (Rylance 3). This debate was also conducted in specialist psychological texts, novels, poems, philosophical tracts, and political polemics and by "economists, imaginative writers, philosophers, clerics, literary critics, policy-makers, and biomedical scientists" (Rylance 7). Of particular interest, however, was the use of literature to examine psychology. Popular writers took up and explored the widespread concerns of madness, the self, memory, inheritance, descent, and degeneration in nineteenth-century fiction and poetry (Taylor xvii). Literature provided a way to perceive and explore these issues with

fictional characters in a way that was just not physically or ethically possible with real human patients. Freud himself, “the father of psychoanalysis,” would later write that “imaginative writers are valuable colleagues [of the psychoanalyst] and their testimony is to be rated very highly, because they have a way of knowing the many things between heaven and earth which are not dreamed of in our philosophy” (qtd. in Cranfill and Clark 35). In this way, literature participated in and extended the scope of contemporary science and social theory. Some psychological discussions, particularly on insanity and sexuality, were so widespread and pervasive in contemporary life that every Victorian citizen, let alone every Victorian author, would have been aware of them (Taylor xvii)

Henry James was one of those novelists raised in and shaped by this Victorian intellectual climate. He grew up quite fascinated by mental science. Born in New York in 1843, James was the second child of Henry and Mary James. The elder Henry James was independently wealthy, notoriously eccentric, and a self-proclaimed theologian well-acquainted with the literary and intellectual elites of the day, including Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau. He frequently took his family on extended stays in Europe and, consequently, his five children were educated by a vast array of schools and tutors, at home and abroad, in English, French, and German. The oldest child, William, would go on to become one of the preeminent mental scientists and philosophers of the day and his two-volume *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) is considered one of the most important early psychological works. An expatriate, living much of his adult life in Britain, Henry James was an

important member of the intellectual communities on both sides of the Atlantic. He and his brother William were both prominent members of the Society for Psychical Research, which sought to scientifically study psychic and paranormal phenomena, and was illustrative of the merging of science, philosophy, and religion into a field of empirical study that marks the nineteenth century.

James was one of the “imaginative writers” so valuable to the mental scientists of his day. He entered deeply into the minds of his characters and explored the situations he created for them with detailed psychological analysis. Many of his works, including *The Turn of the Screw*, can be read as psychological thought-experiments. It’s relatively easy to see *The Turn of the Screw* as a thought-experiment examining the mental unraveling of a sexually-repressed young woman; however, when we shift our attention to the children, we can see James experimenting with what lost innocence in children might look like and how the symptoms of mental illness, specifically childhood moral insanity, might manifest themselves.

Victorian mental scientist James Cowles Prichard provided the definitive textbook definition of moral insanity (as applicable to adults) in his 1835 publication *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind*. For Prichard, and the mental scientists who followed him, moral insanity was “madness consisting of a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination” (qtd. in Taylor 252). In 1881, mental scientist

George Henry Savage was the first to draw a distinction between adult moral insanity and the moral insanity he observed occurring among children. In the *Journal of Mental Science*, he describes the distinctly childish symptoms:

As seen in children, the primary moral insanity may be due almost entirely to inheritance of neurosis, or it may be due to some physical disease

Undoubtedly injury or bad treatment may have had something to do with their condition. In cases of this kind it is not very uncommon to find genius, or, at all events, some precocity, and in some morally insane children one is disgusted to find not only precocity in some lines of intellectual life, but a precocity of the animal passions also. Sexual desires are developed at an unusually early – in fact, sometimes at an infantine – age The moral insanity . . . is seen to come on in these cases between five and ten [years of age]. (qtd. in Taylor 283)

Savage goes on to describe the lying and stealing proclivities of morally insane children, as well. According to Savage and others, the age of onset of childhood moral insanity is between the ages of five and ten. Flora is eight and Miles is ten when their story begins.

Of particular interest to mental scientists were the potential causes of mental illness, because if they could determine what caused the problems, then they could advise their patients what to avoid. Those that advocated mental illness prevention and the promotion of mental health were called “mental hygienists” (Sicherman 218). Mental hygienists agreed that childhood was the best time for instilling the “habits of

self-control, self-reliance, devotion to duty, and calmness” that would assure mental health in adult life. If such habits were not properly instilled in childhood, grief, shock, excessive egoism and introspection could cause mental deterioration. All were considered potential causes of mental illness in both children and adults. (qtd. in Sicherman 218).

Miles and Flora exhibit all of Savage’s symptoms of childhood moral insanity. I will investigate those symptoms in some depth shortly. First, though, we must examine what would have been the primary concern for James’s Victorian readers: what caused the mental illness in the children? From what James tells us in *The Turn of the Screw*, it is not possible to definitively identify the source of moral insanity in the children. However, the mental scientists’ main causes, including heredity, illness, mental injury, trauma, and sexual and mental abuse, are all suggested by the text. Some of these causes are more explicitly laid out than others, but taken together, they create a picture of two children with a variety of reasons to be mentally unsound.

Victorian mental scientists placed great stock in heredity and the passing of mental illness from parent to child. James Crichton-Browne, a mental scientist writing in 1860, describes how parents can pass both good and bad, physical and mental, traits on to their children. He says, “those predispositions may remain latent and concealed, but, when placed in circumstances favourable for their maturation, they may develop and become actual disease” (qtd. in Taylor 335). Crichton-Browne does not suggest that all insane parents will have insane children, but that the possibility and capacity for the children of the insane to suffer from mental illness

will probably always exist and if the conditions are right, insanity may develop. Savage echoed Crichton-Browne when he wrote that “the inheritance of neurosis may mean that the children are naturally unstable and unfitted to control their lower natures; that they come into the world unfitted to suit themselves to their surroundings” (283).

All we know of Miles and Flora’s parents is that they died in India two years before, where the father, the younger brother of the custodian uncle, was in the military. We have no indication of either of the parents suffering from any sort of mental illness, so we cannot assume the children inherited the neurosis, but it is a possibility. Another of Savage’s sources for childhood moral insanity includes physical illness. Given their previous residence in India, combined with the deaths of their parents there, the reader’s mind is easily drawn to a variety of infectious diseases, including malaria, more common in that part of the world, as a cause of the parents’ death and perhaps the “physical disease” that affected the children, as well.

Another basis for the children’s moral insanity could be some “injury . . . or bad treatment” they may have suffered at the hands of their uncle’s valet, Peter Quint, who lived at Bly with the children for some months. Shortly after the governess’s first vision of the man, Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, reveals that he had taken a liking to Miles when they both lived there together. Mrs. Grose also reveals that not only did she dislike Quint for the license he took with Miles, but she was afraid of him, both for his effect upon the children and the harm he might bring upon her. In answer to the governess’s query, Mrs. Grose admits that Quint was “definitely . . . bad” (26).

When the valet is found dead from a head wound on the side of the village road one morning, the official cause of death is a drunken slip on an icy path, “but there had been matters in his life, strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected, that would have accounted for a good deal more” (27). Though the master did not seem to know the low character of his valet, everyone else at Bly did. In the master’s typically uninterested view of things, according to Mrs. Grose, “if people were all right to *him* — ” (26), that is, if Quint was good enough for him, then he was good enough for the children. Mrs. Grose did not approve of this sentiment and regrets not reporting the man’s questionable behavior to the master. It was never made clear to the residents of Bly why a man who might be perfectly adept at caring for the master’s clothes and running his errands would ever be considered an acceptable companion for young children.

It is difficult to say how Victorians would have read Mrs. Grose’s concern about the effect that the “sinister” Quint might have upon the children. James hints at several distinct possibilities, one social, one sexual, and one a combination of the two. The first concern deals with the social divide between Miles and his “great friend” (25) Peter Quint. Though he was the master’s valet, Quint’s position on the social ladder at Bly would have been certainly beneath Miss Jessel’s, who, as governess, was head of the household in the master’s absence. Quint’s social position would also have been considerably lower than Miles and Flora’s, who, though they are children, are members of a higher class. We’re never told what rank the children’s uncle holds, but given his ownership of Bly and his home in London, the family is

undeniably wealthy, members of the gentry or even aristocracy. As the oldest male heir, Miles stands to inherit everything from not only his father, but his childless uncle, as well. Though he's a child, his rank is thus considerably higher than Quint's, and for the two of them to engage in a friendship of some months where they would go off together for hours on end would be wholly improper.

Mrs. Grose imagines the corrupting influence Quint had on little Miles, particularly when Miles seemed to prefer him to the governess: “When they had been about together quite as if Quint were his tutor – and a very grand one – and Miss Jessel only for the little lady. When he had gone off with the fellow, I mean, and spent hours with him” (35). The fact that Mrs. Grose refers to Quint as a “fellow” sums up her low opinion of him, because she would never use the word to refer to someone she considered a gentleman and worthy of Miles's company. Indeed, Mrs. Grose is so troubled by the inappropriateness of their relationship that she “ventured to criticise the propriety, to hint at the incongruity, of so close an alliance, and even to go so far on the subject as a frank overture to Miss Jessel would take her” (34). Miss Jessel tells her to mind her own business, yet Mrs. Grose is still distressed enough to take her appeal to Miles himself and tells him “that *she* liked to see young gentlemen not forget their station” (34). Her plea has little effect on Miles and the relationship only ends with Quint's death.

Because Quint's position on the social ladder would have been lower than Miss Jessel's, the previous governess with whom Quint had an alleged affair and upon whose death the current governess is hired, this partly explains why their

relationship was so scandalous. Mrs. Grose laments their affair when the governess presses her with the assumption that there must have been something between the two. Mrs. Grose reveals:

“There was everything.”

“In spite of the difference – ?”

“Oh, of their rank, their condition’ – she brought it woefully out. “*She* was a lady. . . . And he so dreadfully below. . . . The fellow was a hound.” (31-2)

The strong implication to the reader is that the two engaged in a sexual relationship. Further evidence for this deduction seems to be offered when Mrs. Grose hints that Miss Jessel left her position as governess under some sort of scandal: ““She couldn’t have stayed. Fancy it here – for a governess! And afterwards I imagined – and I still imagine. And what I imagine is dreadful”” (32). The reader easily imagines that Miss Jessel had to leave Bly because she was pregnant with Quint’s illegitimate child. It follows that her death then could have been a result of complications during childbirth or taking her own life rather than live with the shame she’d brought upon herself.² The harm this scandalous relationship between Miss Jessel and Quint could have brought upon the children is not explicitly stated. However, the governess thinks she knows and endeavors to obtain confirmation of her suspicions from Mrs. Grose, who doesn’t want to talk about it:

‘You do know, you dear thing,’ I [the governess] replied; ‘only you haven’t my dreadful boldness of mind, and you keep back, out of timidity and

modesty and delicacy, even the impression that in the past, when you had, without my aid, to flounder about in silence, most of all made you miserable. But I shall get it out of you yet! There was something in the boy that suggested to you,' I continued, 'his covering and concealing their relation.'

(35)

Mrs. Grose cannot deny this is true and the governess is confirmed. This means that Miles knew about relationship between Miss Jessel and Quint, and thus potentially knew about sex, perhaps even witnessed it.

Given his inappropriate behavior with Miss Jessel, the reader is not surprised to later learn that Quint disregarded social conventions again in his relationship with Miles. In a telling passage, Mrs. Grose reveals to the governess:

"It was Quint's own fancy. To play with him. I mean – to spoil him." She paused a moment; then she added: "Quint was much too free."

This gave me [the governess] . . . a sudden sickness of disgust. "Too free with my boy?" "Too free with everyone!" (25)

This exchange brings hints of sexual abuse to the reader, at least in Miles's case.

Some support for this is given when Mrs. Grose remembers the impropriety of a "period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together" (34).

The reader already assumes that Quint engaged in sexual relations with Miss Jessel, so Mrs. Grose's statement that "'I've never seen one like him. He did what he wished

² Masterpiece Theatre's is the most recent movie adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw* (1999). The film takes this approach and opens with a young woman, later revealed to be Miss Jessel, jumping to her death from a bridge.

. . . . With them all” (32) could easily be read as him having inappropriate sexual relationships with the children, as well, or at least with Miles.

In 1899, the journal *The Independent*, reviewing *The Turn of the Screw*, expressed the common view of the irreparable harm Quint and Miss Jessel caused the children: “The little boy and little girl, at the toddling period of life, when they are but helpless babes, fall under the influence of a governess and her lover who poison the very core of their conscience and character and defile their souls in a way and by means darkly hinted rather than portrayed by Mr. James” (qtd. in Norton 156). Not only are the children exposed to sex and sexuality at the very age that they should be protected from it, the exposure comes at the hands of the woman and man put in place to provide that protection.

These children, in particular, are in need of protection because they are orphans; without parents to look after them, that task has fallen to others. An interesting and troubling discrepancy exists between the texts of the Norton Critical Edition and the perhaps more popular Dover Thrift Edition. The Dover text erroneously asserts that the uncle gained custody of the children “by the death of *their* [the children’s] parents in India” [emphasis mine] (4), while the Norton follows James’s original texts and reads “by the death of *his* [the uncle’s] parents in India” [emphasis mine] (4). I draw attention to this error because, while the Dover version depicts children who are orphaned once when their parents died two years previous, the Norton presents children who are presumably doubly orphaned by the deaths of both their parents *and* grandparents. The Norton text indicates that when the

children's parents died two years previous, they were placed in the custody of their grandparents, also in India. Sometime in the year following the parents' deaths, the grandparents also died, and the children were placed in the care of their uncle in London, because "the awkward thing was that they had practically no other relations . . ." (5). To suffer the deaths of both parents and grandparents in a single year was undoubtedly traumatic for the children. James does not tell us anything about the cause of death of either the parents or grandparents, which perhaps serves his ambiguous purpose. The reader can imagine sudden and tragic deaths or slow, agonizing deteriorations, whichever she finds more horrific for Miles and Flora.

In any case, certainly the children suffered severe emotional upheaval with the death of all four parental figures and their removal to England to live with an uncle who, though he claims to care for their welfare, currently strives, at all costs, to avoid any physical and emotional contact with them. Through the character of Douglas (recounting what he was told by the governess years earlier), we learn that the children were sent to the country house Bly and that their care "had all been a great worry and, on his [the uncle's] own part doubtless, a series of blunders" (5). The uncle goes on to assert that the children were kept at Bly "from the first with the best people he could find to look after them, parting even with his own servants to wait on them and going down himself, whenever he might, to see how they were doing" (5). Two of these are peculiar statements for the uncle to make. The first, that he hired the "best people he could find," seems at odds with his engaging a twenty-year-old first-time country governess to care for and educate the children. Also that he

previously left his valet, Quint, a man of questionable morality, to inexplicably fraternize with his impressionable nephew. And the second, that he “[went] down himself, whenever he might, to see how they were doing” directly contrasts with the uncle’s strangest and most important condition for the governess’s employment: she should never trouble him about anything to do with the children, “neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone” (6). Indeed, this stipulation “had been prohibitive” (6) for several other (perhaps more qualified?) applicants who refused the position. The governess remembers agreeing to this strange condition and shaking the uncle’s “disburdened, delighted” (6) hand. This demand that he remain completely separate from Miles and Flora seems particularly odd when there is evidence that the uncle did spend time with the children at Bly in the recent past. Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, reveals that, “They [the uncle and his valet, Quint] were both here – last year. Then the master went, and Quint was alone” (23). The reader is left wondering what happened in the interim to make the uncle want to completely avoid his niece and nephew. This disconnect with the children’s only living relative and new father figure undoubtedly is also damaging to their mental and emotional welfare.

Not only does the uncle not want to have any direct contact with the children, but he also has no desire to learn of their health, academic progress, or happiness. This absent and disinterested father figure turns out to be quite distressing to young Miles. On a walk to church with his governess, Miles broaches the subject of his

return to school and when the governess refuses to give him a straight answer as to when he might go back, he asks if his uncle knows of the situation. The governess truthfully answers, “I don’t think your uncle much cares” (55). No reader could help but feel pity for the young boy who, stopping in his tracks at this statement, asks, “Then don’t you think he can be made to?” Miles insists that he will *make* his uncle care and come to Bly to see him, but, as the reader will see, his attempts are unsuccessful.

As we have seen, Miles and Flora have encountered an alarming amount of tragedy in their young lives. Their uncle wants nothing to do with them. They were possibly mentally and/or sexually abused by a servant in their own home. Even if we forge our own reading path and declare that Miss Jessel and Quint are falsely accused of any wrongdoing, that they did nothing but care for and protect the orphaned children, the fact remains that these two are now dead. After the tragic deaths of their parents and grandparents, followed quickly by the sudden deaths of these surrogate parents, in two short years, children as young as Miles and Flora could not help but suffer severe emotional trauma when every parental figure that comes into their lives dies. Even if no single event the children have suffered is enough to cause mental illness, it would be surprising, given the combination of all that has recently transpired in their lives, for little Miles and Flora to *not* be mentally unsound.

With the causes of Miles and Flora’s moral insanity identified, we can now turn to mental scientist Savage’s list of symptoms. An important indicator of childhood moral insanity described by Savage is genius or mental precocity. This is

illustrative of how our understanding of mental illness has changed drastically. While a modern reader would most likely find an intellectually precocious child to be special and unique, a Victorian reader would be suspicious of extraordinary intelligence in someone so young. The governess vividly describes the children's mental capacities in glowing terms. She gushes:

They had shown me from the first a facility for everything, a general faculty which, taking a fresh start, achieved remarkable flights. They got their little tasks as if they loved them; they indulged, from the mere exuberance of the gift, in the most unimposed little miracles of memory. They not only popped out at me as tigers and as Romans, but as Shakespeareans, astronomers and navigators” (37).

Of Miles specifically she says, “he was too clever for a bad governess, for a parson's daughter, to spoil” (38) and of both children, “the musical sense . . . was of the quickest, but the elder in especial had a marvelous knack for catching and repeating” (38).

Though the modern reader might not think anything of these descriptions of childhood genius, it most likely would have raised concerns in the well-read Victorian. Many of the mental scientists dealing with childhood criminality and insanity wrote of mental precocity as a distinct cause for alarm. Of morally insane children, Savage says “in cases of this kind it is not uncommon to find some genius, or at all events, some precocity” (283). Havelock Ellis, in his 1890 writing on “The Child as Criminal” states that “[moral insanity] is sometimes united with precocious

intellectual qualities” (350). In 1883, Crichton-Browne warned in his article “Education and the Nervous System” of “such a thing as moral precocity, and moral, like intellectual precocity, maybe [sic] a manifestation of disease or may eventuate in weakness.” Crichton-Browne goes on to claim that “little saints, like little prodigies, often die of acute hydrocephalus, and what is called ‘early piety’ not rarely ends in late imbecility” (340). Mental hygienists condemned intellectual precocity, which many considered to be the outward manifestation of an inward defect. To prevent this type of problem, some physicians even advocated deferring all mental labor until a male child reached the age of ten; female children should wait even longer. Of great concern was the fear that intellect might stunt the development of an individual’s moral sensibilities. However, at the same time, mental scientists believed that education and culture were strong defenses against disease, insanity included. The key was avoiding intellectual excess (Sicherman 222-3). The Victorian reader was wary of an intellectually precocious child and would likely pick up on James’s descriptions that Miles and Flora “performed the dizziest feats of arithmetic, soaring quite out of [the governess’s] feeble range, and perpetrated, in higher spirits than ever, geographical and historical jokes” (63).

In addition to mental precocity, Savage also mentions that morally insane children sometimes exhibit sexual precocity, as well. He says that in some children “[s]exual desires are developed at an unusually early – in fact, sometimes at an infantine – age . . .” (283). The reader might easily recognize that Miles and Flora’s sexual precocity probably stems from the abuse they suffered at the hands of Quint.

In Miles's case, the reason for his expulsion from school is never fully revealed, though stealing and lying are the governess's chief speculations. Though he admits to taking and destroying her letter to his uncle, Miles claims that he did not steal at school. When pressed for what it was that he did to be expelled, he becomes visibly physically uncomfortable: "He looked in vague pain all round the top of the room and drew his breath, two or three times over, as if with difficulty. He might have been standing at the bottom of the sea and raising his eyes to some faint green twilight" (83). The reader senses that Miles is about to reveal something crucial and horrible, yet it is left to our imaginations to run wild at what his secret transgression(s) might be.

We gain slightly more information when Miles explains that he only "said things" to those few boys that *he liked* (83). To the modern reader unfamiliar with the British public school system, particularly of the Victorian era, this may seem like a lot of nothing. However, illustrative cases of homosexuality are not hard to find in the annals of English public schooling. One writer's candid memoirs describe Harrow, one of the more famous English schools for boys, in the 1850s as a place of "animal lust" in which "every boy of good looks had a female name . . . as some bigger fellow's 'bitch'" and "acts of onanism, mutual masturbation, the sports of naked boys in bed together" were widespread (qtd. in Haralson 145). These graphic images of life in a boys' school provide a likely context for the fears surrounding the beautiful little boy Miles.

James's ambiguity is maddening, but given Miles's possible sexual history with Quint and/or his knowledge of Quint's relationship with Miss Jessel, combined with the sexual atmosphere often associated with British public schools, the reader can surmise that the "things" Miles said to the boys he liked were sexual in nature. If Miles's sexual comments to his school-fellows were repeated to others *they* liked, as he speculates with "unspeakable anxiety" (84), this could certainly be grounds for expulsion.

William Acton, a Victorian mental scientist writing in 1865 on disorders in children and youth, professed that "[i]n a state of health no sexual idea should ever enter a child's mind" (209). He goes on to say that in many instances, "either from hereditary predispositions, bad companionship, or other evil influences, sexual feelings are excited at a very early age, and too often with the most deplorable consequences" (210). Miles has certainly had bad companionship at home and perhaps that has extended to school, as well. This unfortunate predisposition in boys is recognizable by "slight signs" (210) when an otherwise normal young boy directs his attentions to a particular girl: "His kindness to her is a little too ardent. He follows her and he does not know why. He fondles her with a tenderness painfully suggestive of a vague dawning of passion. No one can find fault with him. He does nothing wrong. Parents and friends are delighted at his gentleness and politeness . . ." (211). This is interesting to note in light of some of the governess's descriptions of Miles's affinity for and relationship with his little sister Flora: "What surpassed everything was that there was a little boy in the world who could have for the inferior

age, sex and intelligence so fine a consideration. They [Miles and Flora] were extraordinarily at one, and to say that they never either quarreled [sic] or complained is to make the note of praise coarse for their quality of sweetness” (39). And, as Mrs. Grose and the governess discuss them, “the children strolled to and fro in one of their most manageable moods. They moved slowly, in unison, below us, over the lawn, the boy, as they went, reading aloud from a story-book and passing his arm round his sister to keep her quite in touch” (44). Of course, we must not forget that Miles and Flora are brother and sister, orphaned at a very young age, and have no one in the world but each other. It would not necessarily be surprising that Miles is very protective of his sister or that he seeks to be close to her in all ways. Yet, at the same time, Acton’s observations of sexual precocity in little boys throw a shadow of doubt on the relationship between the two children.

In the article “‘His little heart, dispossessed’: Ritual Sexorcism in *The Turn of the Screw*,” author Eric Haralson argues that the “distinguished discord” of the apparitionists and nonapparitionists miss the point of the novel entirely. Haralson believes “the tale is an allegory of sexual panic” (138) and even as ghosts, “Quint and Miss Jessel would have been substantial enough to be realized as threats to the developing child – especially the male child as heritor of class and state power – and thus quite literally to haunt the adult reader’s mind” (139). Even if our minds do not automatically make this connection, we *are* haunted by the thought of a sexually precocious little boy making overtures to his schoolfellows and sister. Not only is the idea distasteful, but it is unnerving at the same time.

Flora's own sexual precocity is evidenced in an extraordinarily subtle way in the scene where the governess catches her first "glimpse" of her dead predecessor Miss Jessel while observing Flora intently playing with two pieces of wood on the edge of the lake: "She had picked up a small flat piece of wood which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat. The second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place" (29). This vivid description of Flora's play is a prime example of where we can take the governess's account as accurate, but we may offer our own interpretation of the events she observes. Flora's screwing one piece of wood into the hole of another may be nothing more than innocent child's play to make a boat, but some scholars see this as a deliberate imitation of sexual intercourse. Psychoanalyst M. Katan wrote in 1962 of Flora's behavior with the sticks:

Nobody can escape the meaning of the child's action: it is the symbol of sexual intercourse. The author purposefully leaves it indefinite whether Flora has seen the apparition [of Miss Jessel] or not. According to the description, the little girl behaves as if she has not seen anything. Nevertheless, the warded-off comes out, for her play-acting betrays through its symbolism what she wants to keep secret If, as a child, you have witnessed intercourse between the parents or their substitutes, and if you cannot get rid of these impressions but under their influence you are "in cahoots" with another child,

you are lost. This is a terrible secret which the child has to carry around with him. (qtd. in Beidler, “With holes” 52)

Katan ultimately believes that with this scene James is trying to “unload his anxiety upon the reader” that stems from him having seen his parents engaging in sex as a child (qtd. in Beidler, “With holes” 52). James’s own potential neuroses are beyond my scope here, but what Katan has to say about Flora and perhaps Miles (the other child she is “in cahoots” with) is interesting. If Flora has, in fact, been exposed to sexual intercourse to any degree, she undoubtedly would not fully understand the act. She may not even consciously be imitating the act with her sticks, but playing out some buried memory or aspect of her unconscious.

A more recent Freudian reading by Allan Lloyd Smith in 1998 turns our attention to the dark secret that he thinks Flora is revealing about her own troubled past: “We must ask what it is that Flora is telling through her actions. Her gesture allusively represents the act of sexual penetration. [. . . S]urely it is appropriate first to recognize the enactment for what it immediately is: something done *by* Flora, representing something done *to* Flora” (qtd. in Beidler, “With holes” 53). Smith believes that Flora is so traumatized by her abuse that she cannot speak of it directly to the governess, so she symbolically hints at it with her gestures. The governess, however, does not understand the message.

Both Katan and Smith make interesting arguments, but what is most useful for our purposes is their adamancy that Flora’s behavior with the sticks is anything but innocent child’s play. Whether Flora is performing this action because of her own

sexual experiences with Quint, because she saw Miss Jessel and he engaged in intercourse, or because she is mimicking something her brother may have told or shown her, the activity certainly qualifies as sexual precocity in a child of eight.

There is also the case of the “really shocking” (74) things Flora says of the governess after their disagreement over the presence of Miss Jessel on the side of the lake. Mrs. Grose tells the governess that she heard ““from that child – horrors!”” (74). The housekeeper is so overcome with the telling that she breaks down crying and collapses upon the governess’s sofa. The governess asks her to clarify herself and asks, ““She’s so horrible?”” Mrs. Grose continues her account, confessing that the things Flora said are “[r]eally shocking It’s beyond everything, for a young lady; and I can’t think where she must have picked up –” (74). Neither the governess nor Mrs. Grose comes right out and specifically says what “appalling language” (74) Flora is using, though they seem to understand one another perfectly well. It is the reader who is mystified and left to wonder what Flora is saying. Given Mrs. Grose’s horror, her references to the unladylike nature of the language, and her curiosity as to where Flora may have learned it (since Flora sees no one but Miles, the household staff, and the townspeople that attend their church), the reader’s speculation naturally drifts to profanity, but we cannot know for sure. Of significance is the fact that Flora’s language is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. In the face of all that has transpired at Bly over the summer, Mrs. Grose is only compelled to flee with the onset of Flora’s “tongues.”

Jamesian scholar Dorothea Krook has no doubt that Quint and Miss Jessel engaged in illicit sexual relations. She is also quite certain that the two had no qualms about discussing the details of their relationship with the children in the “confidential, insinuating, nudging-and whispering way that such people habitually talk about sexual matters, especially to the young” (112). The effect of these confidences on the children would be disastrous, both to their mental well-being and their sexual development: “. . . the children would find them [the sexual confidences], on the one hand, confusing and frightening, and on the other dangerously, unhealthily exciting and alluring” (112). It is the latter harm that Krook finds most alarming, as she believes such knowledge would induce in the children, in particular Miles, “a craving for more and more ‘knowledge’ of this kind – for the fascination, the excitement, the stimulation, to the imagination and the senses, of a debased eroticism” (113-4). This may be for what Miles is expelled from his school. Quint and/or Miss Jessel planted in him an unnatural and premature desire for sexual knowledge and experience and he attempted to fulfill that desire when he “said things” to those he liked at school.

Of course, James makes certain that we never learn concretely that Miles was expelled for sexually propositioning his friends at school, or that Flora was playing at intercourse or cursing her governess, but he puts the possibility into our minds nonetheless. Even if we do not read these actions as examples of sexual precocity, we recognize that the children are exhibiting strange behaviors, which heightens our anticipation of the horror to come.

More of Savage's symptoms of moral insanity are found in both children's proclivity to lie and Miles's affinity for theft. The governess believes she catches Flora in a lie when the child is discovered out of bed and with the white curtains "deceivingly pulled forward" (40). Flora explains the absence from her bed by claiming she thought she saw someone walking around out on the grounds. When pressed whether she actually saw anyone, she replies in the negative, and the governess "absolutely believed she lied" (41). Flora confesses to pulling the curtains shut so to give the appearance that she was safely in bed, but explains that she did so to avoid frightening the governess. Because of Flora's younger age, the degree of her dishonesty may not be so well developed as her brother's or she just may not get caught as often. Mental scientist Savage points out that most children exhibit some tendencies to fib once in awhile and this is no real cause for concern, but the morally insane child does it persistently and "with such wonderful power that he lies like truth" (284). In the scene where she catches Flora out of bed, the governess firmly believes the little girl lies, yet marvels how perfectly she explains herself with "the loveliest, eagerest, simplicity" and her reply to each of the governess's questions is "returned, almost with the full privilege of childish in consequence, resentfully, though with a long sweetness . . ." (41). When the governess tries to trip Flora up with a question and catch her in the lie, "she absolutely declined to be puzzled; she turned her eyes to the flame of the candle as if the question were as irrelevant, or at any rate as impersonal, as . . . nine-times-nine" (41). Indeed, the impression the governess gives in her narrative is that Flora is almost too smart for her. The

governess eventually gives up, but both the reader and the governess are left with the distinct impression that this is a little girl with something to hide.

As for Miles's lying, Mrs. Grose reveals that Miles denied going off with Quint on certain occasions when it was well known that he had. The governess seeks to clarify what Mrs. Grose is telling her and their exchange makes it quite clear to both the governess and the reader: "He then prevaricated about it – he said he hadn't?" Her [Mrs. Grose's] assent was clear enough to cause me to add in a moment: 'I see. He lied'" (35). Mrs. Grose tries to explain the circumstances away, but it is evident to both women that Miles does not always tell the truth.

Both the children are "caught" late one night when the governess discovers Flora has left her bed, extinguished the candle, and is gazing intently out her window onto the grounds below. Rather than reprimand her immediately, and hoping to catch sight of whomever or whatever she is secretly watching, the governess sneaks out of their bedroom and hurries to a room on the opposite side of the house where she will be able to see both Flora in her own window and whatever the little girl is looking at on the grounds below. To the governess's horror, the person Flora is watching outside is none other than Miles. She rushes outside to retrieve him and leads him wordlessly to his room all the while wondering:

[I]f he were groping about in his dreadful little mind for something plausible and not too grotesque. It would tax his invention certainly, and I felt, this time, over his real embarrassment, a curious thrill of triumph. It was a sharp trap for any game hitherto successful. He could play no longer at perfect

propriety, nor could he pretend to it; so how the deuce would he get out of the scrape? (45)

Yet, in spite of her determination to trip him up, as with Flora, the governess is unable to actually catch the little boy lying. Though the governess is not convinced of Miles's explanation for his midnight wandering, the explanation is intriguing for the reader because he confesses that he sneaked out of bed so that the governess would catch him and "Think [him] – for a change – *bad!*" (45). He goes on to assert with great pride that "When I'm bad I *am* bad" (46). Though this may be at least part of the truth, neither the governess nor the reader is convinced it's the whole of it. Much like with Flora, though the governess doesn't catch him lying, we're left with the distinct impression that he is hiding something.

The governess recognizes Miles's midnight confession as a threat and confides it all to Mrs. Grose later: "It all lies in half a dozen words . . . words that really settle the matter. 'Think, you know, what I *might* do!' He threw that off to show me how good he is. He knows down to the ground what he 'might do.' That's what he gave them a taste of at school" (46). Her assertion is that Miles was expelled from his school for lying. The reader doesn't know anything more than the governess and Mrs. Grose, but the imaginations of both readers and characters are buzzing with terrible possibilities.

Savage and other mental scientists consider theft to be one of the chief symptoms of childhood moral insanity. Whether Miles stole at school is unclear, though he denies it. The governess suspects him of it when she gets him to admit that

he stole her letter addressed to his uncle. When she finally asks him outright if he took the letter, she describes his physical reaction as he struggles with his answer: “The face that was close to mine was . . . white . . . and out of it presently came a sound, not low nor weak, but as if from much further away . . . ‘Yes – I took it’” (82). The governess clutches Miles to her where she can feel “in the sudden fever of his little body the tremendous pulse of his little heart” (82). Miles knows he has been caught doing a very bad thing, especially for a boy of his social status. While the reader only knows of this one instance of Miles’s stealing, the seed has been planted in our imaginations. We know he stole once, so who is to say that he has not stolen before or will not do so again?

Before we learn of Miles’s stealing, however, there are hints that the children may not be entirely perfect and innocent. Throughout the early pages of the novella, the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose offers subtle clues that suggest the idyllic world of Bly may not be quite what it seems. We haven’t yet seen evidence of the children’s moral insanity, but the housekeeper hints at traces of evil lurking beneath the apparently innocent surface. The woman is a long-standing servant of the family and though she was not directly involved, she has observed everything that transpired at the manor house over the past few years.

Immediately upon the governess’s arrival at Bly (within the first two pages of her narrative), she notes how “inordinately glad” the housekeeper is to see her: “I felt within half an hour that she was so glad . . . as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much. I wondered even then a little why she should wish *not* to show

it, and that, with reflexion, with suspicion, might have made me uneasy” (7). And, a few pages later: “Oh she was glad I was there!” (9). Mrs. Grose’s reaction to the governess’s arrival obviously serves to foreshadow the “unease” that is to unfold in the coming pages. But, it is also useful to question *why* Mrs. Grose would be so exceedingly glad to see the governess *before* all of the trouble unfolds. Certainly, there was unseemliness and death some months ago, but Miles has been safely removed to school and Mrs. Grose has only been charged with the care of a single, angelic little girl whom she professes to adore. For the housekeeper to be politely happy to see the governess seems customary, but for the governess to be struck with the excessive joy with which her arrival is met gives the impression that something is not quite right. Has the perfect little girl Flora been a lot to handle?

A few days later the letter arrives that announces Miles’s dismissal from school. The governess is so distressed that she confides in Mrs. Grose. Upon hearing the shocking news, the housekeeper “. . . gave me a look that I remarked at the moment; then, visibly, with a quick blankness, seemed to try to take it back Consciously, under my attention, she reddened” (10). What does the remarkable look Mrs. Grose tries to take back signify? She seems upset at the news of Miles, but not particularly surprised. She almost seems to suspect a reason for his dismissal that she’s not willing to share. The governess speculates why the boy might be dismissed and asks, “[i]s he really *bad*?” (10). Mrs. Grose doesn’t answer in either the affirmative or negative, but with tears in her eyes avoids the question and inquires if that is what the gentlemen of the school say. It isn’t until the governess suggests that

Miles may have been an injury to the other students that Mrs. Grose reacts, and this time with vehemence: ““Master Miles! – *him* an injury?”” Clearly she is fiercely loyal, but we are left wondering what she knows about Miles and is unwilling or afraid to say.

Perhaps a little light is shed on the matter when later in their conversation they discuss that they both like for little boys to be, to some degree, naughty. They agree together that “a boy who never is . . . is no boy for *me!*” Yet, when the governess presses her and suggests that naughtiness to the point of contamination or corruption is too much, Mrs. Grose “stared, taking my meaning in; but it produced in her an odd laugh.” She asks of the governess, “[a]re you afraid he’ll corrupt *you?*” (12). This seems an odd moment for laughter, perhaps signifying the housekeeper’s discomfort in the situation, but we are left wondering the source of her discomfort. Does she make the joke about the little boy corrupting the governess to diffuse the situation because she finds the notion absurd or because it is all too plausible?

Finally, at the end of this same odd conversation, the governess asks about her predecessor and Mrs. Grose reveals that the woman was young and pretty. The governess muses, “[h]e seems to like us young and pretty!” (12). The housekeeper is quick to agree, only she slips up and agrees that “he did” in the *past* tense, when the master, to whom the governess was referring, is still quite alive and would certainly be referred to in the present tense. This odd slip-up foretells of Quint’s similar affinity for young and pretty women, which the governess will learn of soon enough. But, what is interesting for our purposes here is Mrs. Grose’s mistake and her reaction

to it: “She looked blank, but she coloured [sic]” (120). The woman tries to cover her mistake and insists she meant the master. The governess has no reason to suspect otherwise at this point, so doesn’t press the issue, but the reader catches it and our eyebrows raise a little. What other secrets might Mrs. Grose be hiding?

Taken apart, these half-glimpses of concealed information say little, but together, they suggest secrets afoot at Bly. More importantly, these secrets seem to, at least in part, involve the children. Without meaning to, this “stout simple plain clean wholesome woman” (7) has provided us with doubt, with suspicion, that things at Bly may not be quite what they seem, particularly in regards to Miles and Flora. The governess gives credence to this notion after she first sees the figure of Quint on the tower. In a “confusion of curiosity and dread” she tries to rationalize what she has just seen and wonders: “Was there a ‘secret’ at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (17). Could we venture a third guess, however, and suggest that the “secret” at Bly concerns the children and their innocence or lack thereof?

A final and not insignificant point to add to the reader’s suspicions that the children may not be quite right comes a bit later in the novel, after both Quint and Miss Jessel have been spotted, when Mrs. Grose and the governess are discussing what is to be done for the children’s safety. Mrs. Grose believes that the governess must appeal to the uncle for assistance, and the governess, realizing how ludicrous the situation sounds, scornfully asks “[b]y writing to him that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad?” The housekeeper is in earnest, however, and

replies, “[b]ut if they *are*, Miss?” (48). There, laid out clearly for the reader to see (a rare occurrence in the novella, indeed) is the plausible concern that the children may be insane. This conversation between the governess and Mrs. Grose comes just after the midway point in the story, so, even if the idea of the children suffering from mental illness has not entered the mind of the reader before, she now has the second half of the tale to digest the possibility of morally insane children on top of ghosts and governesses.

This same line of text where the governess asks Mrs. Grose incredulously if she is expected to write the master that “his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad?” is also significant because it is one of the most substantive changes James made to his original 1898 periodical text for the New York Edition in 1908. The 1898 version reads: “[b]y writing to him that I have the honor to inform him that they [the children] see the dead come back?” Taken in contrast, these two phrases represent vastly different explanations for what is happening to the children at Bly. The 1898 version seems to lean quite heavily on the interpretation that ghosts are lurking at the manor house. Still, the governess does not come right out and say that there are ghosts, so the interpretation that perhaps there is something wrong with the children that is *causing* them to see ghosts is a possibility (mental illness causing hallucinations?). However, James’s 1908 revision is quite direct in its assertions and raises the red flag of madness if it hasn’t already been detected. The vast majority of James’s changes for this edition are quite minor rewordings of phrases or replacing one word for its synonym. Very few of the changes actually alter James’s meaning.

This lack of major substantive revisions, I believe, places even greater import on the actual modifications the author *did* make. James wanted his readers to be clear that madness was a distinct possibility to explain what was happening at Bly. And though his readers might question the sanity of the governess on their own, it was important for them to question the children's, as well.

In an 1898 letter to fellow writer H. G. Wells, James wrote of his difficulty in writing the character of the governess: "The grotesque business I had to make her picture and the childish psychology I had to make her trace and present, were, for me at least, a very difficult job, in which absolute lucidity and logic, a singleness of effect, were imperative" (116). This reference indicates that the governess's purpose as both a character and as the narrator was to convey "childish psychology."

Further evidence for this reading of Miles and Flora as morally insane comes not from the text itself, but from contemporary reviewers of the novella (all writing in 1898, the year *The Turn of the Screw* was first published), who also would be familiar with the mental science of the day. England's *Bookman* wrote of the surface beauty of the story, but underneath saw "a sink of corruption, never uncovered, but darkly, potently hinted" (304). The review goes on to discuss the children specifically:

One's heart cries out against the picture of the terrible possibility; for the corrupted are children of tender years. Every inch of the picture seems an outrage in our first heat. Even in colder moments, if we admit the fact of infant depravity, if we own that children are supreme actors, and can bar doors

on their elders most effectually, we must deny the continuity and the extent of the corruption as suggested here. (304)

The reviewer finds great horror in the story and even asserts that James's portrayal of the children goes too far, that no real child could be quite as horrible as these two.

The *Illustrated London News* writes of the duplicitous nature of the children: "They act their pretty parts of innocent babes to perfection; but the love of two good women probes beneath their beauty, and finds the sink of corruption" (308). This publication praises the governess and Mrs. Grose for their goodness and desire to save the children from themselves. The *Illustrated London News* summarizes the sentiments of many reviewers and readers alike when it writes that "the subject will outrage many minds far from prudish, with its sickening suggestion of evil nestling in the fairest of all places, the souls of little children" (308). Many Victorian readers picked up on James's hints and clues that the children might be morally insane. They recognized that this idea only added another layer of horror to the story.

Towards the end of the novella, both Miles and Flora seem to be suffering from physical illness which may be a manifestation of their deteriorating mental state. Mental scientist Crichton-Browne wrote in 1883 that moral insanity ". . . may eventuate in weakness" and made a connection between childhood mental illness and subsequent physical disease: "little saints, like little prodigies, often die of acute hydrocephalus . . ." (340). In the scene that takes place after the governess catches Miles out of bed in the middle of the night and wandering out on the grounds, she describes him repeatedly as a sick child. First, "[h]is clear listening face, framed in

its smooth whiteness, made him for the minute as appealing as some wistful patient in a children's hospital . . ." (60-1). Then when she presses him about why he wants to leave Bly, "[h]e gave . . . like a convalescent slightly fatigued, a languid shake of his head" (61). Finally, when she urges him to confess the secret she knows he's hiding, "[h]e turned off a little, facing round toward the wall and holding up his hand to look at as one had seen sick children look" (62). It's a distinctly odd way to describe a healthy little boy, unless, of course, he is beginning to show physical signs of actual illness, which wouldn't be surprising considering his sister is about to fall deathly ill.

During the governess's confrontation with Flora regarding the presence of Miss Jessel, we can literally see the child physically deteriorating before our eyes: ". . . her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished . . . she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly" (70). Following this encounter, the little girl becomes seriously ill: "Flora was so markedly feverish that an illness was perhaps at hand; she had passed a night of extreme unrest . . ." (71). Mrs. Grose is so concerned for Flora's rapidly deteriorating health that she agrees to abandon Bly and take the child to her uncle in London.

In addition to their physical deterioration, the final demonstration of the children's loss of innocence comes in the descriptions of the children as "old." In the wake of Flora's mental precocity, the sexually suggestiveness of her screwing sticks together, her lying to the governess, and the "appalling language" she utters, Mrs. Grose laments of the little girl: "It has made her, every inch of her, quite old" (72). After retrieving Miles from his midnight wandering outdoors, even before the full

scope of his symptoms have become apparent, the governess is unnerved by his distinctly adult demeanor: “It was extraordinary how my absolute conviction of his secret precocity . . . made him, in spite of the faint breath of his inward trouble, appear as accessible as an older person, forced me to treat him as an intelligent equal” (60). Miles’s loss of innocence becomes apparent to the governess when she finds herself treating him like an adult, like her equal.

Miles and Flora’s loss of innocence in the novella, manifested in physical and mental deterioration, is particularly troubling because they fall so far. When we are first introduced to them, the children are the epitome of all the characteristics we associate with childhood innocence. Upon first meeting Miles, the governess notes:

I had seen him on the instant, without and within, in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his sister. He was incredibly beautiful, and . . . everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence (18)

The descriptions of the children’s beauty, purity, and goodness are heavy in the first half of the novel. Consequently, nearly every contemporary reviewer of the novella came away with a deep sense of the “two astonishingly beautiful children . . . a boy and a girl so radiant and charming” (“A Masterpiece” 151). As evidence of their moral insanity symptoms begins to mount, however, and we start to become aware that these children may not be quite as innocent as we once thought, the glowing

descriptions taper off. For reasons we may not care to admit, we would be less surprised at the children's deterioration if they had been described as ugly and unpleasant from the start. For Victorian and modern readers alike, we are stunned that such beautiful children should be found to have evil lurking inside.

By setting up such a fall from grace, James is examining the loss of childhood innocence in a particularly disturbing form (sweet, lovely, upper class children). Just as we are horrified by this today, so too were James's Victorian readers. Using the emerging field of mental science, Victorians sought to group together those undesirable qualities they occasionally saw in their children – sexual precocity, unnaturally mature intelligence, and a proclivity to lie and steal – and label them as symptoms of “moral insanity.” By terming these qualities as symptoms of mental illness, this brought the behaviors out of the realm of the mind and into the arena of science. In so doing, Victorians sought to apply reason, rationality, and control to their fears of lost childhood innocence.

We continue to occasionally encounter these qualities in children today and mourn the loss of childish innocence they represent. Our belief in the sanctity of childhood is inherited from the Victorians, and along with that idea a fierce determination to protect our children. We no longer use a label of moral insanity to try to control our fears, but we do seek to control what our kids are exposed to, from the types of media they see to the people they meet. Of course, the Victorians tried to protect their children, too, and the fact that we still haven't yet devised a foolproof method to shield and preserve childhood innocence is precisely the reason why *The*

Turn of the Screw still resonates with readers today. On the surface, the story is scary because there may be ghosts or an insane governess trying to harm the children. Either possibility is horrific to consider because the recipients of the evil are supposedly innocent children. In the frame narrative of the house party, Douglas even says that when a ghost story is told about children, it “gives the effect another turn of the screw” (1). Children are supposed to be innocent and safe, especially children as lovely and precocious as Miles and Flora. To consider the possibility that it may be the children who are the insane ones, though, I believe, gives the horror screw still another excruciating turn.

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