THE MOTHER OF ALL FEARS:

ZEALOUS MATROPHOBIA IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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Abstract:
While many scholars of *The Turn of the Screw* label the governess as one who suffers from some type of sexual hysteria, I seek, alternatively, to explore the much overlooked psychological impact of the governess' new maternal role, focusing on the pressures induced by the strict culture of parenting at the turn of the century and the accompanying theological obligations of childrearing. Reading *The Turn of the Screw* in the context of Protestant theology and matrophobic theory, I question how the governess' spiritual orientation influences the anxious maternal identity that I argue leads to her psychological break. My investigation is thus primarily concerned with the following guiding questions: First, how do gothic novels in general reflect the maternal anxieties of the nineteenth century? Second, how do the religious metaphors embedded throughout the governess' narrative reveal her own maternal anxieties in *The Turn of the Screw*? And finally, in what ways do childrearing expectations, theological obligations, and the governess' psychology intersect in the formation of the ghostly apparitions at Bly? These questions invoke the current discourse in Henry James scholarship while also incorporating archival research to situate James' novella in the historical context of nineteenth century motherhood. Specifically, I argue that the governess "possesses" the children with projections of her maternal anxieties, distorting Miles and Flora into the evil beings the governess needs them to be in order to relieve herself of the impossible theological duty of shielding their innocence.

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Since the earliest publication of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, scholars have approached the same question, time and time again, either directly or indirectly, regarding the reality of the ghosts that haunt the governess' experience at Bly: Are the ghosts really present on the house grounds, or do they exist only as hallucinations? While critics have long considered this question from various angles and with differing insights, many recent readings preclude the forced either/or distinction and instead claim that James crafted a story in which both realities are possible.[1] It is interesting to note, however, that whether the governess is deemed sane or mad, whether the ghosts are decidedly real or imagined, there remains the urge to label the governess as one who is wrought by sexual hysteria. From Edmund Wilson's influential claim that the governess "is a neurotic case of sex repression" (88) to Dorothea Krook's argument that James may have consciously written a ghost tale but unconsciously written a story about a governess who suffers from the "sexual complications of her maiden state" (370), there is a general tendency to make the governess' sexuality the fulcrum of the story, taking her seeming

[1] José Amorós, for example, postulated that a cycle of reading and rereading leads from an initial trust in the governess, to a subsequent suspicion of her reliability, and finally to an acceptance of "radical ambiguity" (64). Julio Olivares Merino similarly suggests there can be two opposite interpretations of the novella due to the presence of two plots in the single text (157). Millicent Bell also claims that the governess' real problem is her inability to accept ambiguity, and that problem is reflected in the reader's similar inability to accept the ambiguity of the story itself.

infatuation with the "handsome," "pleasant," and "gallant" uncle on Harley Street as the impetus of her hysteria.

While I certainly admit, however, that signs of sexual hysteria seem to plague the governess to some extent—who could, for example, deny the sexual tension resulting from her attraction to the uncle and her subsequent seclusion as a governess without opportunity to act on those feelings?—I also maintain that there are other, equally powerful forces acting on the governess' psyche that have been sorely overlooked. Marilyn C. Wesley, for example, points out that, just before seeing the first apparition, the governess wishes for someone to "stand before [her] and smile and approve," and that this someone "should *know*" (emphasis in original, 39). As Wesley goes on to argue, the governess' apparent need for authorized identification in this passage does not stem from the id's repressed desires—those of a sexual hysteric—so much as it suggests "the strivings of an emergent ego" (83). In other words, while it may be evident that the governess is charmed by the uncle on Harley Street, it is equally evident that she does not simply seek a sexual partner when the first ghost appears; she seeks, more specifically, an "approving" presence—one who would approve of her character and of her acclimation to her new role as governess. The governess thereby appears to suffer not just from the afflictions of a sexual hysteric but also from those of a desperately insecure employee.[2]

The mere fact that the governess is never referred to by any name other than the designated title of her occupation suggests that her particular employment is central to the story, yet the potential in examining the governess *as governess* rather than as a simple case study for sexual neurosis or sadomasochism has remained, for the most part,

[2] While I agree with Wesley's initial point of contention, my suggestion that the governess' afflictions stem from her employment is my own; Wesley maintains, alternatively, that the approving presence the governess seeks reflects her need for self-expression in a transformative narrative process (83).

untapped.[3] It is thus the goal of my current project to expand the critical focus from a narrow fixation on sexual hysteria to a wider awareness of the much overlooked pressures the governess faces in her new occupation—specifically, the pressures of surrogate motherhood.

In short, I seek here to explore the psychological impact of the governess' adjustment to motherhood, focusing on the pressures induced by the strict culture of parenting at the turn of the century and the accompanying theological obligations of childrearing. Reading *The Turn of the Screw* in the context of Protestant theology and matrophobic theory, I question how the governess' spiritual orientation influences the anxious maternal identity that leads to her psychological break. My investigation in this matter is primarily concerned with the following guiding questions: First, how do gothic novels in general reflect the maternal anxieties of the nineteenth century? Second, how do the religious metaphors embedded throughout the governess' narrative reveal her own maternal anxieties in *The Turn of the Screw*? And finally, in what ways do childrearing expectations, theological obligations, and the governess' psychology intersect in the formation of the ghostly apparitions at Bly? These questions will invoke the current discourse in Henry James scholarship while also incorporating archival research to situate James' novella in the historical context of nineteenth century motherhood. Specifically, I will argue that the governess "possesses" the children with projections of her maternal

[3] At least two exceptions come to mind: Paula Cohen argues that the governess abuses the children as a protest against the placement of the governess in the Victorian social order, and William Scheick presents a brief overview of nineteenth century medical theories concerning the seclusion involved in the role of the governess. While both readings do focus on the governess as governess, however, my argument is more centered on the governess' role in the process of childrearing. To my knowledge, close attention has not yet been paid to that facet of the novella.

anxieties, distorting Miles and Flora into the evil beings the governess needs them to be in order to relieve herself of the impossible theological duty of shielding their innocence.[4]

Although the governess is not the biological mother of Miles and Flora, the historical position of the governess was often thought to resemble motherhood to a great extent.[5] As Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros explains, employment as a governess was considered suitable for middle-class women precisely because "the work so strongly resembled the traditional feminine tasks of the middle-class wife and mother," for the governess took on responsibilities that would otherwise comprise "the natural mission of her mistress" (27-28). Period essays from the nineteenth century also attribute definite maternal duties to governesses, describing them as "women employed to give such home training and instruction as are necessary to our children, and fulfil the highest of those duties which, in a simpler state of society, devolve on the parents" (Jameson 252). The similarities to motherhood were sometimes so sharply perceived, in fact, that Anna Jameson saw fit to discourage nineteenth century mothers from allowing their "maternal vanity" to motivate any interference with the governess taking on a similarly maternal role (274).[6]

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[4] While my interpretation does treat The Turn of the Screw as a psychological tale rather than a paranormal one, the same argument (that the governess suffers more from maternal anxiety than sexual hysteria) can still be made even if the ghosts are presumed real. In such a reading, the material ghosts would only spur on the maternal anxieties that I here argue manifest those very apparitions. Either way, however, the ghosts, whether real or imagined, do not pose the main threat to the children; it is rather the governess' severe reaction to the ghosts that puts Miles and Flora in danger. It is for this reason that, given the space available in these few pages, I focus on the governess herself rather than extending my discussion to a more thorough examination of the ghosts' debated authenticity.

[5] While I focus only on the motherly qualities of the governess here, see M. Jeanne Peterson and Mary Poovey for more in depth discussions of the governess' ambiguous role.

[6] While there is no conclusive evidence to determine whether or not Henry James would have been influenced by such essays, Peter G Beidler identifies strong parallels between *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Roving Bee* that suggest James could have read works about governesses (like *The Roving Bee*) in preparation for his own novella (179). If this were the case, he very well could have accessed the historical essay I mention here for the same reason. Furthermore, Leon Edel states that James' own mother employed a governess (12), which again suggests that James would have been familiar with the perception of governesses at the time.

Even as the historical governess was perceived as a mother-like figure, however, the governess' role in *The Turn of the Screw* remains unique in that she is the only authoritative parental figure at Bly. Both the mother and father have died long before the story begins, and the uncle wishes not to be bothered by any interaction with the children whatsoever. This governess thereby carries much more power (and consequently is subject to more pressure) than the typical nineteenth century governess who would work under the watchful eyes of the mother; she must do all that the children's absent mother would do as well. As Dawn Keetley suggests, the governess can be seen submitting to a fully maternal role when she experiences extreme emotional swings "that, conjoined with a chronic sleepiness, suggest postpartum symptoms," and when she imagines the sound of a child's cry at night, implying "her unconscious conviction of her maternity" (147). To say that the governess assumes the role of a surrogate mother—and assumes it quickly—is thus no stretch at all.

But in order to move forward in our understanding of the governess as mother, we must first understand the prevailing ideologies that would have shaped the culture of childrearing for middleclass women in Victorian society. In the decades preceding the publication of *The Turn of the Screw,* for example, socially held views of children in both England and America were wrapped up in a Protestant culture affected by Dissenting theologies. Protestant ideas regarding the nature of children swung back and forth between Puritanical concepts of children as victims of original sin who needed strict moral and religious upbringing to more tolerant notions of naturally innocent children

who only needed to be protected from corruption.[7] The simultaneous entertaining of such contradictory views of children thus began to frame the child as an unknowable entity that defies categorization. It is impossible to prove one way or another whether a child is born innocent or with naturally evil tendencies—or even if childhood innocence was merely a mask that hid a truly corrupt disposition. Such uncertainty is unsettling, or as Freud would say, "uncanny," due to the seemingly familiar idea of the child being so wrapped in mystery. The governess, like countless parents before her, would naturally be affected by the uncanny feeling surrounding the children in her care, for even the slightest hint of uncertainty about the nature of our children diminishes any sense of parental control; a lingering sense of doubt insists that either a child's naturally sinful nature or other external forces could make parental efforts to raise a "good" child fruitless (Bruhm 106).

This sense of doubt can be seen haunting the governess throughout the novella, for even from the very onset of her narrative, the governess' language betrays her concerns about taking on the formidable task of rearing such unknowable children. During the carriage ride that first takes her to Bly, for example, the governess describes having feelings of "doubt" and admits that she expected "something dreary" in assuming her new role (29). She also states retrospectively that she must have been ignorant, confused, or conceited "to assume that [she] could deal with a boy whose education for the world was all on the point of beginning," implying the enormity of the task being asked of her (37).

[7] See Jacqueline S. Reinier and Jacquelyn Rogers for extended discussions of these conflicting views of children and the ways those views were conveyed in art and literature. See Adrian Schober and Daniel Sullivan & Jeff Greenberg for specifically gothic interpretations of these views on childhood.

That the governess would be nervous about taking on a mother-like role, specifically in the nineteenth century, is further understandable, considering that historians attribute high levels of parental anxiety in this period to several factors including the emergence in the 1890's of a germ information campaign that disseminated vivid images of microscopic impurities that could contaminate children, the phenomenon of ransom kidnapping that became a well-known tragedy in America and generated widespread parental fear in the late 1800's, and emerging technologies like the automobile that seemed to make the world increasingly less "child-friendly" (Stearns 17-18). Child study experts of the time (including William James) also described a child's life between the ages of eight to twelve as a "perilous period of human life" in which the maturing child is "particularly susceptible to external influences"—a factor that goes hand-in-hand with the new implications brought on by encroaching social views of the purely innocent child (Levander 10). Parents began to feel pressure to *preserve* the good nature of their children and to singlehandedly prevent outside forces from leading them astray (Stearns 17). Older notions of original sin had placed problems well within a parent's realm of control: Teach your children good morals and instill in them a strong sense of religion, and their naturally corrupt nature will be tamed. These newer ideas of childhood innocence, however, left parents with a much weaker sense of control as the problem shifted from internal factors within the child to external forces that could come from anywhere (Stearns 18).

That the governess, a parson's daughter, is aware of and acknowledges the belief in childhood innocence is evident in her choice of highly religious descriptors that paint the children—at the beginning of the story, at least—as purely divine beings. In her first

accounts of them, she depicts Flora as "one of Raphael's holy infants" (31), she praises Miles with words like "divine," "love," and "innocence" (37), and she labels both children "unpunishable…cherubs" (43). As the story progresses, her descriptions become even more Christ-like, for she likens sitting with the children at tea to being in a "temple" (44) and remarks at how Flora could "put her little conscious hand straight upon the spot that ached," as if she were a divine healer, causing the governess to "rejoice under this fathomless charity" (60). Furthermore, she claims the children were "preternaturally" fond of her, attributing to them supernatural, beyond human kindness; she says they were "graceful," implying that they were full of divine grace; and she likens them to idols who are "perpetually bowed down over," even suggesting that they perform "*miracles* of memory" (emphasis added, 64-65). Flora also resembles the resurrected Christ more directly in the governess' narrative when "The white curtain draping, in the fashion of those days, the head of Flora's little bed, shrouded, as I had assured myself long before, the perfection of childish rest" (67). Her specific choice of the word "shrouded" in relation to the white curtains calls to mind the white shroud of Christ, and the coinciding image of Flora wrapped in the "perfection" of "rest" further implies Christ's burial. Further still, the governess is soon startled to find that Flora is not, in fact, under the shroud as she had thought and has instead risen from her bed, again harkening to Christ's resurrection and his leaving behind of the empty shroud.

It is thus evident that the governess perceives the children's innocence as a sacred quality, and her acute awareness of the pressure to protect that innocence soon becomes equally apparent. This pressure first takes a noticeable hold on the governess when she worriedly notes that she walks "in a world of [the children's] invention," and they had

"no occasion to draw upon [her influence]" (54). How, then, could she perform her duty and keep them from straying off the path of morality if she had such little effect on them? Fearing that her lack of influence would thwart her best efforts to shield the children's purity, the governess' psychological balance becomes disrupted by the dread of her failing in her childrearing, for this dread consumes her to the point that everything she sees surrounding the children becomes a potentially corruptive force and an added source of fear: "The more I go over it the more I see in it, and the more I see in it the more I fear. I don't know what I *don't* see, what I *don't* fear!" (57). In the words of Freud, the governess begins to experience the "over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with physical reality" (15). Becoming so obsessed with her seemingly impossible task of protecting the children's innocence, everything she sees them do, and everything she does not see them do, becomes in her mind just another proof of the children's inevitable corruption.

Laboring under such an obsession, the governess sees potentially corruptive forces around every corner at Bly, noticeable in how she emphasizes the words "contaminate" and "corrupt" by using them four times in quick succession at the onset of her story (35), also calling on the word "poison" at least three times in her narrative. All of these words specifically imply that the dangers she fears come from an outside source, for in order to poison, contaminate, or corrupt, a foreign agent must invade another's body/mind from the outside. She also directly states the fear that the children's future "might bruise them," reiterating her conception of the children's fragility and susceptibility to the external forces of which she is so afraid (38).

The governess quickly becomes preoccupied with her maternal role as protector of such vulnerable children, again evident in the language she chooses to describe her experiences. When she first sees Quint's apparition on the tower, for example, rather than spending time describing Quint's appearance, the governess seems more concerned with describing aspects of the architecture surrounding him. She notes the "crenellated structures" behind which he stood, remarks how the two towers "flanked" each side of the house, and she says they could all benefit from the grandeur of the "battlements" (39). In this passage, the governess is emphasizing the defensive aspects of the house: To be "crenellated" means to contain the notches in castle walls designed to protect archers defending the house, "flank" is a term commonly referring to the right or left side of a military formation, and "battlements" are fortifications on a tower wall with spaces left open for shooting. Quint's marked ease in looking "at [the governess] over the battlements" and moving "from one of the crenellations to the next" suggests that the house's defenses do not thwart him (40-41). As the governess becomes witness to the apparition's movement above and across the house's defenses—across *her* defenses—she begins to fear that her attempts to keep outside forces at bay may be futile, and her maternal anxiety is piqued.

That the governess suffers just as much from these maternal anxieties as she does from the more general sexual hysteria current criticism often points to is quite plausible, considering that Henry James must have been familiar with the parental anxieties of the nineteenth century through his brother William's involvement in the child study movement of the time. It is evident that Henry was well acquainted with at least some of his brother's work, for in several personal letters he mentions either reading or intending

to read William's publications.[8] Speaking generally, for example, Henry wrote to William saying, "all you write plays into *my* poor creative consciousness and artistic visions…with the most extraordinary suggestiveness and force of application and inspiration" (emphasis in original, *Letters* 110). I would suggest, then, that William's "extraordinary" influence on *The Turn of the Screw* is evident in how closely the governess' struggles resemble the very parental struggles William was discussing around the time of the novella's publication. For example, in one of the lectures he would have written Henry about, William James warns parents and teachers to avoid becoming too influenced by the popular child-study research of the time, for he believed that "Quickened to discern in the child before us processes" (13) that we have heard about, our eyes "indulge fancies that are just a shade exaggerated" (1). He also suggests that "If there are devils, if there are supernormal powers, it is through the cracked and fragmented self that they enter" (qtd. in Taylor 110).[9] Perhaps this explains why, as the novella progresses, Miles and Flora slowly transform in the governess' eyes from divine to wicked creatures, even though the governess has little evidence aside from her feeling of "instant certainty" in the matter of their moral deterioration (70). Flora, once a cherub, becomes an "old, old woman" (99) whose childish beauty "had suddenly failed, had quite vanished" (103). Miles, once a divine gentleman appears as a sickly child (92) inclined to play "infernal" tricks (97)—all of this simply because the governess has decided that "All roads lead to Rome" (78), as she does exactly what William James warns against: She

[8] In "Informed Eyes," Caroline Levander suggests that while Henry James did not attend William's lectures, he did express interest in the subject matter of child psychology in several letters dated from 1895 to 1898.

[9] Eugene Taylor, a historian of psychiatry, used James' lecture notes to reconstruct the 1896 Lowell lectures on "Exceptional Mental States" referenced here.

indulges exaggerated fantasies that turn the children in her care into warped reflections of her own fears, so the real "devils" come from the governess' own fragmented self.

Viewing the governess in this light suggests James' novella can be understood as one of many gothic texts that explore the disastrous effects of both intentionally and unintentionally harmful parents—what happens when the very beings slated to protect a child's innocence become in themselves corruptive forces? While frightful father figures are highly prevalent in the gothic genre—think, for example, of the lascivious fathers in *The Castle of Otranto* and *Mansfield Park,* the benign but useless father in *Carmilla,* and the poisonous father in "Rappaccini's Daughter"—equally pervasive, if not more so, is the depiction of fearsome mothers: Mrs. Reed's cruel "mothering" of Jane Eyre, Lucy's transformation into the evil mother in *Dracula,* and Henry James' continuous portrayal of the dangerous mother in stories like *The Awkward Age, What Maisie Knew, The Portrait of a Lady,* "The Pupil," and "The Author of *Beltraffio."*[10] In *The Awkward Age*, adolescent Nanda is surrounded by the corruptive influence of her mother's immoral social circle, and although Nanda moves away from her mother in the end, her future remains uncertain. In *What Maisie Knew,* Ida Farange uses her daughter, Maisie, as a pawn in her hateful disputes with her ex-husband and eventually deserts Maisie altogether, similar to *The Portrait of a Lady*'s Serena Merle, who abandons her daughter, Pansy, and manipulates Isabelle into destroying her own life to take over as Pansy's stepmother. In "The Pupil," Morgan is raised by a deceitful father and an immoral mother, and he eventually dies from heart failure, just as young Dolcino dies in "The Author of Beltraffio" after his mother fatally withholds his medicine in an attempt to "protect" him from what she believes to be the baleful influence of his father. Taken

[10] See Pearson for an extended discussion of the dangerous domestic sphere depicted in James' stories.

together, these plotlines demonstrate a recurring theme in James' work pertaining to the necessity of parental responsibility, but more specifically, they reveal James' contention that much of that responsibility falls on the mother.

For James, the key to the success of a family unit rested on the hierarchical position of the mother (Shine 97)—a notion perhaps deriving from his own experience with an authoritative matriarch. In his analysis of James' journal entries and personal letters, Leon Edel remarks that James envisioned his mother as the keystone of the family arch, emanating a strength and firmness along with her maternal tenderness through which she nurtured her children and supported her husband (11). James saw his mother as the true commanding presence in the household, in contrast to his father whom he described as weak and dependent (Edel 15). Edel goes on to explain, however, that while James idealized his mother as a powerful figure deserving of an almost sacred reverence, he also remained emotionally confused by her affectionate yet stifling presence.[11] These feelings continued to brew until he saw the detrimental effect that his mother's death had on his father, and "At some stage the thought came to him that men derive strength from the women they marry, and that conversely women can deprive men both of strength and life" (Edel 15). For James, just as the powerful mother generates successful family units, she is also capable of shaking the very foundations of those units. With such a conflicted outlook on the maternal identity, James can be seen toying in his novels with the dangerous implications of mothering gone awry. The fearsome mothers in James' fiction are thus largely guilty of abusing the very maternal power that James both admired and feared.

[11] See Wendy Graham for a closer look at how James' ambiguous feelings for his mother affected his emotional state and sexuality.

The Turn of the Screw is no different in this respect, for the novella exposes the obsessive maternal fears that can overcome even seemingly benign mother figures to the point that they unwittingly harm their children in a desperate attempt to save them. The governess' language, for example, reveals that she initially thinks herself, as a Christian mother, to be capable of saving the idyllic children in her care despite (or because of) their apparent downward spiral, but she becomes treacherously consumed by the zealous pride she feels in acting the part of "savior"—so consumed, in fact, that she eventually shifts from her role as the passive servant of God to the active figure of Christ himself.[12] Embodying and exaggerating the archetype of the self-sacrificing mother, the governess makes of herself a Christ-like martyr. As her choice of words in the following passage suggests, however, she tries so hard to perform her self-proclaimed massianistic role that she blinds herself to the fact that she is suffocating the very children she is trying to save:

> I had an absolute certainty that I should see again what I had already seen, but something within me said that by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquility of the rest of the household. The children in especial I should thus fence about and absolutely save. (50-51)

This passage is littered with religiously coded words that express the way the governess chooses to contextualize her motherly experience as a spiritual one. The governess says, for example, that she will offer herself as the "sole subject" of the ghostly occurrences at

[12] Few other scholars have commented at length on the religious aspects of *The Turn of the Screw*, but see Carolyn Kane for a reading of how the governess' Protestant beliefs affect her in forming and destroying her own "dream world;" see Joseph Firebaugh for an explanation of how the governess' Calvinist convictions specifically compel her to deny the children knowledge; see Mark Steensland for an interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* as a Christian allegory; and see Domhnall Mitchell for an interpretation of the novella through the lens of the Fall of man.

Bly in order to shield the children from corruption, and the specific diction she uses is significant in that the word "sole" could easily be read as its homonym, "soul." Such word play indicates that the governess is the *sole subject* in that she is willing to have her *soul subjected* to the demonic ghosts rather than put the children's souls in danger. It is in this sense that she deems herself an "expiatory victim": *Expiatory* means "to make amends for," but in the 1800's, when *The Turn of the Screw* was first published, the word was used almost exclusively in the religious context of obtaining remission of sins. The governess' choice of words thus reflects her construction of a martyr-mother identity as she places herself in the position of risking her own wellbeing for the spiritual salvation of her children.

The repetition of the word "should" further indicates the governess's sense of maternal/messianistic responsibility, for in saying "I *should* see again what I had already seen," "I *should* serve as an expiatory victim," and "I *should*…save [the children]," the governess emphasizes her obligatory sense of duty to perform the work of God; "should" implies that she *must* or *ought to* do these things in her need to fulfill her maternal martyrdom. She also does not merely aim to save the children but to *absolutely* save them. "Absolutely" suggests something is done to the fullest extent or to the highest degree, and it also carries connotative meanings of purity and perfection. Thus, the governess thinks herself capable of not only saving the children's mortal lives but of "saving" them in the pure, perfect, baptismal sense of ensuring everlasting life.

The governess also chooses to use egocentric words throughout this passage that focus so much on her own abilities that she eventually allows herself to extend her maternal martyr persona until she surpasses the role of God entirely. She does admit that

it was “something within” her that first told her she could save the children, which can be understood as her attributing the impetus of her noble actions to the inner voice of God, but this indirect attribution shrinks behind the seven occurrences of the words “me,” “myself,” and “I” in that single passage. Furthermore, the governess says that she will prevail in her endeavors “by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all,” in which her shift from the passive “accepting” to the active “inviting” and “surmounting” can be seen as her forgetting her secondary status in relation to God. At first, she humbly admits her passive role, “accepting,” or agreeing to her motherly task as handed down by God. Immediately after, however, she actively “invites” that very same task and “surmounts” it, suddenly usurping God’s role as the active agent in the process.

The governess’s prideful self-reliance becomes even more apparent when the passage here discussed is read in conjunction with the lines just a few pages before, when Mrs. Grose invites the governess to church and she replies, “Oh I’m not fit for church” (47). When Mrs. Grose insists it will do her good to attend the service, the governess retorts that it will not do the children any good, so she “can’t leave them.” In claiming that church would not benefit the children and that she would rather stay at home with them, the governess implies that it is she alone who can help the children, not God.

It is this very act of depending on her own maternal abilities in neglect of God’s intervening powers that foreshadows her failure as protector, specifically when she says she will “fence [the children] about” in order to “absolutely save” them. Just as a fence can be used to keep something out, it can also be used to keep things in. While fencing-in the children will presumably keep the harmful ghosts from gaining access to them, the word “fence” simultaneously suggests a sense of restriction or confinement, meaning that

the governess's attempts to protect the children by herself eventually confines them to the point of suffocation. This suffocation becomes all too apparent when Miles, at the end of the novella, literally suffocates in the governess's embrace, confirming the governess's failure.

The governess knew she would fail in her efforts long before her final encounter with Miles, however, and her double meaning in the words "to fence about" serves as a marker for this self-fulfilling prophecy. Before long, she stops depicting herself as a messianistic mother simply fencing in the children, and she drastically shifts her self-image by asserting, "I was like a gaoler," or jailer (83). On some level, she is aware of her suffocating effect on the children, and her figurative language betrays that awareness and guilt. Perhaps, then, the following passage could be read substituting "Him" (God) in place of "him": "That was what really overcame me, what prevented my going in [to church]. I walked around the church, hesitating, hovering; I reflected that I had already, with him, hurt myself beyond repair. Therefore I could patch up nothing and it was too extreme an effort to squeeze beside him into the pew" (87). At this point, the governess sees herself as failing so much in her childrearing that she has failed God himself.

Because her anxieties stem from the social perceptions of children as innocent beings that need to be protected by parents, the governess eventually tries to fall back on early Evangelical conceptions of original sin in order to cleanse herself of the guilt inherent in being an inadequate protector of childhood innocence. She echoes the assertions of Reformed Protestants as she begins to juxtapose the children's "beautiful" and "angelic" appearance with what she construes to be a wicked nature that existed in them before she arrived. When it is revealed, for example, that the angelic Miles had been

expelled from school before the governess even met the child, she remarks that his misdemeanors "would be incredible" (34). Although the surface meaning of "incredible" suggests that the governess thinks any unruly act coming from perfect Miles would be implausible, the positive connotation of the word simultaneously suggests that such an act would be fantastic or remarkable. Why would the governess use such an ambiguous word here, if not to express her secret pleasure in the notion that proving her ability to protect Miles' innocence would be irrelevant if he were already corrupted as such an expulsion from school would suggest? If the children were already evil to begin with, the governess could not be expected to reverse the process, and so she would be free from the pressure to protect their already lost innocence.

It is this thought that leads the governess to project her maternal anxieties, in the form of ghosts, on both children so as to render them "already lost." Because they stem from her own inner fears, the ghosts she believes to have corrupted Miles and Flora thus manifest as doubles of the governess herself.[13] Both apparitions, for example, only appear where the governess has been previously, just as Quint appears "at the very top of the tower to which, on that first morning, little Flora had conducted me" (39). She also has the habit of taking the place of the ghosts after they have disappeared:

> It was confusedly present to me that I ought to place myself where [Quint] had stood. I did so; I applied my face to the pane and looked, as he had looked, into the room. As if, at this moment, to show me exactly what his range had been,

[13] Doubles in *The Turn of the Screw* have been the focus of many scholarly discussions of the novella. See, for example, Juliet McMaster's "The Full Image of Repetition" or Paul N. Siegel's "'Miss Jessel': Mirror Image of the Governess."

> Mrs. Grose, as I had done for himself just before, came in from the hall. With this I had the full image of a repetition of what had already occurred. (45)

The governess later sits on the staircase, "suddenly collapsing there on the lowest step and then, with revulsion, recalling that it was exactly where, more than a month before…I had seen the spectre of the most horrible of women," Miss Jessel (87). That the ghosts and the governess continually replace each other in physical space suggests they are one in the same being.

Even when the governess does not physically embody the same space as the ghosts, they continue to appear to her across mirror-like surfaces. The governess first sees Miss Jessel, for example, across a glassy lake (54), and Quint appears on the opposite side of a window, at which point the governess even remarks "it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always," suggesting that she sees as much of herself in him as she does when looking at her own reflection (44). Perhaps most tellingly, when she sees Miss Jessel sitting at her desk, the governess confesses, "I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was *I* who was the intruder" (emphasis added, 88). It becomes ever more apparent that the apparitions are nothing more than the makings of the governess herself. As Clair Rosenfield points out, doubles occur in literature as "two characters, the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited, often criminal self" (328). Because the governess' anxiety makes her feel that she is not "socially acceptable" in her childrearing skills, her doubles, in the form of Quint and Miss Jessel, become her way of casting off and externalizing this inadequate self that does not meet social expectations. As Helene Meyers elaborates, "Striving to resolve psychic tension, the paranoid subject

uses this strategy [of projection] to turn herself into a unified subject, a blameless, besieged Gothic heroine. Thus victim and victimizer, oppressor and oppressed become mutually exclusive terms" (112).

The psychic tension defining the governess' inner struggle to become a successful mother figure is a classic struggle between the "me" and the "not-me," the good and bad me. The governess is quickly thrust into the role of an adoptive surrogate mother in the absence of Miles and Flora's biological parents, but her matrophobic disposition impedes her efforts to assume such a maternal role. Adrienne Rich defines matrophobia as the fear of becoming one's mother, suggesting that "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage" (235). Deborah Rogers adds to that definition the simultaneous "fear of identification with and separation from the maternal body and the motherline" (1). As the governess struggles with fears of inadequacy and her own potentially harmful influence on the children, it is not clear whether or not she is afraid of actually becoming her mother—we don't know enough about her mother to suggest that—but she does show definite signs of fearing her own identification with the motherline in general, being terrified of identifying too strongly with the "bad" mother. Her projections thus help unify her identity by separating the good from the bad, for in casting off Miss Jessel, the bad mother, and Quint, the bad father, the governess transforms herself into the wholly good mother. It is in this way that she attempts to resolve her matrophobic quest for maternal identity as she imagines herself unambiguously good.

By inventing the ghosts and exaggerating the children's involvement with them, the governess alleviates herself of any blame regarding the children's potentially

unsuccessful upbringing. If the children were already corrupted by Quint and Miss Jessel before she arrived, then she could not be held responsible for their resultant evil nature, and she thereby remains the good mother. As the exclusively good mother who has reverted to early Evangelical conceptions of original sin and would rather her child die prematurely than live as a graceless child, Miles' "dispossessed" heart at the conclusion of the novella signals victory for the governess despite the child's death. The governess becomes one of many women in history who "killed children they knew they could not rear…[out of] the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt" of motherhood (Rich 258, 277). Becoming increasingly insecure in her mothering capabilities and her resemblance to the bad mother, the governess resorts to altruistic homicide, smothering Miles rather than allowing him to live as a constant reminder of her failure to raise him right.

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