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Mrs. Grose’s Reading of
*The Turn of the Screw*

ARTHUR BOARDMAN

If the governess who tells most of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* has hallucinations, evil in the story comes from a flaw in her, but if she sees apparitions it comes from the universe itself. Though aberration in human beings can frighten and even kill, man can often defend himself against it, but he cannot control and may hardly affect a cosmic force. The question, then, of whether the governess is to be taken as having hallucinations or as seeing apparitions is not only fundamental in interpreting James’s tale, but it is also preliminary to other criticism. The question can be answered and the basic reading made by analyzing the function in the work of Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, part of whose function is to be a kind of first reader of the governess’ story, for all that she is illiterate and that James dismisses her before the last scene.

But why study Mrs. Grose to settle the controversy begun when Edmund Wilson suggested the governess “sees” projections from her own mind? Because James through the governess herself is the first to raise the possibility that she “sees things” rather than sees. He does so to good advantage: since he has her tell an outlandish story and also assigns her intelligence, she gains in verisimilitude as narrator and character from the doubts about her sanity that he has her voice, and the question of her sanity becomes a part of the suspense. But exactly James’s success with her makes it unlikely that by analyzing *her*—and much of the criticism addressed to the issue has done just that—the

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1 "The Ambiguity of Henry James," *Hound and Horn*, 7 (1934), 385-406. For the scholarship on James’s story see the fourteen-page bibliography in Thomas Mabry Cranfill and Robert Lanier Clark, Jr., *An Anatomy of The Turn of the Screw* (Austin, Tex., 1965). *A Casebook on Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Gerald Willen (New York, 1960), contains the basic documents in the controversy. See also Ernest Tuveson, "The Turn of the Screw: A Palimpsest," *SEL*, 12 (1972), 783-800, who proposes that the governess is a kind of psychic conductor, unwittingly provoking the action of supernatural powers and focusing them on the children. Whatever the merits of the proposal, it is not contrary to the argument that the ghosts are ghosts rather than hallucinations.

2 For example, see *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York, 1907-1917), XII, 239. Subsequent references to the story will appear in the text.
“truth” of what he has her say can be proved or disproved. Clearly, it is necessary to turn to another source of information.

Just such a source is Mrs. Grose, who in the development of the narrative is second in importance only to the governess. Until lately she has had scant attention paid her, but in recent years four works containing extended examination of her have appeared. The best of these is by Eric Solomon, who writes in “The Return of the Screw” a spoof featuring Mrs. Grose as the villain of the story. Less amusing, because they propose seriously more or less the same thesis, are studies by John A. Clair and C. Knight Aldrich, studies which the mere existence of Mr. Solomon’s satire refutes. The fullest examination of Mrs. Grose appears in An Anatomy of The Turn of the Screw, by Thomas Cranfill and Robert Clark, Jr., but this is marred by what seems a determination to treat all the characters as real people rather than fictional creations, and by an inconsistent point of view, which sees the housekeeper now as an ignorant dupe of the governess, now as a prejudiced gossip, and now as a sensible woman trying to manage a lunatic.

Mrs. Grose, I think it clear, is primarily a rhetorical element in The Turn of the Screw. She is the kind of character Wayne Booth speaks of as a “dramatized” or “disguised narrator,” one he could include among the “many dramatized narrators [who] are never explicitly labelled as narrators at all.” The housekeeper’s function as a narrator has been noticed by Krishna Vaid, who has drawn attention to the fact that “the continual exchange between the two women [the governess and Mrs. Grose] is the familiar Jamesian practice of dramatizing the process whereby the narrator [the governess in this instance] gradually arrives at his data.” But a narrator’s function can include more than imparting information: aside from using Mrs. Grose to set out data, a matter about which I shall say little, James uses her to help create an ominous atmosphere, especially earlier on; and more significantly yet he uses her, as I have said, as a first reader of the governess’ story.

Another main line of criticism has been that of looking into James’s possible sources and into his statements about the work.


She is “first” in that the governess constantly confides in her, and she is a “reader” in that like us she knows—i.e., we are to imagine her as knowing—only what the governess tells her about what the governess experiences. Further, she is an informed “reader,” for she knows the characters in the governess’ narrative first-hand, both the quick and the dead. And she is a critical “reader,” for she continually tests the governess’ story. As “first reader,” she indicates how we, James’s audience, must take the governess’ tale, and her final judgment of it, coming just before her removal, shows that the story must be taken as true and the governess as seeing apparitions. 9

James opens The Turn of the Screw with a first person narrator who introduces a second narrator, Douglas, who tells how a glamorous young man hired a governess and sent her to Bly, his place in the country at which she was to care for his niece and nephew. The governess’ narrative begins with her arrival at Bly and tells of her meeting Mrs. Grose and the children—Flora and Miles—and of her initial happiness, a happiness disturbed only by a letter from Miles’s school saying that he will not be readmitted. Then she twice sees the figure of a stranger whom Mrs. Grose, on the governess’ description, identifies as Peter Quint, the dead valet of their employer; and later the governess sees a figure she thinks is Miss Jessel, the former governess, who Mrs. Grose says died after having an affair with Quint. She sees the figures several times and, believing that they have returned to seduce the children, concludes that the children communicate with them and have become corrupt. She determines to save them. Eventually, she confronts Mrs. Grose and Flora with the figure of Miss Jessel, but both deny seeing it, and Flora begs to be taken away from the governess. Though Mrs. Grose, who has never seen the figures, leaves with Flora the next day, she says that she is now convinced of the truth of what the governess has told her. In the final scene, Quint appears to the governess while she talks to Miles. The boy apparently does not see Quint but names him and dies in the governess’ arms. And that is the end.

In introducing Mrs. Grose, James takes care to establish as her main quality her reliability, a quality which has obvious bearing on her as a “disguised narrator.” He does so by giving her references and by preparing the way to showing, later in the story and indirectly, that...
she is highly honest. He introduces her through the second narrator in the work, Douglas, who tells what the governess told him the master of Bly, her employer, had told her, which is that he had put in charge at Bly, though “belowstairs only,” “an excellent woman, Mrs. Grose, whom he [the master] was sure . . . [the governess] would like and who had formerly been maid to his mother. She was now housekeeper and was also acting for the time as superintendent to the little girl, of whom, without children of her own, she was by good luck extremely fond” (XII, 154).

Now we should not take the uncle’s judgment as wholly sound: James gives him just enough of a sense of responsibility to provide for the children, but not enough to want them with him, and even so little as to insist that the governess never disturb him about them (a prime necessity in the narrative, of course, to isolate her). But these first statements about Mrs. Grose are corroborated in two ways. First, by the recommendation of the master’s mother, a character whose sole function, the one time she is mentioned, is in effect to say that Mrs. Grose was good enough to be her maid. Second, by the housekeeper’s speech and manner in the first conversation James reports between her and the governess: the latter has shown how struck she is with Flora, who is with them, and on her asking whether the boy is also so “remarkable,” Mrs. Grose replies, “‘Oh Miss, most remarkable. If you think well of this one!’ and she stood there . . . beaming at our companion” (XII, 161). Thus what the children’s uncle has said about the housekeeper’s fondness for Flora is confirmed, and the specific confirmation supports the general tenor of his statements about her.

The way James introduces her, apart from establishing her reliability, suggests her honesty, a quality of character James confirms in subtle and paradoxical style early in the governess’ narrative. For he has Mrs. Grose prevaricate at least once, and the lapse attests to her trustworthiness as no mere truth-telling could. Her departure from exact truth occurs when she and the governess talk, not long after the latter’s arrival at Bly, about someone’s liking pretty young women. The governess has asked about Miss Jessel, Mrs. Grose has said that she was young and pretty, like the present governess, and the younger woman says, “He seems to like us young and pretty,” referring to her employer.

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

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

She looked blank, but she colored. “Why of him.”
“Of the master?”
“Of who else?”
There was so obviously no one else that the next moment I had lost my impression of her having accidentally said more than she meant. . . . (XII, 169)

Mrs. Grose’s using the past tense when she assents and her correcting herself by shifting to the present and emphasizing “his” indicate that she is speaking of someone other than the master at that moment, someone who can only be Peter Quint. In the conversation quoted, she lies; but seen in perspective her lie is the best evidence of her reliability and honesty, for she lies because she is not a gossip. That she is not appears in her long silence about the relationship between Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, a matter James does not have her mention until considerably later, when the governess, having seen the figure of Miss Jessel, specifically quizzes her (XII, 207). Mrs. Grose’s lapse from absolute truthfulness is to be interpreted as decent reticence, and the incident enhances her reliability and her authority, instead of diminishing them.

After establishing, mainly in the prologue, the housekeeper’s authority, James uses Mrs. Grose to help create an atmosphere of uncertainty which is ominous: he hints several times, as Oliver Evans has noted, that she “is uneasy, that she is trying to conceal a suspicion that everything [at Bly] is not as it should be. . . .” The first hint that Mrs. Grose is and has been uneasy appears in the governess’ early impression that the housekeeper is “inordinately glad” to see her, “so glad . . . as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much” (XII, 159-160)—an impression accounted for, in a general way, by the story the older woman later tells about the relationship between Quint and Miss Jessel and about their influence on the children. The account James has her give and the relief and gladness he has the governess perceive are highly compatible with each other.

The second hint occurs when the governess informs Mrs. Grose that Miles has been dismissed from school: “She gave me a look that I remarked at the moment; then visibly, with a quick blankness, seemed to try to take it back” (XII, 165). This hint is confirmed by a tacit admission when, in a later conversation, the governess suggests that

10Oscar Cargill in “The Turn of the Screw and Alice James” says, “It is Mrs. Grose, out of petty jealousy common to domestic servants, who, at the prompting of the governess, embroiders the tale about a relation between the pair. . . .” (Norton Critical Edition, p. 153).

Miles knew of the guilty relation between Quint and Miss Jessel: Mrs. Grose replies unhappily that she does not know, and the governess goes on to say, "I don't wonder you looked queer . . . when I mentioned to you the letter from his school!" To which Mrs. Grose answers, "I doubt if I looked as queer as you!" (XII, 214).

The third hint I have already referred to—it is the incident of Mrs. Grose's lying. Her saying "more than she meant" in talking about someone's liking women young and pretty is a little different from the first and second hints, but in suggesting that there is something to be concealed it contributes to an atmosphere of uneasiness.

The final hint comes during the scene in which Mrs. Grose identifies as Peter Quint the figure the governess tells her she has seen, but the hint comes before she makes the identification. The governess in speaking of the figure has said that he is not a gentleman, that he is a horror, and finally that she is afraid of him. And now, "Mrs. Grose's large face showed me, at this, for the first time, the faraway faint glimmer of a consciousness more acute: I somehow made out in it the delayed dawn of an idea I myself had not given her and that was as yet quite obscure to me" (XII, 189). The hint contained in the "glimmer of a consciousness more acute" is supported and expanded when the housekeeper identifies as Quint the figure the governess describes.

On the surface, but only on the surface, there is a contradiction between Mrs. Grose as giver of hints and Mrs. Grose as "first reader" of the governess' story, for her characteristic attitude in the latter function is skepticism. James here practices a daring economy in narrative, and he gets away with it by showing that she had a dread of Quint when he was alive, a dread that lingers strongly in her memory. She tells the governess that she did not complain of Quint to the master of Bly because she was afraid of Quint, for she thought him "clever" and "deep"; she could not bear then and she can not bear now the fact that he was in complete charge of the children, in the sense of his having "everything to say" about them (XII, 197). Further, she offers as the only example of Miles's naughtiness what the governess reports as the "fact that for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together" (XII, 212). James adds to Mrs. Grose's feelings about Quint the possibility that she suspects Miles may have understood the illicit relation between him and Miss Jessel. The housekeeper, then, knowing that the children have been exposed to evil in Quint and Miss Jessel and believing that Quint was especially "deep," is inclined, very plausibly, when the new governess comes to her with her tales of having seen the apparitions of the dead pair to defer judgment. Her attitude is that of a suspension between belief and disbelief. Because of her experience of
Quint and Miss Jessel, she does not reject out of hand the governess' story. Yet she does not blindly accept it, either.

To analyze Mrs. Grose as "first reader" of the governess' story is in essence to analyze the relation between the two characters from Mrs. Grose's viewpoint. Early in *The Turn of the Screw* James has the governess make a remark summarizing, in effect, her relation with the housekeeper from her point of view. To a suggestion of hers, she says, "Mrs. Grose assented so heartily that I somehow took her manner as a kind of comforting pledge—never falsified, thank heaven!—that we should on every question be quite at one" (XII, 162). This statement is not strictly borne out by the events, but it is an accurate description of the relation between the two at the beginning and at the end.

They are in complete agreement when the governess declares she will say nothing to anyone about Miles's having been dismissed from school: Mrs. Grose "gave with her apron a great wipe to her mouth. 'Then I'll stand by you. We'll see it out!' " And the governess picks up the phrase: " 'We'll see it out!' I ardently echoed, giving her my hand to make it a vow" (XII, 172). They agree also in their amazement and stupefaction when Mrs. Grose identifies, from the governess' description of the man she has seen once on a tower and once looking in at a window of the house, the dead Peter Quint: the governess "almost" shrieks; the housekeeper "hangs fire," and she appears to "plant herself" in order "to express the wonder" of the identification (XII, 192).

But in the report of the sequel to the identification scene James hints that Mrs. Grose does not see absolutely eye to eye with the governess and that the governess does not fully understand her. The governess tacitly recognizes one obvious difference, that she can see the figure of Quint whereas the housekeeper apparently cannot, but she is not wholly perceptive, for she says of Mrs. Grose, "She herself had seen nothing, not the shadow of a shadow . . . yet she accepted

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12 James gives her other reasons too: the governess is "in supreme authority" at Bly (XII, 154) and her social position and education are superior to Mrs. Grose's. Also, Mrs. Grose has had bitter experience with Miss Jessel in opposing those higher than herself (XII, 212-213).

13 Although I do not believe that either Harold C. Goddard's or John Silver's "refutation" of the identification (Norton Critical Edition, pp. 191-193, and *American Literature*, 29 [1957], 207-211, respectively) is valid, neither do I believe that the identification proves that the governess sees apparitions, since Mrs. Grose does not take it as proof. It is, however, one of several pieces of evidence which considered together do make up proof.
without directly impugning my sanity the truth as I gave it to her, and ended by showing me on this ground an awestricken tenderness, a deference to my more than questionable privilege, of which the very breath has remained with me as that of the sweetest of human charities" (XII, 193; italics mine). The italicized words imply three things: the governess’ awareness that her tale—her “truth”—is incredible, as in common sense it is; skepticism in Mrs. Grose, who should be taken as humoring the governess without openly accusing her of having lost her mind; and the governess’ limited recognition of Mrs. Grose’s reaction, limited because the housekeeper’s behavior is tender and charitable and thus comforting.

James then confirms what he has hinted, in a conversation which follows almost immediately. Mrs. Grose asks about the figure the governess says she has seen:

“He was looking for some one else, you say—some one who was not you?”

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

“But how do you know?” (XII, 194)

Mrs. Grose's first question addresses itself to a crucial point, the governess’ belief that the figure she saw was looking for someone other than herself; and her second question is the right, skeptical question about that point. How indeed does one know that another person one sees is looking for someone else? Even if he speaks, there is only his word for it. The two questions show that Mrs. Grose, despite her identification of Quint, is not to be taken as simply accepting what the governess tells her. She tests—and testing implies skepticism.

Now skepticism in The Turn of the Screw is what I called earlier suspension between belief and disbelief. Mrs. Grose’s skepticism may incline in one direction or the other at different times, but it is consistent in that it is always there, except at the end. There Mrs. Grose first rejects then accepts fully what the governess has said.

The consistency of Mrs. Grose’s skepticism is easy to show. At the next crisis, the governess, certain that Flora has seen a figure which she herself has just seen, almost throws herself into the housekeeper’s arms, crying that the children know; then, on feeling the housekeeper’s “incredulity,” she adds that two hours ago “Flora saw!”

Mrs. Grose took it as she might have taken a blow in the stomach. “She has told you?” she panted.
"Not a word—that's the horror. She kept it to herself! The child of eight, that child!" Unutterable still for me was the stupefaction of it.

Mrs. Grose of course could only gape the wider. "Then how do you know?"

"I was there—I saw with my eyes. . . ." (XII, 203)

Here again James has Mrs. Grose ask the right questions, questions focusing on the issue of how the governess has come by her knowledge.14

In the same scene, the housekeeper's skepticism continues, as is shown by her repeatedly asking hard questions. When the governess reveals that is is not the figure of Quint she has seen, but rather that of a woman whom she identifies as Miss Jessel, Mrs. Grose asks, "How can you be sure?" (XII, 204). A little later the governess asserts that "the woman's a horror of horrors"—

Mrs. Grose, at this, fixed her eyes a minute on the ground; then at last raising them, "Tell me how you know," she said.

"Then you admit it's what she was?" I cried.

"Tell me how you know," my friend simply repeated.

(XII, 205)

At no point in the scene does Mrs. Grose say that the figure the governess speaks of must have been that of Miss Jessel. After the governess tells her that the figure looked at the child, Flora, with the intention of getting "hold of her" and describes the figure as dressed in nearly shabby mourning and looking both beautiful and "infamous," Mrs. Grose says, "Miss Jessel—was infamous,"15 and then goes on, with some questioning from the governess, to reveal Miss Jessel's relation with Quint (XII, 206-208).16 This amounts, no doubt,

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15Cranfill and Clark theorize that the dash between "Jessel" and "was" may mean that she does not know what "infamous" means. "What," they ask, "is the likelihood that 'infamous' would be in the vocabulary of the dear old illiterate whom 'contaminate,' 'effect,' 'fixed,' and 'intention' perplex?" (p. 120). Unluckily, "contaminate" is the only one of those words about which the text shows that Mrs. Grose is perplexed (XII, 168). The dash before "was infamous" is obviously for emphasis.

16Cranfill and Clark, implementing their belief that "each theorizer [about The Turn of the Screw] should be left to his own imaginings" (p. 114), imagine that the relation need not be taken as having been an illicit sexual one. They base their contention on the idea that the sentence, "Come, there was something between them," and the reply, "There was everything," spoken by the governess and Mrs. Grose respectively, are ambiguous (Cranfill and Clark, p. 116). The ambiguity, however, is that of euphemism, not that of obscurity. In reference to the relations between a man and a woman, the progression quoted is perfectly clear.
to tacit agreement, but tacit agreement need not be taken for complete agreement.

That it should not in this instance James shows through the governess’ narrative in the chapter following the scene:

Late that night, while the house slept, we had another talk in my room; when she went all the way with me as to its being beyond doubt that I had seen exactly what I had seen. I found that to keep her thoroughly in the grip of this 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. . . . (XII, 209)

The governess’ statement that now Mrs. Grose went “all the way” in accepting what she had said implies that she has not before. Further, the governess must be seen as to some extent aware of the fact, because of the method she uses to convince the housekeeper.

The statement that Mrs. Grose accepted the truth of what the governess had told her should be taken as accurate for that time, but for that time only, as later events prove. Some weeks pass without any new crisis. Then, with the children promenading near them, the governess tells the housekeeper of a new incident, and here is how the housekeeper gives her her attention: “Mrs. Grose watched . . . [the children] with positive placidity; then I caught the suppressed intellectual creak with which she conscientiously turned to take from me a view of the back of the tapestry” (XII, 231). After the interval of calm and with the beauty of the children before her, the housekeeper must make a positive effort to listen to the governess sympathetically. The need for effort indicates a stronger inclination toward disbelief than anything shown before. It continues in the same scene and becomes so strong that at one point one cannot tell whether it is the children or the governess that Mrs. Grose thinks mad when she suggests that the children’s uncle be sent for (XII, 239).

The inclination is not permanent, however, for when the governess subsequently tells Mrs. Grose of her “talk” with Miss Jessel (the scene in which she comes upon Miss Jessel in the schoolroom), the housekeeper’s words appear to allow for the possibility of the truth of what the governess says, especially when the governess blames the uncle for having left such people as Quint and Miss Jessel in charge of the children, and Mrs. Grose says, “He didn’t in the least know them. The fault’s mine” (XII, 261). And when Flora disappears, Mrs. Grose twice shows uneasiness at the possibility of encountering the apparitions (XII, 272, 274). The uneasiness should not of course be read as acceptance of the governess’ story, only as caution and, perhaps,
nervousness brought on by the fact that the little girl is missing.

After inclining toward disbelief and then returning, apparently, to a more neutral attitude, Mrs. Grose eventually rejects the governess’ view, in a scene requiring a close look. When Flora is found to be missing, the governess enlists the housekeeper’s aid in searching for her, and when they find her the governess asks the child, “Where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?” At that question, “the whole thing was upon us. Much as I had made of the fact that this name had never once, between us, been sounded, the quick smitten glare with which the child’s face now received it fairly likened my breach of the silence to the smash of a pane of glass.” Mrs. Grose cries out at the governess’ “violence,” and then the governess herself cries out, “She’s there, she’s there!” “Miss Jessel stood before us on the opposite bank exactly as she had stood the other time, and I remember, strangely, as the first feeling now produced in me, my thrill of joy at having brought on a proof. She was there, so I was justified; she was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad” (XII, 277-278).

Two points should be noted about this highly dramatic beginning to one of the climactic scenes of *The Turn of the Screw*. One is the governess’ insistence that she has never mentioned Miss Jessel, or Quint for that matter, to the children, nor have they to her—an insistence or contention corroborated in part by the child’s reaction, the governess’ description of which is itself corroborated by Flora’s subsequent behavior, and in part by the shocked cry from Mrs. Grose. The other is the governess’ sense of being vindicated. Here is the apparition and here are witnesses. The governess’ relief at being proved right—the strongest indication, perhaps, that James intends the reader to think of the possibility of hallucinations and to think, also, of the governess as recognizing the possibility—shows that from her point of view the moment of truth has arrived. All, so James has her think, will now be made clear and will be resolved.

But the moment turns out not to be what the governess expects. The undermining of her sense of relief begins with the reaction of Flora, which she describes. To her amazement, she sees the child does not even pretend to look toward the figure of Miss Jessel but rather looks at her in accusation and, finally, “fixed reprobation” (XII, 279). The child’s attitude becomes dominant in her mind. Then suddenly, “I became aware of having Mrs. Grose also, and very formidably, to reckon with. My elder companion, the next moment, at any rate, blotted out everything but her own flushed face and her loud shocked protest, a burst of high disapproval. ‘What a dreadful turn, to be sure, Miss! Where on earth do you see anything?’” (XII, 280). At the moment when the governess thinks she has proof at last and that Mrs.
Grose is seeing it, Mrs. Grose denies the proof and rejects, by implication, everything the governess has told her about seeing the figures of Quint and Miss Jessel. The governess cannot believe what is happening; she points to the figure and tells the housekeeper to look, *look*:

She looked . . . and gave me, with her deep groan of negation, repulsion, compassion—the mixture with her pity of her relief at her exemption—a sense, touching to me even then, that she would have backed me up if she had been able. I might well have needed that, for with this hard blow of the proof that her eyes were hopelessly sealed I felt my own situation horribly crumble . . . and I took the measure . . . of what I should have from this instant to deal with in the astounding little attitude of Flora. Into this attitude Mrs. Grose immediately and violently entered, breaking, even while there pierced through my sense of ruin a prodigious private triumph, into breathless reassurance.17

"She isn't there, little lady, and nobody's there—and you never see nothing, my sweet! How can poor Miss Jessel—when poor Miss Jessel's dead and buried? *We* know, don't we, love?"—and she appealed, blundering in, to the child. "It's all a mere mistake and a worry and a joke—and we'll go home as fast as we can!" (XII, 280-281)

The governess' interpretation of Mrs. Grose's behavior is exactly borne out by the housekeeper's words. Negation and compassion are apparent in the first sentence of Mrs. Grose's speech, which is addressed to the governess: the words "you never see nothing" are not only negation but also a homely way of stating that the governess suffers hallucinations, and the endearments, "little lady" and "my sweet," are evidence of affectionate pity. The repulsion is apparent in the third and fourth sentences of the speech, which, as the exposition and the stressed pronoun show, are addressed to Flora: the words "*We know*" indicate Mrs. Grose's siding with the child against the governess, and the suggestion to Flora that they go home as fast as they can implies a desire to get away from the governess. The rejection of her views is total.

Ironically, it comes just before Flora confirms the validity of those views by a slip of the tongue, a slip James has neither of the adult

17A non-apparitionist might well exclaim at the "private triumph," though I do not remember that any has. The reason may be that there is no logical way for a non-apparitionist to explain it. An explanation can be inferred, however: the appearance of Miss Jessel in the presence of the governess, Flora, and Mrs. Grose (even though the last cannot see her) acknowledges the governess as an opponent in a struggle for Flora and thus recognizes her as a real threat. The inference receives confirmation from the later appearance of Quint, which is treated explicitly as a struggle.
characters notice. The little girl, hanging on to Mrs. Grose's dress, speaks for the first time since the governess asked her, "Where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" To that question—and to the only other words the governess has addressed to her, the impassioned cry, "She's there, you little unhappy thing—there, there, there, and you know it as well as you know me!" (XII, 279)—she replies, "I don't know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never have. I think you're cruel. I don't like you!" (XII, 281).

The sentence "I never have" (the italics are James's) implies—from Flora's point of view it emphatically states—that at no time in the past has Flora seen what the governess has just asked about and has just so dramatically pointed at. Since at the beginning of the scene the governess has emphasized that never before has she spoken of Miss Jessel to the child, the form of Flora's denial needs explanation. One possible explanation is that the governess lies or does not know that she has spoken of Miss Jessel to Flora before. Another is that Flora and the governess are both telling the truth but that Flora has heard of the apparition of Miss Jessel from her brother. There is no specific support for either of these explanations, and specifically against the first is the fact that Flora has shown no uneasiness before, as is corroborated by Mrs. Grose's shock at the child's asking to be taken away from the governess (XII, 281). A third possibility, that "I never have" is a verbal echo of Mrs. Grose's "you never see nothing," is unsatisfactory because the repetition, if a deliberate echo, seems pointless. A fourth explanation is the one offered, in effect, by the governess, and it is that Flora is lying. For this explanation there is specific evidence.

Apart from the strongly suggestive turn in Flora's behavior—her sudden hatred and fear of the governess—which is more compatible with the theory that she has been "caught" and is lying to get out of it than with the theory that the governess has been lying or imagining things, there is a contradiction in her own speech: she begins her reply to the governess with the statement, "I don't know what you mean," but the subsequent statement, "I never have," especially because of the stress on the verb, shows that she knows exactly what the governess means. Flora is lying, as the contradiction in her own words proves. She knows what the governess means, and since she does the

18Marius Bewley has advanced that explanation, though by asserting it rather than arguing it, in *The Complex Fate* (London, 1952): "It gives us some idea—that 'I never have', with its use of the past tense—of all the children must have been through at the governess's hands, pressures, suggestions, and tyrannies that we aren't informed of; and it tells us how they must, with natural delicacy of perception, have sensed something of what, all this time, has been going on in the governess's mind" (p. 108). This "explanation" is sufficiently refuted in my essay, but it may be worthwhile to point out here that in fiction what the reader is not informed of does not happen.
inference is reasonable that she has seen and does see the apparition of Miss Jessel.

To the objection that I am making a great deal of a few words spoken by a child, who is probably not careful with words, the refutation is easy: Flora is not a child but rather a character in a piece of fiction by Henry James, who was careful with words.

Flora’s self-betraying slip has a particular rhetorical purpose. The reader can see the slip, and seeing it prepares him to accept a more extended self-betrayal that he does not see but that Mrs. Grose reports. The second self-betrayal brings the housekeeper around, for having rejected the governess’ truth in the scene just examined, she accepts it completely in her next scene, the last in which she figures.

James brings the fact out slowly, in a way to keep suspense high. When Mrs. Grose reports the following morning that Flora is very sick, the governess asks if the girl persists in her denials and, a bit later, if she has mentioned Miss Jessel at all, except for the denials. Mrs. Grose tells her no and adds, “And of course, you know . . . I took it from her by the lake that just then and there at least there was nobody.” This statement is descriptive, telling no more than that the housekeeper took the child’s word as the truth at the time of the incident: it says nothing about her present belief. The governess answers, “Rather! And naturally you take it from her still.” And again Mrs. Grose’s reply tells nothing of what she believes: “I don’t contradict her. What else can I do?” (XII, 286). Her statement explains how she responds to Flora, and her question suggests that she does not contradict because having seen nothing she cannot, or because she does not wish to disturb the child, or for both reasons.

James uses the neutral quality of Mrs. Grose’s replies to build up to the suggestion that she now distrusts the governess—a natural enough sequel, it would seem, to her rejection of the governess on the previous day. When the younger woman suggests that Mrs. Grose take Flora to her uncle, partly so that she herself may have things out with Miles, Mrs. Grose seems reluctant, and James allows the suggestion to appear in the governess’ manner that she suspects Mrs. Grose does not trust her (XII, 289). Thus what the governess thought in the scene on the previous day, when she felt her “own situation horribly crumble,” has apparently come true, for it seems that the housekeeper no longer supports her. At this moment, the lowest point in the governess’ reliability and authority both as governess and as narrator is reached.

At the next moment, however, James makes clear that Mrs. Grose’s reluctance has been an appearance only—a misinterpretation by the governess:
I wanted to be very just. "If you should wish still to wait I'd engage . . . [Flora] shouldn’t see me.”

“No, no: it’s the place itself. She must leave it.” She held me a moment with heavy eyes, then brought out the rest. “Your idea’s the right one. I myself, Miss—”

“Well?”

“I can’t stay.”

The look she gave me with it made me jump at possibilities. “You mean that, since yesterday, you have seen—?”

She shook her head with dignity. “I’ve heard—!”

“ Heard?”

“From that child—horrors! There!” she sighed with tragic relief. (XII, 289)

And next she breaks into tears. The “horrors” Flora has spoken have brought her round. She has become convinced on hearing the child that the place itself is evil, and her seeming reluctance to agree to the governess’ proposal is not distrust but rather doubt that the younger woman will be able to deal with Miles and perhaps fear for her.

The “horrors” and Mrs. Grose’s feelings become clearer as James has her develop further what it is she has heard. What Flora says about the governess, she says, is “beyond everything, for a young lady”; and when the governess guesses that the little girl is using “appalling language.” Mrs. Grose, tacitly agreeing that it is appalling, says,

“I can’t bear it. . . . But I must go back.”

I kept her, however. “Ah if you can’t bear it—!”

“How can I stop with her, you mean? Why just for that: to get her away. Far from this,” she pursued, “far from them—”

“She may be different? she may be free?” I seized her almost with joy. “Then in spite of yesterday you believe—”

“In such doings?” Her simple description of them required, in the light of her expression, to be carried no further, and she gave me the whole thing as she had never done. “I believe.” (XII, 290)

And those are Mrs. Grose’s last words on the subject. James has her say, in fact, very little more at all. She goes on to guess—foolishly and with the effect of stressing the governess’ final isolation—that Miles was dismissed from school for stealing letters. After making her guess, the housekeeper leaves the younger woman and appears no more in the story, which continues only through the governess’ concluding scene with Miles.

What remains now is to explain why we should accept as reasonable Mrs. Grose’s judgment of the governess’ story and should ourselves come to the same judgment.
First, there is her reliability. Second, there is her contribution to the ominous atmosphere—she offers independent testimony that something is wrong at Bly. But these are peripheral, contributory reasons not by themselves conclusive. Conclusive reasons appear in Mrs. Grose’s “reading” of the governess’ story and they have to do with logic and with rhetoric.

Her judgment is sound logically because it is grounded in skepticism. As reluctance to accept blindly, skepticism is proper because the governess’ story is incredible, which does not prevent its turning out to be “true”; and as reluctance to dismiss out of hand skepticism is equally proper because the story suggests danger to the children. Rhetorically also, in that it suggests an example to follow, skepticism is proper: it is the common-sense reaction to the governess’ lurid tale, and we must use common sense, working from evidence in the text and eschewing guesses, in judging the tale ourselves.

Further, the soundness of the housekeeper’s judgment in itself and as an example appears in a more convincing way yet, one in which logic and rhetoric almost blend. Since the governess’ tale is an account of experiences she alone has had (the children do not openly admit their experiences), it can be proved or disproved only by evidence independent of the governess. For Mrs. Grose—and let us remember that we take her as “knowing” the other characters—Flora’s speaking “horrors” constitutes exactly such evidence. That independent evidence, from Mrs. Grose’s point of view, shows the governess’ incredible story to be true. The logic of the housekeeper’s reaction is impeccable. Rhetorically, again as an example, her reaction has great weight, for there are available to us four pieces of evidence not dependent on what the governess says: the identification, Flora’s slip of the tongue, the horrors Mrs. Grose reports Flora as speaking, and Mrs. Grose’s judgment of what the horrors mean. Each of these pieces of evidence consists of something that a character other than the governess says.

Although the reasons I have shown for accepting the housekeeper’s judgment and for coming to the same judgment are conclusive, there are other rhetorical reasons connected with Mrs. Grose’s function in the tale for taking what the governess says as true. They bear on our attitude toward the governess not as narrator but rather as actor in the story. First, to note Mrs. Grose’s skepticism and to emulate it is essen-

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14 Despite the first person narrative, there is such evidence: the governess’ account includes the speech of other characters, which must be taken as accurately reported.
15Miles’s admission to wrong-doing at school, his naming of Miss Jessel, and his naming of Quint (XII, 306, 308, 309) are also things said independently of the governess.
tial to suspense: whether or not the governess has hallucinations is a question kept open partly by the housekeeper's attitude, and to diminish the question is to miss part of the drama in James's story. Second, the pattern of Mrs. Grose's reactions is dramatic in itself and is a counterpoint to the pattern of the governess' emotions: the fact that the rejection comes hard upon the moment when the governess thinks she is vindicated, and the acceptance when she feels she is distrusted, heightens the drama in those moments. Third, the housekeeper's final reaction prepares us for the last scene by putting the governess in a new perspective: from almost the beginning of her narrative two themes have competed for acceptance, the theme of hallucination in the governess and the theme of struggle for the children; Mrs. Grose in making her last judgment puts an end to the theme of hallucination. What remains is struggle.

From the first paragraph of *The Turn of the Screw*, the theme of struggle is tied to the idea of fighting in defense of a child against an external force, and it is not tied except in a minor way to the idea of fighting against the internal force of hallucination. After Mrs. Grose's departure, there is only the final scene, and struggle is what the scene is about. The governess fights for Miles, fighting alone as she has all along. Mrs. Grose's function is to make us see that the adversary the governess fights is the cosmos.

*University of Colorado.*