Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bogeymen, and the "Ghosts" in The Turn of the Screw

STANLEY RENNER

For readers and critics for whom the true—and clearly the richer—story of James's The Turn of the Screw is its dramatization of a woman's psychosexual problem and the damage it does to the children in her charge, the immovable stumbling block has always been the governess's detailed description of Peter Quint, a man dead and buried whom she has never seen. If James does not mean for readers to take Quint (and subsequently Miss Jessel) as a bona fide ghost, so the argument runs, why does he arrange things so that the only way to account for her description of him is that she has seen a supernatural manifestation? Asks A.J.A. Waldock, in the classic formulation of the question,

How did the governess succeed in projecting on vacancy, out of her own subconscious mind, a perfectly precise, point-by-point image of a man, then dead, whom she had never seen in her life and never heard of? What psychology, normal or abnormal, will explain that? And what is the right word for such a vision but "ghost"?¹

¹"Mr. Edmund Wilson and The Turn of the Screw," Modern Language Notes, 62 (1947), 333–34.
Efforts thus far to circumvent this obstacle—Harold C. Goddard’s argument that Mrs. Grose makes her identification before and with negligible help from the governess’s detailed description, John Silver’s that the governess has learned of Quint in the village before she describes him, and Oscar Cargill’s that she has gotten wind of Quint from little Flora, who shows her around Bly “room by room, secret by secret”—have not settled the issue.² In this paper I want to show that the story provides its own eminently logical, quite unsupernatural, indeed, deeply naturalistic, accounting for the manifestations the governess describes. The logic of this line of development has escaped observation, I believe, because it derives from idea structures that have since faded from general awareness: the symptomatology of female sexual hysteria and the supposed behavioral significance of human physiognomy. What the governess sees on her first encounter with the famous “ghosts” of Bly, the experience that sets in motion the story’s central line of development, is thus not the ghost of a dead man she has never seen but the projection of her own sexual hysteria in the form of stereotypes deeply embedded in the mind of the culture. The story’s spectral figures, colored by the governess’s sexual fear and disgust, symbolize the adult sexuality just beginning to “possess” Miles and Flora as they hover on the brink of puberty. Frantically trying to block the emergence of their sexuality, the governess does damage to their natural development that, in the case of the male child, proves fatal.

The first appearance of an apparition in the story and the governess’s state of mind on that occasion are, of course, crucial to understanding the ghosts and their place in James’s design. As

²See Goddard, “A Pre-Freudian Reading of The Turn of the Screw,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 12 (1957), 11–13; Silver, “A Note on the Freudian Reading of ‘The Turn of the Screw,’” American Literature, 29 (1957), 210–11; and Cargill, “The Turn of the Screw and Alice James,” PMLA, 78 (1963), 242. A recent exercise of the standard rebuttal to any psychological reading of the ghosts is David S. Miall’s observation that “the key passage in The Turn of the Screw in which the governess’s description of Quint is recognized by Mrs. Grose” is “one of the main pieces of evidence against the hallucination theory.” He elaborately attempts to explain the evil in the story in terms of “what the ghosts themselves may mean, if they were intended to be seen as a reality and not just a hallucination of the governess” (“Designed Horror: James’s Vision of Evil in The Turn of the Screw,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 39 (1984), 306).
the story itself asserts, "the fact to be in possession of" is that the governess is a parson's daughter leaving the shelter of home for the first time, coming up to London in "trepidation," and encountering a young gentleman presented in the story as a girl's romantic dream, from whom she accepts employment. As the Jamesian narrator of the prologue deduces, and Douglas, who knew the governess and tells her story, does not deny, she "succumbed" to "the seduction exercised by the splendid young man" (p. 6). Thus James pointedly calls attention to a group of characterizing details about the governess—her sheltered religious background, inexperience, vulnerability, anxiety and fear, and susceptibility to romantic emotions—that establish her as a virtual Victorian cliché of sexual ambivalence. With her almost classic conflict between idealistic innocence and naive romantic impulses she is the virginal ingenue encountering sexual danger in the form of a "handsome," "bold," young gentleman bachelor with "charming ways with women," enjoying a life of pleasurable self-indulgence (p. 4). This emphasis on the governess's susceptibility to romantic emotions is an important feature of the buildup to the first apparition.

With this preparation the reader comes to the governess's first encounter with the apparitions that harrow her throughout the story: she sees a frightening male ghost that she later describes so particularly that Mrs. Grose, in astonishment and consternation, identifies it as Peter Quint, deceased former valet of the children's uncle and guardian, who, with the last governess, also deceased, had previously shared the charge of the children. When, however, the episode is read closely in the light of the turn-of-the-century understanding of sexual hysteria, it unfolds as a remarkably astute dramatization of an actual hysterical attack.

Although she suppresses the erotic component of her impulses, it is clear that the governess is indulging in romantic fantasies of her dashing young gentleman employer as she enjoys an evening stroll, the children "tucked away" in bed: how "charming" it would be, she fancies, if "someone would appear there at the

---

turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve” (p. 15). And then she does see him. Whatever the psychic validity of the phenomenon James presents in this scene, it is clear that the governess is able to conjure up in her fantasy such a powerful impression that she feels she is actually seeing someone not present. And what she sees, at least at first, is her gentleman employer’s “handsome face” reflecting the “kind light” of approval with which she has hoped he will notice her. With “the sense that [her] imagination had . . . turned real,” she declares unequivocally, “he did stand there!” (p. 16).

But then as she views this figure from her own imagination she experiences an indescribable “bewilderment of vision”: the figure now before her, she explains, “was not the person I had precipitately supposed.” Readers have customarily accepted the governess’s own explanation for what happens to her vision: that her first impression was mistaken and that the figure that ultimately stands before her has been there all along. But the fact is that she was not mistaken; her identification of the handsome gentleman is too positive, too emphatic to have been a mistake. What has actually happened is that the attractive male figure she first imagines is transformed in her own mind into the frightening male figure she subsequently projects. That the transformation is brought about by fear—specifically fear of male sexuality—is the clear implication of the terms in which the governess explains the “shock” to her sensibility caused by the figure that ultimately met her eyes: “an unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred” (p. 16).

More than twenty years ago Cargill established James’s actual technical knowledge of sexual hysteria, both his almost certain familiarity with Breuer and Freud’s Studien über Hysterie and his “personal acquaintance” with an actual case of hysteria in “the illness of his sister [Alice] and with the delusions and fantasies of that illness.” Thus it should not be surprising that in The Turn of the Screw he could portray an accurate, virtually textbook case of sexual hysteria. Briefly summarized, sexual hysteria, as it was

---

4 Cargill agrees that “to the end of her tale [the governess’s] sudden infatuation is the mainspring of her action” (“Turn of the Screw and Alice James,” p. 243).

5 “Turn of the Screw and Alice James,” p. 247.
understood in the milieu of The Turn of the Screw, is a psychosexual disorder mainly afflicting women, particularly women with "fine qualities of mind and character," caused by a profound conflict between their natural sexual impulses and the repression of sexuality required by society and exaggerated by Victorian idealism—a conflict in the hysterical, Havelock Ellis explains, "between their ideas of right and the bent of their inclinations." The classic symptom of hysteria is thus "a paradoxical sexual instinct... by which, for instance, sexual frigidity is combined with intense sexual preoccupations" (Ellis, p. 213). The resulting conflict can be of such intensity as to precipitate some kind of "nervous explosion" (Ellis, p. 231). "Pitres and others," Ellis notes, "refer to the frequently painful nature of sexual hallucinations in the hysterical" (p. 217). In some cases "nausea and vomiting" or an "actual hysterical fit" may occur (pp. 223, 225).

Today the term "sexual hysteria" is familiar, but less so is its substance: the actual syndrome designated by the name. Thus, even though the term has been applied to the governess, no one has shown how exactly she fits the profile of a typical sexual hysterical. It would be hard to imagine a more classic manifestation of its symptomatology than James's governess. Her "superiority of character" (Ellis, p. 220), revealed in her sense of responsibility for the children, is unquestionable. She exhibits, in classic form, the conflict between sexual impulse and inhibition found by clinicians of the time at the root of the disorder, suffering from "sexual needs... and in large measure, indeed, precisely through the struggle with them, through the effort to thrust sexuality aside" (Ellis, p. 224). A "fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage," the governess is clearly in a state of extreme tension of the kind most likely to trigger an attack of hysteria. And she fits the profile of the typical female hysteric in several

---

6 "Auto-Erotism," Studies in the Psychology of Sex, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1936), I, Part One, 220. Further references to this section of Ellis' work are cited in the text. I make no claims, by the way, for the validity of turn-of-the-century assumptions about sexual hysteria, which are presently being challenged. My point is only how faithfully James reproduces these assumptions in his characterization of the governess.

ways: she is a “single woman . . . whose sexual needs are unsatisfied”; she appears to be “attractive to men”; she leads the kind of “small, smothered life” conducive to hysteria; and she is extremely suggestible (Ellis, pp. 218, 229n.). Indeed, in typifying the hysterical situation Ellis mentions the case of a governess much like that of James’s protagonist: “in one case,” he writes, “a governess, whose training has been severely upright, is, in spite of herself and without any encouragement, led to experience for the father of the children under her care an affection which she refuses to acknowledge even to herself” (p. 221).8 James’s governess, according to all the evidence in The Turn of the Screw, is the product of a training “severely upright,” and she feels, “without any encouragement,” an attraction to the paternal figure (if not the father) of the household in which she is employed, which she regards as only the desire to please an employer and merit his approval.

Not only does James’s governess fit the classic profile of the female sexual hysterical, she also experiences the “hysterical fit” observed by turn-of-the-century clinicians. That her first hallucination precipitates a “nervous explosion” of some intensity is clear from her own account. Like that of the classic hysterical, her “mental activity . . . is split up, and only a part of it is conscious” (Ellis, p. 220). Her initial fantasy of her handsome employer is conscious, but his transformation into a figure embodying her fear of sexuality is generated by deep-rooted unconscious inhibitions. The effect—“the shock I had suffered,” as she describes it—is a manifestation of the kind of “shock to the sexual emotions,” that, according to Freud, could “scarcely fail sometimes to produce such a result” (Ellis, p. 231). “Something is introduced into psychic life which refuses to merge in the general flow of consciousness” (Ellis, p. 222), and that something is the governess’s unacknowledged sexual attraction to the charming gentleman: it does not fit with her idealized romantic and spiritualized notions about love. The resulting “collision,” as she herself terms the experience, between her conscious ideals and her unconscious impulses triggers

8Ellis is most likely alluding to “The Case of Miss Lucy R.,” included in Studien über Hysterie, the case which Cargill convincingly links to The Turn of the Screw, pp. 244–46.
in her emotions a profound disturbance. “Driven” by her “agitation,” as she confesses, and only half conscious, she “must, in circling about the place, have walked three miles” (p. 17). As the hysterical shock involves shame and disgust and often “cannot even be talked about” (Ellis, p. 222), so the governess, upon encountering Mrs. Grose, “somehow measured the importance of what I had seen by my thus finding myself hesitate to mention it” (p. 18).

If the figure the governess “sees” is an example of “the frequently painful nature of sexual hallucinations in the hysterical” (Ellis, p. 217), a manifestation of her deep fear of sexuality engendered when her unacknowledged sexual impulses intrude themselves into her idealized romantic fantasy of her employer—when, to put it another way, the relationship she fantasizes begins to take its natural course toward a sexual consummation—the logical question to be addressed is “What form would such a hallucination take?” Obviously, it would be a male figure, and it would be sexually threatening. The figure the governess sees is male, and the “fear” she feels is like that stirred in “a young woman privately bred” by “an unknown man in a lonely place.” Assuming, then, this generalized embodiment of a threatening sexual male figure, if the governess were to imagine the apparition more particularly, what particular features might it be expected to have? The answer is that there existed in the culture a widely recognized stereotype of the predatory sexual male, a set of typical features and characteristics that such a figure would be presupposed to manifest. Logically enough, it is this figure that the governess describes in *The Turn of the Screw*.

Europe in the nineteenth century was much intrigued by the theory that there exists in human nature a determinative relationship between physiognomical features and character. In a recent book Graeme Tytler documents “the universality of physiognomy in nineteenth-century Europe” and in particular the immense influence of the physiognomical speculations of Johann Caspar Lavater, an eighteenth-century Swiss clergyman, whose *Physiognomische Fragmente* in four volumes was cer-
tainly, Tytler says, known about by “most nineteenth-century men of letters.” Widely popularized in newspapers and periodicals, physiognomical theory exercised a significant influence on the novel during the period from the early 1770s to about the 1880s as the pseudo-scientific spuriousness of its conclusions came to be increasingly recognized. There is no evidence that James knew Lavater’s work firsthand. But there is evidence beyond the elaborate physiognomical portrait the governess describes in The Turn of the Screw that he knew something of the subject, as when in his description of Caspar Goodwood in A Portrait of a Lady he mentions “blue eyes of remarkable fixedness, . . . and a jaw of the somewhat angular mould which is supposed to bespeak resolution.” And it is certain that James would have been well versed secondhand in the physiognomics of fictional characterization: the roster of writers named by Tytler as most influenced by physiognomy—Fielding, Dickens, the Brontës, Thackeray, Balzac, Flaubert, George Sand—reads like a gallery of novelists most familiar to James.

To demonstrate the physiognomical stereotypicality of the fearful male figure the governess hallucinates, whose actual unreality James may be implying in her remark that “‘he’s like nobody,’” it will be useful to reproduce her description at length:

“He has no hat. . . . He has red hair, very red, close-curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight good features and little rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair. His eyebrows are somehow darker; they look particularly arched and as if they might move a good deal. His eyes are sharp, strange—awfully; but I only know clearly that they’re rather small and very fixed. His mouth’s wide, and his lips are thin, except for his little whiskers he’s quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor. . . . He’s tall, active, erect, . . . but never—no, never!—a gentleman. . . .”

[Mrs. Grose] visibly tried to hold herself. “But he is handsome?”

I saw the way to help her. “Remarkably!”


“And dressed—?”
“In somebody’s clothes. They’re smart, but they’re not his own.”
She broke into a breathless affirmative groan. “They’re the master’s!”

(pp. 23–24)

Certain details of this description can be traced to more general assumptions than those of physiognomical theory. The figure is remarkably handsome, and “the handsome man,” according to general prejudice, particularly in men, “is likely to be a cad.” Quite ready “for his own immediate profit . . . to defy the conventions that other men subscribe to,” the cad “may dress and adorn himself in what is commonly condemned as bad taste” as “a crude and external manifestation of his disregard of the conventions of masculine behaviour.” Thus he has no scruples against “taking advantage of the susceptibility which women exhibit in the presence of good-looking men.” Usually with “neat and symmetrical features” and “attractive to many women,” the cad is hampered neither by “a bad reputation nor bad manners . . . : his aim is not love or even philandering, but amour.”11 Presumably, the fearful male figure the governess hallucinates, with his “straight good features,” his somehow not quite suitable clothes, his “secret disorders, vices more than suspected,” and his success with women—“He did what he wished,” Mrs. Grose says, “with them all” (pp. 24, 28, 33)—emanates from some such stereotype.

Beyond conveying this general aura of sexual danger, however, the governess’s description of the threatening male specter she conjures up turns out to be a detailed physiognomical portrait, the most telling feature of which is its “red hair, very red, close curling.” “Most nineteenth-century novelists,” Tytler observes, “are concerned, like their predecessors, almost entirely with the color of the hair.” While red hair, according to Lavater, is said to characterize “a person supremely good or supremely evil,” the general consensus has always favored the latter view, a prejudice that can be traced as far back as the Bible (Tytler, pp. 213, 215). Indeed, there is a close connection, not at all surprising in view of Lavater’s clerical vocation, between physiognomical stereotypes and biblical personifications of evil. In the Old Testament the as-

sociation of red hair with evil would have been reinforced by the story of Esau, who yielded to fleshly appetite, sold his God-given birthright for a mess of pottage, and spawned the lineage repudiated by Jehovah. More telling against red hair was the suspicion that Judas must have been a redhead. But most relevant of all to the governess’s hallucinations in The Turn of the Screw is the knowledge that in ancient lore it was held that Satan materialized in the form of a red-haired male. It would not be surprising if a parson’s daughter, hysterically projecting an image of her sexual fear and revulsion, would envision a figure embodying features of this long-standing assumption about the human form assumed by the Tempter himself.

Indeed, the correspondence is striking. The threatening male figure she projects has “very red” hair (emphasis added). In The Devil in Legend and Literature Maximilian Rudwin observes that “the Devil’s beard as well as his hair is usually of a flaming red color.” The figure she sees is associated with “vices more than suspected” (p. 28); among other things, to be sure, “Satan is famed as the greatest gambler ever known upon or under the earth.” And other details of her portrait whose place in the design of the story has remained obscure are at least traceable to lore about Satan. The odious figure gave the governess “a sort of sense of looking like an actor.” “The Devil is likewise regarded as the inventor of the drama,” says Rudwin; “indeed, the actors were regarded by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and even for many centuries afterwards, as servants of Satan” (p. 259). Finally, the penchant of the governess’s projected figure to wear the clothes of a gentleman in order to be taken for what he decidedly is not is very much a part of his Satanic aura:

The Devil... has on clothes which any gentleman might wear.... It has been his greatest ambition to be a gentleman, in outer appearance at least; and to his credit it must be said that he has so well succeeded in his efforts to resemble a gentleman that it is now very difficult to tell the two apart. (Rudwin, p. 50)

Thus, in projecting in human form the embodiment of her deep, puritanical fear of evil, which in Victorian times tended to mean sexual evil, the governess envisions an attractive male figure, one to whom she would instinctively respond—a figure projected in the form of the Tempter himself, as he was imprinted in the mind of the culture of which she is representative. But her projection draws also on stereotypes established in the physiognomical lore of the preceding centuries. The importance of Lavater in the considerable influence of physiognomical theories on the nineteenth century, and particularly on important novelists, has been mentioned. But there were many other practitioners in the field, and in their writings, as well as in those of novelists influenced by physiognomical lore, can be found most of the details of the apparition the governess projects. This is a precarious business at best: the spuriousness of the science assures that one can find almost as many different readings of the same features and expressions as there are physiognomists. But there is pretty solid agreement supporting Lavater’s suspicion of red hair. The mind of Chaucer’s Miller, for example, with a beard red “as any sowe or fox,” runs to “synne and harlotries.” Swift equips Gulliver with the prevailing prejudice against red hair. In describing the Yahoos—“cunning, malicious, treacherous and revengeful” as well as “cowardly . . . insolent, abject, and cruel”—Gulliver observes “that the Red-Haired of both Sexes are more libidinous and mischievous than the rest” and finds it curious that the female Yahoo with a lecherous eye for him did not have “Hair . . . of a Red Colour, (which might have been some Excuse for an Appetite a little irregular).” Among physiognomists, Joseph Simms, after acknowledging that “many cases might be cited in which red-haired persons have been very amiable,” finds nevertheless that this color, “if curliness is added [Quint’s hair is “very red, close-curling”], indicates a . . . disposition to ardent love,” and if it is very coarse “is a sign of propensities much too animal.”

Mantegazza agrees that “red hair, although rare, is disliked by nearly all because it is an almost monstrous type.”\textsuperscript{17} Although, as Tytler points out, physiognomical (as well as phrenological) explanations for human behavior had lost credibility for perceptive people by the end of the century, their assumptions remained in some minds so ingrained as to be almost taken for granted. Thus, in \textit{Ann Veronica} (1909), as Ann and her fellow suffragettes are arraigned after their raid on the House of Commons, H. G. Wells describes “a disagreeable young man, with red hair and a loose mouth, seated at the reporter’s table, . . . sketching her.”\textsuperscript{18}

If, by general agreement, red hair is a sign of lechery, other features of the male sex villain the governess projects can also be found with threatening significance in physiognomical lore. The figure’s eyes, for example—“sharp, strange—awfully; . . . rather small and very fixed”—which give the governess “such a bold hard stare” (p. 19), have a clear sexual significance. According to Simms, “there is a close connection between the eyes and the sexual organs” (p. 299). To the authoritative Lavater, “small, and deep sunken eyes, [are] bold in opposition; not discouraged, intriguing, and active in wickedness.”\textsuperscript{19} The significance of the figure’s eyebrows—“particularly arched and as if they might move a great deal”—is also explained by physiognomy: the arch by Mantegazza, who finds that the proud and impudent “have arched eyebrows which are often raised,” the movement by Lavater, who explains that “the motion of the eyebrows contains numerous expressions, especially of ignoble passions; pride, anger and contempt: the supercilious man . . . despises, and is despicable.”\textsuperscript{20} The wide mouth and thin lips of the governess’s figure fit Mantegazza’s observation that “no face recalls the expression of cruelty so much as a wanton one,” and “the expression of cruelty is almost exclusively concentrated round the mouth; . . . The mouth is closed, the corners are drawn back as far as possible, . . . The eye is clear,

\textsuperscript{17}Physiognomy and Expression (New York: Scribners, 1914), p. 62.
\textsuperscript{20}Mantegazza, Physsognomy and Expression, p. 181; Lavater, Essays on Physiognomy, III, 183.
widely opened, and fixed upon the victim” (p. 178). Even the “habit of going about bareheaded” (the governess’s figure “has no hat” [p. 23]) attracts physiognomical attention. Indeed, the essence (as well as the eyes, eyebrows, mouth, and hair) of the governess’s projected figure, embodying her hysterical but unconscious sexual horror, is reflected closely in one of a series of descriptions Lavater provides of physiognomical types, clearly an epitome of brutal male power:

Rude, savage, ruffianly, danger-contemning, strength. It is a crime to him to have committed small mischief; his stroke, like his aspect, is death. He does not oppress, he destroys. To him murder is enjoyment, and the pangs of others a pleasure. The form of his bones denotes his strength, his eye a thirst of blood, his eyebrow habitual cruelty, his mouth deriding contempt, his nose grim craft, his hair and beard choleric power. (III, 249–50)

The picture that accompanies this description (see illustration), showing close-curling hair—presumably red, the color traditionally associated with cholera—may give us an uncannily accurate glimpse of the face that so terrifies the governess.

Not only is it reasonably certain that James knew about physiognomical theories and the use of such devices by novelists familiar to him, then, but he also creates in his governess a character who fits the profile of the typical sexual hysterical, who has hysterical hallucinations, and whose mind projects her sexual fear in a form that draws on the very religious and physiognomical stereotypes with which a mind such as hers would logically be

furnished. It remains only to show some striking prototypes of the governess’s physiognomically stereotypical redheaded sex villain in popular novels of the era. A link to one such prototype exists in *The Turn of the Screw* itself: the governess is reading *Amelia* just before her third hallucination of the figure identified as Quint (p. 40), and *Amelia* contains a similar figure, Robinson, who has Quint’s long pale face, red hair (actually “a red Beard”), and clothes that call a kind of disreputable attention to themselves.22 Although Robinson is not, to the reader’s knowledge, sexually villainous, his life resembles Quint’s, at least the latter’s reputation for “strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected” (p. 28). Robinson is a gambler, cheat, thief, and criminal conspirator. The governess, not having finished the novel, would not know of his repentance in the end and thus could be expected to regard him with emotions that might contribute to her fearful hallucinations. Even more terrifying, however, in this novel with its undercurrent of sexual danger and ruin are its interpolated histories of young women betrayed by their naive indulgence in the pleasurable sensations excited by the attentions of attractive men: Miss Mathews, seduced by a soldier under false promises of marriage, and Mrs. Bennet, seduced by a nobleman after quaffing only “Half a Pint of Small Punch,” which had been drugged. The latter’s case would have been especially terrible to the governess, for Mrs. Bennet was the naive, sheltered daughter of a clergyman and got into trouble precisely by entertaining romantic fantasies of an attractive man: she intended only to “indulge [her] Vanity and Interest at once, without being guilty of the least Injury” (*Amelia*, p. 295). The warnings of both these wretched fallen women must surely have terrified the governess. Miss Mathews offers her fate as a warning to every woman “to deal with Mankind with Care and Caution . . . and never to confide too much in the Honesty of a Man, nor in her own Strength,

where she has so much at Stake; let her remember she walks on a Precipice, and the bottomless Pit is to receive her, if she slips; nay, if she makes but one false Step.” Mrs. Bennet warns “that the Woman who gives up the least Out-work of her Virtue, doth, in that very Moment, betray the Citadel” (Amelia, pp. 53, 295).

Indulging in romantic fantasies of her dashing gentleman employer, the governess, had she read thus far into Amelia, might indeed suddenly discover herself on the way to ruin, the outworks of her virtue undermined by her own susceptibility to an attractive male. Small wonder, in such a case, that the gentleman of her fantasy should metamorphose into a villainous projection of sexual fear. And just as she does not need (and indeed does not have) any knowledge of Peter Quint to accomplish the transformation, so her complementary projection of the female counterpart of her sexual fear does not require knowledge of Miss Jessel and her shame: it is, in an important sense, the governess herself, the awful projection of herself ruined by the sexual evil toward which her own sexual impulses are urging her.

Tytler’s demonstration of the physiognomical awareness reflected in Amelia is corroborated by Fielding’s mention of the term “physiognomist” in the novel, as well as by the physiognomical description of the villainous Robinson. But Robinson is not a sexual villain. The projection of the governess’s fear is even more in

23The view of the female figure the governess sees, a genteel woman ruined by indulging her sexual impulses, as a fearful projection of the governess herself and also of the adult sexual female Flora will become, also susceptible to sexual promptings, is supported by Paul N. Siegel. Siegel discusses James’s subtle dramatization of the governess’s psychosexual ambivalence: she is horrified at Miss Jessel’s sexuality and its consequences and terrified of her own susceptibility to sexual feeling, of which she is subconsciously aware; but she is also fascinated and excited, because of her powerful attraction to her employer, by identifying herself with Miss Jessel and her indulgence of sexual desires. Although he does not pursue its consequences, Siegel also senses James’s implication that Miss Jessel in some way prefigures in the governess’s mind a Flora grown up and hardened by sexual experience. See “‘Miss Jessel’: Mirror Image of the Governess,” Literature and Psychology, 18 (1968), 36. The story’s most telling hint of this is in the episode of the girl’s second excursion to the lake. With the awful vision of Miss Jessel burning in her mind, the governess sees that Flora’s “incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished . . . she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly.” Flora’s indignant response to her accusations seems to the governess like “that of a vulgarly pert little girl in the street” (pp. 72–73).

24Fielding, Amelia, p. 47.
the lineage of numerous red-haired male villains rendered, like her projected figure, in detailed physiognomical portraits in some of the best-known novels of the era. Uriah Heep, for example, with his slimy designs on the saintly Agnes in *David Copperfield*, bears a close resemblance to the governess’s vision. Although Heep is anything but handsome, “this red-bearded animal,” “this detestable Rufus,” has the hair color, pale face, wide mouth, and piercing eyes of the figure described in *The Turn of the Screw*. Heep’s face is “pale” and “cadaverous,” “his mouth [is] widened” like a gargoyle’s, and his eyes, “sleepless . . . like two red suns,” were a “shadowless red” and “looked as if they had scorched their lashes off.”25 An older, aristocratic version of the same character type is Lord Steyne, the sharkish nobleman who undoes Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*. Steyne’s description captures the grotesquerie, as well as several details, of the portrait of Heep. His “shining bald head . . . was fringed with red hair. He had thick bushy eyebrows, with little twinkling bloodshot eyes . . . His jaw was underhung, and when he laughed, two white buck-teeth protruded themselves and glistened savagely in the midst of the grin.”26 In *Daniel Deronda* Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt, like the governess’s figure, is handsome, and, as Gwendolen Harleth discovers, trails, like Quint, a past of secret disorders and vices, like gambling and keeping a mistress, more than suspected. Grandcourt is “decidedly handsome,” has “a mere fringe of reddish-blond hair,” a complexion of “a faded fairness resembling that of an actress,” and “long narrow grey eyes” that “looked at Gwendolen persistently with a slightly exploring gaze.”27 This list could be extended considerably.

To be sure, the governess, whose ordeal takes place around the 1840s, could not have known the redheaded sexual villains Heep, Steyne, and Grandcourt. My point is, rather, that James, writing in the 1890s, surely did know them and that in creating the figure she describes he drew the same type of character, one

whose lineage in literary history, James is careful to imply, she would have been familiar with. The only book she is shown reading in *The Turn of the Screw* is *Amelia*, but through her remarks about her reading at Bly James implies that, free from the strict censorship of the vicarage, utterly on her own, and with a good deal of time on her hands, the governess fell with avidity on the “roomful of old books at Bly”—books of a kind that had come into her “sequestered home” only “to the extent of a distinctly deprecated renown”—the very category of books that could not fail to whet “the unavowed curiosity of [her] youth.” No catalog of the library at Bly has survived, but one category of its holdings was “last-century fiction” (p. 40)—fiction, that is, full of the ordeals of virginal ingenues pursued by sexual villains. At the time of her first manifestation of hysterical symptoms when she projects the redheaded sex fiend, she has already been some weeks at Bly. If she is, as is likely, immersed in eighteenth-century fiction full of Gothic terror—fiction, as Tytler demonstrates, steeped in physiognomical lore—the figure she describes is exactly what might be expected.

There can be no doubt that James *could* have done what I have proposed. His own upbringing as a boy in proper household, “surrounded by admonishing governesses, a permissive father, an often stern ambiguous mother,”28 would have provided, in general outlines, a prototype for the situation as well as the atmosphere at Bly. (Indeed, there is good reason to suspect, in view of James’s own well-known sexual problems and Douglas’ pointed hints to the Jamesian narrator of the opening frame that when “he looked at me, . . . he saw what he spoke of” [p. 2], that it is his own story James tells in *The Turn of the Screw.*) In his familiarity with the work of his brother William, coupled with his knowledge of sexual hysteria, its supposed causes, and its manifestations, James certainly possessed the requisite psychological acumen to dramatize the psychology of sexual fear in a maternal figure and its effect on the children in her charge. And, given his artistic seriousness and penchant for subtlety, as well as the persistent undercurrent, despite his prim distaste for the explicit airing of sexual matters, of sexual implication in his work, what I have suggested is, I be-

lieve, precisely what he would do with the story. Indeed, the demonstrable extent to which the governess represents a classic case of sexual hysteria and the fact that the figure she projects is a classic example of physiognomical cliché, deliberately elaborated for ironic effect, serve to indicate James's intentions in *The Turn of the Screw*. It is not, except on the surface for the superficial reader, a ghost story but a psychological drama about the disastrous effects of Victorian sexual attitudes on the development of children.²⁹

In the light of the foregoing, a belated, apologetic, perhaps ironic sympathy is due poor Edmund Wilson for his ordeal over *The Turn of the Screw*: he was on the right track but could never get over the obstacle of the ghosts.³⁰ Wilson was right: the problem is with the troubled sexuality of the governess, who, the story pointedly emphasizes, was greatly attracted to the gentleman who employed her but also, in an exaggerated but quintessentially Victorian way, deeply fearful of and hostile toward sexuality. As she indulges her romantic feelings toward her attractive employer, she senses subconsciously that by thus relaxing her sexual defenses even so innocuously she has set foot on the path to ruin. At that point, the attractive male projection of her pleasurable sensations changes to the terrifying male projection of her fear. The figure she projects emerges from her own subconscious imprinting by religious and cultural stereotypes—an amalgam of religious personifications of evil and temptation and well-established physiognomical stereotypes of the villainously libidinous male, with numerous precedents in the literature of the period, colored, conceivably, by some awareness of the views of Lavater himself, who had established a reputation throughout Europe as a preacher as well as a physiognomist.³¹ Thus awakened, the governess's hysterical fear of sexuality is superadded to her sense of

²⁹This conclusion is also reached by Jane Nardin, who asserts that *The Turn of the Screw* "is neither about evil metaphysically conceived, nor about madness clinically conceived, but rather [about] a particular social milieu and the way it affects people living in it." See "The Turn of the Screw: The Victorian Background," *Mosaic*, 12, no. 1 (1978), 142.


her duty as governess of two children approaching puberty. She takes upon herself the role of angel in the house—guardian of idealized, spiritualized love and sexual purity. Along the same line she is, as James seems to have realized, a manifestation of the Great Governess of the era, representing maternal control over the sexual mores of the household and thus of the culture at large.

Through the figures the governess projects—one representing her fear and revulsion at male sexuality, the other her fear and disgust at female reciprocation of male lust (she realizes with a spasm of ambivalence that what went on between Quint and Jessel “must have been also what \textit{she} wished!” [p. 33])—James contrives to objectify her sexual state of mind. But the main line of development in the story is the effect such a deep aversion to sexual phenomena has on the development of children. But how does one dramatize so psychological a drama? James’s solution to the problem is masterful. The “ghosts,” which work well enough on the literal level (where even many learned critics have enjoyed them), become, on the figurative level, a means of objectifying the psychology of both the governess and the children and also the psychological meaning and consequences of her behavior toward them: they represent both her fear and revulsion and the children’s natural sexual development. For, of course, the sexual male and female figures so fearfully on the governess’s mind \textit{are} possessing Miles and Flora: they are merely the adult sexual beings the children will become when the sexuality latent in childhood emerges through adolescence and establishes itself in adulthood. This possession, however, is not evil; it is merely natural. The many elaborate explications of the evil in \textit{The Turn of the Screw} notwithstanding, the only evil the story presents is that Quint and Jessel were sexually active. The powerful aura of evil that pervades the story emanates from the psyche of the governess, who, after all, tells the story: it is her hysterical Victorian aversion to sexuality, heightened for satirical effect by James’s subtle irony. In her compulsion to keep the children from being possessed with this evil, then, she is actually blocking their normal sexual development. Naturally, when she looks so anxiously at Miles and Flora, children entering puberty, she sees signs of their sexual maturation—the adult male with an attraction to young and pretty women in Miles and the adult female with a reciprocal attraction
to handsome young men in Flora. In trying to suppress all manifestations of their natural sexual development she inflicts grievous damage on their psyches. With apt Oedipal implications, James allows Flora to escape to the protection of the father figure; but the male child, trapped in the psychosexual undertow of the mother-son relationship, is destroyed.

One question remains. If the redheaded sexual male does, as I have demonstrated, well up hysterically in the governess’s mind from physiognomical stereotypes, how does it happen that this figure so closely resembles the real person Peter Quint? The answer is not, certainly, that James gave credence to physiognomical science. For, as he was undoubtedly aware, the physiognomical stereotype, as well as the evil ascribed to Quint and Jessel, was a purely subjective phenomenon, an attitude of mind. In an atmosphere of increasing rationality, Tytler explains, there emerged as the nineteenth century wore on a “subtler treatment of physiognomy,” which tended to treat it “as a problematic sign of the observer’s own moral character” (p. 319). Thus in The Turn of the Screw the governess’s physiognomical imprinting, like her sense of sexual evil, is a part of her characterization as an upright and idealistic person, but one with dangerously unhealthy attitudes toward sexuality. James needed the real Quint and Jessel also, as has been suggested, both to objectify the psychological drama and to have it both ways, as he surely intended: that is, to produce, on the surface, a ghost story that would materialize interestingly on the figurative level as one of the most remarkable psychological dramas in literature.

For that, ultimately, is the story of The Turn of the Screw—a more significant story, I maintain, than either a ghost story or a parable of some amorphous good and evil. If that is still debatable, the assertion that the psychological drama is more humanly relevant both to James’s time and to our own is surely not. At least a story about the damage done to the sexual development of children by Victorian sexual fear and disgust would satisfy James’s own requirement that the art of fiction must be an imitation of life.

_Illinois State University, Normal_