

“YOU DEVIL!”: CORRUPTION IN HENRY JAMES’ THE TURN OF THE SCREW

In the final and most dramatic scene of Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess battles for Miles’s soul. However, her motives are not pure. “One of the critical questions in *The Turn of the Screw* is whether Miles refers . . . to the governess or to Peter Quint as a ‘devil’” (Beidler 120). Those who believe that Peter Quint is the “devil” include Joseph J. Firebaugh, who says that “Quint [is] an embodiment of evil” (206). However, there are those like Muriel West, who says, “The governess indulges in an exuberant debauch of violence that contributes to the sudden death of the little Miles” (206). According to critic Donal O’Gorman, the governess and the devil are working together throughout the entire story:

The ultimate “Turn of the Screw” is not the death of little Miles, but rather, a few lines earlier, the governess’s revealing use of the pronoun “we.” With reference to her harrowing experience by the lake on the previous day, she speaks of “what we had done to Flora.” And the reader shudders to learn that the Devil, still in full possession after so many years, is slyly dictating the words she writes. (207).

Through the children’s reactions to the governess, and through studying the words “evil” and “devil,” I intend to explore the extent of corruption in the governess. Not only is the governess evil, but she is also a type of the devil.

In the bible, Jude tells us that “angels which kept not their first estate” become entangled in the “chains” of the devil (King James Bible, Jude 1.6). Just like the other followers of evil, the governess was once good and “angel[ic].” The reader learns that the governess is one of many daughters of a parson (James 26). Through close reading, we find that throughout the story, the governess becomes slyly and subtly—which are both characteristics commonly associated with the devil—less good and more evil. When she first meets the children, the governess describes them as “charming,” “radiant,” and “angelic;” “prodig[ies] of delightful loveable goodness” (James 30, 61). At this point in the story, the governess’ main concern is for her charges, and she loves them. The point at which the governess turns evil is when she becomes obsessed with the “ghosts” and with what they have: “How can I retrace . . . the strange steps of my obsession?” (James 80).

When the governess first sees Peter Quint, she is torn between her malice towards him and her desire to have what he has: the children. Bruce Robbins says that the governess “immediately brands [the ghosts—whether real or imaginary] . . . as evil spirits” (Robbins 338). Despite the fact that the governess sees the “ghosts” as “evil,” Priscilla L. Walton reveals that “When the governess . . . appropriates Quint’s gaze, her action serves to indicate her intention to appropriate his place” (310-11). Although the governess recognizes Quint’s efforts to possess the children as iniquitous, she still wants to take his place, and the children recognize her wickedness.

The governess confronts Flora about Miss Jessel and says that Flora looks at her with “an expression . . . that appeared to read and accuse and judge me” (James 102). John Lydenberg states, “[Miles] will not escape . . . [The governess] will hold him tight and keep him all for herself, even though she can possess him as she wishes only in death” (206). Thomas Cranfill and Robert Clark state that “The children suffer prolonged, helpless, lethally dangerous exposure to the mad governess” (206). Even Miles recognizes her wickedness. Just before his death, the governess tries to show Miles where Peter Quint is, and he says, “It’s he?” She responds, “Whom do you mean by ‘he’?” Miles answers: “Peter Quint—you devil!” (James 120). She does not relinquish her struggle for control until Flora is sent away and Miles is lying dead in her arms.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “evil” as “to harm or injure; to ill-treat” (Evil). Neal B. Houston tells us that the governess “is the absolute cause of death, and knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, she is the murderess of Miles” (209). Terence J. Matheson agrees, “There are many indications . . . which point to Miles having been smothered by the . . . governess, that his death is the result of asphyxiation rather than strain, fright, or ‘dispossession’” (208). In this broadest sense, the governess is “evil” to young Miles. She “harms,” “injures,” “ill-treats,” and eventually kills him. Taking this idea farther, The Oxford English Dictionary also defines “evil” as “morally depraved, bad, wicked

[and] vicious" (Evil). Who is the originator of such and all evil? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the "devil" as "the supreme spirit of evil" (Devil).

The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is a type of the devil in part because of her desire to possess that which she cannot have. According to Elizabeth Missing Swell, who wrote an article in 1866 about those who enter into the profession of a governess, said that these girls "are destitute. They have to maintain themselves, and only one profession is open to them. They must be governesses" (136). These governesses did not seem to enter upon this profession by choice. The fact that the main character in *The Turn of the Screw* is a governess implies that she did not have the opportunity, or that she did not choose to marry, which means that, as a respectable young woman, she could not have children of her own. In the Bible, Peter states: "the devil . . . walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (King James Bible, 1 Peter 5.8). Just as the devil desires the things he will never have, similarly the governess wishes to "devour" Miles and Flora because of her own unfulfilled desires to be a mother.

To "devil" somebody is "to worry (someone) excessively; to harass, annoy, tease" (Devil). In the last scene, the governess says to Miles, speaking of Peter Quint, "What does he matter now, my own?—what will he ever matter? I have you" (James 120). Only a few lines after this moment of possession, the governess narrates, "We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart . . . had stopped" (James 120). Through her own corruption and wickedness, the children recognize her for what she is—a "devil." And then she "devils" him to death.

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