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(Other) World and Book: Metafiction and the Supernatural in *The Turn of the Screw*

Henry James's famous story of a young governess left in charge of Bly, an isolated country house, where she encounters the ghosts of two former servants pursuing the souls of the children in her care, has established itself as a classic 'case' in literary criticism. Until comparatively recently, all interpretations of the story told by the governess had been based on one of two assumptions, either that both of the ghosts are real, or that both are figments of her imagination. This debate between apparitionists and non-apparitionists has been long and fiercely contested. The classic apparitionist essay, Robert Heilman's "*The Turn of the Screw* as Poem,"[1] which subjected this text for the first time to the New Critical methodology, reads the story as a complex morality play. Edmund Wilson's landmark non-apparitionist essay, "The Ambiguity of Henry James," which launched the traditional psychoanalytic approach, sees the governess's story as a "neurotic case of sex repression,"[2] since she is clearly in love with her employer, the master and the children's guardian, who keeps his distance from Bly. Post-new criticism, however, has transcended this debate by asserting the tale's ambiguity as being utterly impenetrable. Among its approaches, Shoshana Felman's Lacanian study regards the text as equivalent to a patient's unconscious mind, and a trap for the reader,[3] Christine Brooke-Rose seeks to preserve "the total ambiguity of the TS text"

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[1] Robert Heilman, "*The Turn of the Screw* as Poem," *U of Kansas City Review* 14 (1948); reprinted in *A Casebook on Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw'*, ed. Gerald Willen (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969) 174–88.

[2] Edmund Wilson, "The Ambiguity of Henry James," *Hound and Horn* 7 (1934); reprinted in *A Casebook on Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw'* 115-53.

[3] Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 207.

and therefore does not "argue for the ghosts or for the hallucinations, but [tries] to show that the text is structured on poetic principles that function in both hypotheses,"[4] while T.J. Lustig examines its structural ambiguity in terms of James's conception of "the relation between the real and the romantic or the familiar and the strange in terms of charged circuitries, double dynamics, tensions and fusions."[5]

James's enigmatic tale of the supernatural still possesses an extraordinary capacity to spring critical surprises, however, particularly, I wish to argue, if we read it as an exercise in metafiction. Clues to James's metafictional intentions may be found in his remarkable Preface to this novella, where he records that he felt he had to achieve for his imagination "absolute freedom of hand" in "playing the game" of fiction (37).[6] For James it was a serious game, for he talks in his Preface about reconciling in this "study" the imaginative freedom and "chaos" of "anecdote," with the achievement of "absolute singleness, clearness and roundness" (38). His formal choice of the tale of the uncanny, with an unreliable narrator as its centre of experience and sole recording medium, who describes her daring battle with two ghosts for the souls of her charges, afforded him the opportunity to investigate the fundamental tension in fiction between authenticity (the "chaos" of "anecdote") and artistic completeness ("absolute singleness, clearness and roundness"). *The Turn of the Screw*, then, should be read as a story about the uncanny, but equally as a story about story telling itself. Indeed, *The Turn of the Screw* deliberately draws attention at every turn to its own narrative procedures; its immediate framing context is the collective telling of stories; its centre of interest is a narrator obsessed with her role as storyteller, who reveals a highly self-conscious awareness of both her reader and her effects; whilst the narrative's meanings are amplified by a web of inter-textual references, from the gothic fictions beloved of the governess to the embracing frame of *Paradise Lost*. It is a narrative that fulfils Patricia Waugh's succinct description of metafiction as pursuing questions of "how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world … through its formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book."[7] However, in *The Turn of the Screw* James complicates

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[4] Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 158.

[5] T.J. Lustig, *Henry James and the Ghostly* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 114.

[6] References are to the Penguin Classics edition of '*The Aspern Papers*' and '*The Turn of the Screw*', ed. Anthony Curtis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

[7] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (London: Methuen, 1984; reprinted London: Routledge, 1993) 2–3.

this endeavour by including experience of the 'other' world, and by means of the frame narrative, the telling of ghost stories at Christmas around the fire in an old house, he introduces the popular genre in which our endeavour to comprehend the mystery of evil through story is traditionally embodied.

The reading I propose, authorized by a text whose overt subject is fictionality, combines both apparitionist and non-apparitionist approaches. It depends on an acceptance of the compelling reality of the presence at Bly of the former valet, Peter Quint, but on a simultaneous recognition that the apparition of Miss Jessel, the former governess, is the product of her successor's psychological and narrative imperatives. Whilst the frame narrative provides the credible basis for the story of Peter Quint, at the same time it serves to foreground fictionality as the text's central subject. If, as the anonymous narratee in the frame story affirms, the involvement of two children gives two turns to the screw, then a corresponding second turn to the narrative is given by the governess's compulsion to fictionalize, intensified by her chilling encounters with the supernatural. According to her narrative logic, in order for the second child to be included within the circle of evil, and thus produce the desired fictive completion, the binary pattern already established demands a second apparition. Although the governess's authority in presenting a "credible statement of such strange matters" (40), about which James was anxious in his Preface, is initially endorsed by Douglas, and is confidently sustained in her anecdotal response to the apparition of Quint, her story of Miss Jessel is interrogated and deconstructed by the ghost story genre in which the frame has cast it.

What has been overlooked in previous readings of *The Turn of the Screw* is the fact that its unreliable narrator, the governess, constructs not one but two quite different narratives, each demanding a separate reading. Established early in the text as an imaginist, the governess claims that with the apparition of Peter Quint her imagination has suddenly "turned real" (164). The story of Peter Quint, which concludes with the death of young Miles, presents the governess's encounter with evil perceived as a metaphysical reality "adumbrated," as James describes, with chilling conviction. This narrative, in which the governess is predominantly a recording medium subject unpredictably to the influence of her abnormal visitant, does indeed possess the chaos of anecdote to which James alludes. However, in obedience to a fundamental instinct to universalize the experience of evil, she seeks a measure of comprehension and control through the creation of the story of Miss Jessel, an alternative fiction in which she may defeat her still potent rival and achieve a sense of closure. What is more, she links it to the story of Quint by an extraordinarily tight binary pattern that accords

with James's simultaneous preoccupation with clearness and roundness of narrative form. It follows that if the first narrative involves the governess's perception of Miles's corruption by Quint, then her own story of Miss Jessel must involve the initiation into evil of Flora. The generic indebtedness of this second narrative to the gothic and melodrama, by which evil is trivialized and contained, draws attention to itself, and functions in effect as a parody of the Quint haunting, giving a further turn to the problematic relationship between fiction and reality. The text of *The Turn of the Screw* thus works in the opposition between the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of illusion; the reader's perception of the disjunction between the governess's intermittent, disorganized, compelling narrative of Peter Quint's pursuit of Miles, and the tightly-constructed fictive account of her protracted domestic battle with her dead predecessor, resurrected out of a powerful cocktail of hysteria, insecurity, and sexual jealousy.

The governess's two narratives demand the employment of distinctly different strategies. Whereas the story of Peter Quint is the record of a sequence of unexpected visitations, that of Miss Jessel is crafted from gossip, hints and inferences. Evidence presented to the reader for the apparition of the dead Quint is therefore of a different order from that adduced for the subsequent manifestation of Miss Jessel. As has often been pointed out, Quint's first appearance occurs, not when the governess is in emotional turmoil, but rather when she is in a state of spiritual equipoise, enjoying an evening stroll in the grounds at Bly, which is why she describes the event retrospectively as like "the spring of a beast" (163). And her first response to the shock is to seek a rational explanation, believing that she has simply been subjected to the impudent gaze of an uninvited visitor. But at this juncture in the narrative two events occur that confirm the presence of the supernatural in the text: Quint's appearance looking in through the window of the "grown-up" dining-room on a Sunday, when as he would have known, the children habitually took their tea there, and the fact that against her will and judgment the stolid, unimaginative housekeeper, Mrs Grose feels compelled to identify the governess's detailed description of the intruder as belonging to Quint:

> 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, and except for his little whiskers he's quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor. (173)

Up to this point the governess has known nothing about the former valet, but she responds to his apparition with acute intuition. Quint's hovering by the dining room indicates to her that he has come for Miles; and the reality of the presence of evil is associated thereafter very particularly with Miles, whenever the governess seeks to challenge its power over him. It is confirmed most dramatically when she speaks to him of confession after his night escapade; the chill air, shaking room, and loud noise are accompanied by Miles's apparent cry of exultation and subsequent uncanny calm. And it is felt with progressive intensity as the governess comes across Quint on the staircase, as she observes him again outside the window, and when he is finally identified explicitly by Miles at the moment the boy is finally snatched from her grasp.

The governess's authentic experience of evil through the visitations of Quint finds its formal parody in her account of Miss Jessel, whose appearances occur only after the governess has learned of her history and her death and who, as the text clearly signals, belongs to fictional stereotype. Moreover, the governess's narrative of a second apparition in pursuit of the second child systematically deconstructs itself through a process of internal contradiction, denial, inconsistency, suppression, and evasion. The governess's first sighting of Miss Jessel by the lake is not the detailed picture one would expect from the sharp-eyed observer of Peter Quint's features, by now primed for extraordinary happenings, but a vague description, drawing on what she has learned from Mrs Grose of her predecessor's beauty and shame, and couched in melodramatic terms: "a woman in black, pale and dreadful" (182) with "a kind of fury of intention" and "wonderfully handsome. But infamous" (184). And whereas the reluctant Mrs Grose is finally forced to identify Quint, it is the governess who explicitly and glibly names the female apparition as her dead predecessor. Significantly she withdraws her suggestion that they appeal for corroboration to Flora, who "saw" Miss Jessel, claiming that the girl will lie (183). The narrator's tenuous hold on reality is just sufficient for her to realize that Flora's denial (absorbed in a game, she had her back to the alleged apparition) will threaten her fiction. And in a similar way the governess's subsequent assertion that it was her close descriptions of both Peter Quint and Miss Jessel that convinced the housekeeper of their presence is contradicted by her own discourse, which in fact records Mrs Grose's unwillingness to accept the existence of the second apparition, and her firm denial of it to the frightened Flora.

In contrast to the Quint story, in which she is passive, the governess is able to control every aspect of her own narrative, so that whilst the reader is offered only random sightings of Quint on the tower, on the staircase,

and outside the window, Miss Jessel is presented specifically in relation to the governess's own domain, appearing in places where she most threatens her status and identity: by the lake (the Sea of Azof in her geography lessons), and in the schoolroom. Significantly too, whereas Quint remains a silent figure, the governess invents Miss Jessel's dramatic but conventional confession that "she suffers the torments," whilst simultaneously qualifying it to the point of retraction: "It came to that" (223). For the sake of her plot, the governess is willing to manipulate her raw material in several ways. She infers that because Quint has come for Miles, Miss Jessel must have returned for Flora, an assumption that runs counter to Mrs Grose's clear implication that if Miss Jessel were to return for anyone, it would be for Quint. The governess also distorts the narrative model provided by the housekeeper's revelation that Miles used to go off in the company of Quint, while Flora remained with Miss Jessel, when she claims that the four now meet frequently. In fact much of the governess's energy is expended in trying to force even trivial incidents into the pattern prescribed by the requirements of her plot. With increasing desperation, she offers as evidence of Flora's aim of diverting her attention from Miss Jessel behaviour which she has suppressed in her previous conversation with Mrs Grose, to whom it might merely confirm a heightened normality—"the perceptible increase in movement, the greater intensity of play, the singing, the gabbling of nonsense and the invitation to romp" (188).

The doubling effect created by the governess's presentation of the two apparitions is mirrored in her construction of the two children. Both the governess and the housekeeper, to whom the ten-year-old Miles and the eight-year-old Flora seem angelic, at first subscribe to sentimental, romantic notions of childhood innocence. However, although Miles also displays the precocity of the Jamesian child, he is not like Maisie in *What Maisie Knew*, who mimics adult language as a means of learning; his precocity is unnatural in its massive assurance. This is how he meets the governess's challenge for an explanation when he has been caught outside on the lawn at midnight:

> "Well," he said at last, "just exactly in order that you should do this."
> "Do what?"
> "Think me—for a change—*bad*!" I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how, on top of it, he bent forward and kissed me. It was practically the end of everything. (204–05)

His moral wrong-footing of his interrogator, his poise, and his disarming sexual gesture towards a woman who has just been thinking of him as a "little fairy prince" (204) so overwhelm her rational faculties that she neglects the

obvious fact that his badness could easily have been confirmed by a simple confession of his activities at school. Similarly, on their walk to church, in his request to go back to school there is sexual manipulation, a reliance on their mutual understanding of how the adult world works, and a sophisticated language register clearly beyond the scope of a ten year old:

> "You know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady *always*—!"
> "And always with the same lady?" I returned.
> He neither blenched nor winked. The whole thing was virtually out between us. "Ah of course she's a jolly 'perfect' lady; but after all I'm a fellow, don't you see? who's—well, getting on." (216)

The steepening curve of Miles's maturation leads to the extraordinary scene at night in his bedroom, when he attempts to blackmail the governess into letting him go away by threatening to expose to his uncle the way she has "let it all drop" at Bly (227). Her increasingly destabilizing emotional encounters with Miles are the product of his progressive exposure to the influence of Quint, which becomes overwhelmingly apparent in the culminating episode of his conflict with the governess. In spite of Flora's sequestration from him from the moment she left the lake after the alleged encounter with Miss Jessel, Mrs Grose blushingly admits the possibility that brother and sister have met. This indeed seems to have been the case, for Miles's reaction to the governess's imprecation to a vision outside the window is to assume that her fictional Miss Jessel is indeed as real as the presence of Peter Quint, whom it appears he has been expecting. Miles's angelic sweetness gives way first to unease and then to "white rage" until finally he identifies the governess in demonic terms ("you devil!" [261]), claiming her as a fellow victim of their uncanny visitant.

Whereas Miles's behaviour throughout is unnervingly odd, Flora remains sweet and biddable. Indeed ironically her incorrigible normality not only resists the governess's increasingly violent attempts to mould her character to fit the plot of her own narrative, that of Flora's corresponding corruption by Miss Jessel, but effectively subverts it. Most obviously, while the governess seeks to place a sinister construction on Flora's nocturnal ramblings, the child's account of them is charmingly apposite. The reason for her wakefulness is corroborated by the presence of Miles in the grounds, and her explanation that she concealed her absence to avoid alarming her governess is a convincing instance of her childlike tact. Moreover, the distinction within the text between the Jessel narrative, which deconstructs itself, and the Quint narrative, which offers a convincing representation of an uncanny reality, is made apparent here by the disjunction between the governess's fiction (that Flora is communicating with Miss Jessel from her

bedroom window) and the reality (that she is watching the distant figure of Miles who is looking up at something above their heads). The terrible irony of course is that while the governess is pursuing her banal fictive obsession with Miss Jessel, she is oblivious to the full nature of the evil represented by Peter Quint.

While the governess's response to Quint's infernal pursuit of Miles is recorded in wholly credible psychological terms, her unconsciously parodic invention of a relationship between Flora and her former governess remains overtly fictive throughout, even moving occasionally into the realm of farce, by which this narrative is further deconstructed. Because Flora has gone out hatless, the governess assumes that she has a tryst with the equally hatless and abandoned Miss Jessel, and then has to face Flora's artless questions about her own ironically hatless condition. Equally, because her narrative demands it, Flora's rowing the small boat across the lake is regarded as an extraordinary feat. The governess also descends with comic desperation to trivia, finding explanation for the appalling language that Mrs Grose has heard Flora use in the influence of Miss Jessel, rather than more prosaically in the company of her brother.

However, the comedy collapses suddenly with the governess's brutal question by the lake, "Where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" (237). Her suggestion that Flora reacts to this challenge by looking suddenly old and ugly is simply an imaginative elaboration of fictional detail, and tells us more about her than it does about Flora. We know from James's presentation of the narrator's changing response to Miss Tina in *The Aspern Papers*, who looks suddenly youthful and lovely at the moment when he believes that she has saved Jeffrey Aspern's priceless papers for him, and then old and dowdy when he realizes she has not done so, that for James the physical appearance of people may change according to the kind of narrative they are perceived, subjectively, to inhabit. In fact, naturally bewildered and frightened, Flora wants to be taken away, clinging meanwhile to Mrs Grose, who is also unable to see the apparition and denies its presence in forthright terms.

The governess's compulsion to fictionalize, to transform the inexplicable terrors and loose ends of life into the comforting discipline of art, is not, however, confined to her own account of Miss Jessel. It involves, in different ways, both narratives. That of Quint and Miles unfolds in an unpredictable fashion, yet it also offers the governess the possibility of attempting to position herself within established fictional modes; a narrative of salvation, in which she may fulfil the functions of psychoanalyst and priest, but also a narrative of romance, in which she may play a heroine who is rewarded by love and by marriage to the master—the sustaining dream, in

the late nineteenth century, of the upwardly mobile governess who was also a lady. Her fantasizing imagination hijacks the frighteningly real spiritual drama in which she is involved in an astonishing endeavour to recast James's parable of the Fall in narrative terms that correspond to her own sexual and social needs. Indeed her narrative always has one eye self-consciously on the master. She refers to her "joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me," which she would like to be known "oh in the right quarter!" (179), she speaks of her magnificent behaviour "had there been any one to admire it" (195), and her desire to please the master by not troubling him is, she says, one aspect of "the fine machinery I had set in motion to attract his attention to my slighted charms" (208). But in the random development of the Quint narrative that she inhabits, she finds herself struggling to anticipate and comprehend events, and in the end it fails her.

Seeking the consolation of understanding and control in the creation of a parallel story, which is fed directly by both sexual and professional jealousies, the governess increasingly comes to believe that in order to secure her master's approbation and love she must not only save his nephew's soul, but also defeat her predecessor and rival. Initially the first governess is presented to the inexperienced young girl from a rural parsonage as an ideal, unequivocally endorsed by the master as "a most respectable person" who did for the children "quite beautifully" (150). But when Mrs Grose hints that Miss Jessel had been attracted by the master, and that the master in turn is attracted by youth and beauty, she is clearly nettled: "'Ah then I hope her youth and her beauty helped her!' I recollect throwing off. 'He seems to like us young and pretty!'" (159). This strange sexual rivalry reinforces her secret fear that she is a "bad governess" (193). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that her hysteria finds as its main focus the tale of Miss Jessel, who gave way to sexual desire in a liaison with a man of low class, betrayed her charges, retreated from her role, and died dishonoured and alone; a story that offers the governess a more personal, corroborative instance of the workings of evil.

Clearly, the story of Miss Jessel represents a sub-consciously repressed alternative reality, a distorted mirror image of the governess's own half-realized sexual and social fantasies, which has to be exorcized. Her preoccupation with social class and issues of hierarchy reflects the ambivalent position of governesses in Victorian England,[8] and its most obvious result is her confusion of evil with alleged sexual peccadillo and social transgres-

[8] See T.J. Lustig, *Henry James and the Ghostly* 150.

sion. She builds her increasingly obsessive narrative on the scraps of gossip that she gleans from her interrogation of Mrs Grose, who is never allowed to complete a statement before interpretation is forced upon her, and in this way she converts her role model into a debased woman, creating out of Mrs Grose's distaste for a relationship between "a lady" and someone "so dreadfully below" (185) evidence for an affair between Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. She is clearly disgusted by her rival's social lapse with a "base menial" as she terms Quint (191), but gives this narrative material a further sexual turn by postulating the complicity of Miles, and then adds for good measure the probable involvement of Flora. While James's method of "adumbration" encourages the reader to infer from the story of Miles and Quint the practice of homosexual child abuse, also appalling is the inevitable way in which the governess's own relationship with Flora becomes frighteningly destructive.

The traditional metaphor of the world as book that informs James's metafiction is apparent not only in the governess's narrative strategies but also in her use of models from fiction. Shortly after Peter Quint's first appearance, she muses about the possibility of a "secret" at Bly, as in *The Mystery of Udolpho* or *Jane Eyre*, novels which play with the borders between the rational and the supernatural, and critics have often commented on her feeling that she has entered a "castle of romance" (155), a "charming story" (163). An imaginist, whose grasp of the boundaries between reality and fiction is ordinarily somewhat tenuous, the governess adopts for her own narrative of exorcism the gothic mode and the binary form belonging to the fictions with which she is familiar, *The Mystery of Udolpho*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Amelia*.

Indeed this binary pattern is crucial to our understanding of the complex relationship between the two narratives. As critics have frequently pointed out, not only the frame but also the main narrative works through an extensive and precise system of pairing. Quint is seen twice outside the same window, two apparitions are observed on the stairs, each apparition gives rise to discussions between the governess and Mrs Grose, the governess twice comes across Flora out of her bed at night, she also has two conversations with Miles in his bedroom, and so on. This elaborate pattern serves to draw the reader's attention to the text's fictionality, but it also has the important function of emphasizing the binary logic that drives the governess's own imagined struggle with Miss Jessel, and self-justifying victory over her. Repeatedly the unexpected appearances of Quint outside windows and on staircases demand corresponding manifestations of Miss Jessel. But the differences are significant. Whereas Quint clearly wishes to

avoid encountering the governess, Miss Jessel is made to appear in confrontational situations. The governess's unexpected and horrifyingly human early morning meeting with Quint on the staircase, which is marked by a long gaze of mutual antagonism, calls up by binary reflex the apparition of Miss Jessel on the same staircase. Its fictional quality is underlined by the fact that the governess cannot forebear the obligatory gothic description of the "dreadful face" which she also tellingly confesses that she cannot in fact see (199). In this carefully constructed tableau, Miss Jessel is not standing on the landing like Quint, but seated near the foot of the staircase with her back to her rival, and bent in a submissive attitude of woe. This visitation is given little narrative space, vanishing the moment it has fulfilled its function of reinforcing the governess's perceived moral and social hierarchies.

Miss Jessel's final appearance occurs, with narrative inevitability, at the governess's moment of crisis. Bested by Miles's assertion that he will bring his uncle down to settle his future, she cannot bear the ugliness of the encounter, and she wants to "bolt" (220). Immediately following this temptation, she finds herself sitting in a state of exhausted dejection on the precise spot on the staircase previously occupied by her hated predecessor, "the most horrible of women" (220), who also bolted. Then she encounters Miss Jessel seated at her own table in the schoolroom:

> Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me; but even as I fixed and, for memory, secured it, the awful image passed away. Dark as midnight in her black dress, her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. (221)

In this culminating episode the governess, in thrall to her imagination, perceives herself to be the intruder in the story she has created, and the "wild protest" of her attempt to exorcize the alien spirit—"You terrible miserable woman!" (220)—is an endeavour to suppress this competing image of her own darker self. The crisis of decision is resolved in this scene, not by the danger that Quint poses to Miles, but ironically by the threat that her imaginative resurrection of the former governess has offered to her own sense of identity. And she feels compelled to stay. Within James's fiction, melodrama has turned the screw of the metaphysical plot. And yet, as in the earlier stages of the governess's narrative, this climactic encounter deconstructs itself at its very moment of fictional closure. The narrator not only reveals self-consciously her art of observation, selection and interpretation, but neatly categorizes and contemptuously dismisses her predecessor's sexual experience and social fall in terms of melodramatic stereotype and literary cliché.

The governess's whole narrative impulse is to bind her experience aesthetically into one unified whole. But ironically, while for much of the text her tale of Miss Jessel replicates in its essentials the reality of Quint's visitations—he appears on the tower, she is seen by the lake, and her appearance on the staircase is shortly followed by his—in one most significant respect 'fact' follows 'fiction.' The governess's failure when she confronts Flora with the imagined presence of the dead Miss Jessel, thereby alienating the child's love and trust, leads crucially to the true confrontation with evil in the presence of Quint. She does not learn from the collapse of her own fiction, but blunders tragically into the same urgent confessional situation in the Quint story that she is also endeavouring to appropriate for her own ends. Her assumption of the roles of heroine, saviour and exorcist results in her sending the master a psychologically damaged niece, and the appalling news of his nephew's sudden death.

When Douglas says "The story *won't* tell ... not in any literal vulgar way" (147), he is effectively preserving the text's ambiguity by ruling out exclusive readings of the governess's account of her experiences at Bly, either as a tale of the uncanny, or as psychological revelation. Indeed, the frame narrative, in which Douglas plays a crucial role, with its doubly ambiguous emphasis on fictions about the uncanny and on the governess's authority as narrator, alerts the reader to the text's processes of formal self-examination. James plays the metafictional 'game' in two main ways. There is the doubling effect of the figures of Douglas, the authoritative 'teller,' and the governess whom he endorses, but who is interrogated by the generic domination of the frame. And there are also the two narratives for which she is responsible—the metaphysical, chaotic narrative involving Peter Quint, and the highly literary narrative of Miss Jessel, which strives for aesthetic completion, but which simultaneously deconstructs itself. Metafictions do not 'tell' in any literal, vulgar way, and the writing of this extraordinary proto-modernist narrative afforded James the opportunity to explore, in a uniquely unconstrained manner, the extreme psychological parameters of the permanently unstable relationship between world and book. Indeed, critics who have been tempted to see James as deliberately placed in the text as the master, or even as Quint, might equally consider him figured as the governess, the imaginist, struggling with both the mystery of evil and the 'game' of fiction.