

# THE STRANGER CASE OF THE TURN OF THE SCREW AND HEART OF DARKNESS

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What frightens us may be as good an indication as any of our moral and intellectual life. Perhaps a book like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* relies so heavily on the element of suspense that the popularization of the tale has robbed us of its terror. But I suspect that the rather tame response we have to that work today as opposed to the unnerving experience of reading James's *The Turn of the Screw* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* runs deeper than the mere advance knowledge of endings. It has to do with the absence of clearly defined evil and the silent, sinister ambiguities that take its place. It has also to do with our changing critical assumptions. We are no longer intrigued by works that appear to be self-contained, that pose conflicts and resolve them, but we are increasingly more drawn to works that lure us down dark corridors where we lose our way. We return from the text not by finding the *right* way out, but by recognizing the tenuousness and artifice both of the house of fiction and of our own fixed sense of self. There *are* no revelatory endings in these works by James and Conrad. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, on the other hand, the ending reveals the "double" that the book has been unrelentlessly moving toward, while the clear identification of the evil force in that book contains and diminishes it. If we can explain why *The Turn of the Screw* and *Heart of Darkness*, published about a year before Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*,<sup>1</sup> still frighten and disorient us, while Stevenson's book, only twelve years older, does not, we may be able to identify one aspect of what we call "modernism," mainly by experiencing along with the central characters of these later works an *inability* to identify with certainty the presence of evil that pervades these worlds.

Essentially all three of these nouvelles appear to be highly schematized dramas of good and evil. Although we are in the realm of fantasy in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, we can analyze the book in the familiar terms of character, plot, and theme. Jekyll's "double," clear both to us and to him,

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1. Actual publication dates were: *The Turn of the Screw*, October 1898; *Heart of Darkness*, February 1899, first installment in Blackwood's Magazine; *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900.

is the ignoble Mr. Hyde, foreshadowed (but without perverse overtones) in the two friends Utterson and Enfield, austere lawyer and bon vivant. The plot is a mystery which unfolds gradually, first through a third person narration largely from Utterson's point of view and resulting from his determination to help his friend, and secondly through the exposure of several letters that finally reveal to us the "truth" about Jekyll in his own voice. As for theme, it is that of a respectable Victorian gentleman, and by implication a whole society, attempting to keep good and evil safely polarized at all times and the consequences of such behavior. Students who read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in my classes generally express disappointment that the book is not more frightening. Not only do they contend that Hyde isn't nearly evil enough (no doubt a result of the commonplaceness of violence in modern culture), but they also regard with suspicion what they identify as pure good triumphing over pure evil in the end: Utterson is right in having wanted to rescue his friend, Hyde is considerate enough to die when Jekyll does, leaving his letter and therefore his "reputation" intact, and Jekyll appears vindicated because the appearance of Hyde can be traced to an external accident—an impure chemical that is no longer available to him. Because this book pretends to have a moral message, the modern reader feels duped.

That this is not the case with the nouvelles by James and Conrad is evident by the response these same students have to *The Turn of the Screw* and *Heart of Darkness*. It is clear, however, that they are *not* responding merely to the idea prevalent in all three works—the threat of the uncivilized to erupt and overwhelm the civilized. In discussing the teaching of modern literature, Lionel Trilling has noted the readiness of students to engage in "the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive."<sup>2</sup> The modern reader, I contend, is responding to the inability to determine the boundary between civilization and that which subverts it. Freud's observation that "a great deal of what is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life," applies to Stevenson's work, with its midnight potions, muffled laughter, and Gothic facades, while the corollary is appropriate in this discussion of James's and Conrad's tales, "There are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life."<sup>3</sup> It is the element of the uncanny, I believe, stemming from both intellectual and moral uncertainty, that makes a reading of *The Turn of the Screw* and of *Heart of Darkness* truly disturbing. When we enter these texts, we have crossed some significant threshold.

"No one has noticed that *The Turn of the Screw* and *Heart of Darkness* appeared within a year of each other," writes Leon Edel, "and that

2. Lionel Trilling, "On The Teaching of Modern Literature," *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 26.

3. Sigmund Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 158.

both tales begin in the same way—the quiet circle, the reflective narrator, the retrospective method, the recall of crucial episodes. And perhaps from the ‘Mr. Quint is dead’ of the ghostly tale there sounds in Conrad a powerful echo, ‘Mistah Kurtz—he dead.’”<sup>4</sup> The works do indeed share a similar sensibility. Moreover, one of the first things we discover in attempting to analyze these works is that the traditional terms used in the discussion of fiction will not take us very far. We never have sufficient information to truly analyze character, and although we recognize that there are indeed “doubles,” we cannot identify them clearly. The plots also concern the unravelling of mysteries, but at the end we find that we are no nearer “the truth” than we were at the beginning. Consequently, no clear theme emerges except perhaps an ironic one: the impossibility of isolating perceptions into clear dramas of good and evil. By looking closely at one aspect that these three works do share, “the rescue,” we may be able to uncover those characteristics that link James and Conrad to each other. We will concern ourselves with a number of questions, such as: How do the rescuers determine what is good and evil, and consequently what is to be rescued? How do they perceive of themselves as rescuers? What fictions are created around the rescues? What type of language is clustered around the rescue motif?

The snake-like “brown current” leading to Kurtz’s cabin amid the stakes may seem remote indeed from the gentle paths and fading turrets of Bly, but the mental settings in these works are strikingly similar. In both *The Turn of the Screw* and *Heart of Darkness*, central characters who are also narrators attempt to rescue someone they deem innocent from evil forces which they can never clearly identify. While Utterson wants to free Jekyll from what he regards as solely an external threat, the governess and Marlow want to protect an innocent part of themselves which they project onto another. Their behavior illustrates that they are themselves aware of the self-interest of their quests. But that “other” whom they wish to rescue resists being classified symbolically. Nevertheless, the narrators proceed to actively protect what they perceive to be innocent from the corruption of evil forces. At certain points in both works, their predecessors, who represent that part of themselves which they fear (Kurtz, Miss Jessel) act out the narrators’ fantasies, while also enduring the predictable punishment.<sup>5</sup> In this vicarious experience of their own buried desires, Marlow and the governess pass judgment on what they believe is contemptible, escape punishment themselves and return to the world as witnesses marked by new understanding. But it also becomes clear that their notions of what is truly contemptible are undermined, they *are* punished indirectly for their

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4. Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Master (1909-1916)* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co.), pp. 54-55.

5. Although a Dane named Fresleven who was killed in a quarrel with the natives is Marlow’s actual predecessor, Kurtz can be seen as his predecessor as well.

self-restraint, and their "understanding" at the end is elusive and perhaps limited to their mistrust of themselves. The reader's involvement in the "rescue" is also limited to an awareness about the nature of fiction and the workings of his or her own mind, rather than to a revelation about the morality of a character or a society.

Critical debate over *The Turn of the Screw* has centered almost exclusively on the presence or non-presence of the apparitions, the sanity or insanity of the governess.<sup>6</sup> In short, debate has focused on character analysis. Perhaps we should accept this ambiguity in the text and go on to investigate how and why a work can contain and generate such confusion. Once we admit that there *are* ghosts and also that the governess *projects* her fantasies and neuroses onto reality, we are ready to pose the more meaningful question—what does this uncertainty signify? Most criticism of *Heart of Darkness* has been concerned with the symbolic nature of Marlow's voyage and, as in *The Turn of the Screw*, with the narrative structure—who tells the tale? These concerns result in studies of narrator and of theme.<sup>7</sup> By determining several filters of consciousness in each work, critics have brought to light a major aspect of these two writers, their interest in epistemology and the place of fiction in determining reality. With that insight, we now need to discover some of the other basic shared structures of these works to arrive at a broader understanding of their place in literary history.

First, as I have already mentioned, these are works in which central protagonists who are also narrators attempt to *rescue* someone they consider innocent from the influence of evil. They achieve this goal, but at the cost of the innocent's life. In *The Turn of the Screw*, it is an idea of the innate innocence of children that the governess seeks to preserve: "If he had been wicked he would have 'caught' it, and I should have caught it by the rebound—I should have found the trace. I found nothing at all, and he was therefore an angel."<sup>8</sup> She dwells on their angelic faces and impeccable behavior, which she perceives to be under attack by demons. This essential innocence of children is never questioned. Marlow seeks to preserve another idea of innocence, the civilized European man with his restraint and noble intentions. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,"<sup>9</sup> Marlow recalls, but he had lost the restraint that Marlow values

6. The best summary of this criticism can be found in Alexander E. Jones's "Point of View in *The Turn of the Screw*," *PMLA*, 74 (March, 1959), 112-122. This article is reprinted along with other major essays in *A Casebook on Henry James's The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Gerald Willen (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960).

7. Among many interpretations this voyage has been seen as a movement in the soul, in time, in history, in hell, and in quest of the Holy Grail. Some of these essays have been collected in the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971.)

8. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), p. 19. All further references will be cited in the text.

9. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), p. 50. Further references will be cited in the text.

so highly. Kurtz is part of him, just as the children represent a part of the governess—but they are endangered, fragile parts, besieged by insidious evil powers. Ironically, in neither case do the “victims” want to be rescued; this is the obsession solely of the protector. Marlow tricks Kurtz, corners him in the jungle, and physically carries him aboard the boat, while the governess stages a private dinner with Miles from whom she wrings a confession. Both the identification of Peter Quint and the judgment of the “horror” can be seen as recognitions induced by the presence of the protector and the imposition of his or her perspective on the innocent who dies.

Also from the perspective of the protectors, the evil that threatens these innocents appears and disappears at will. The black natives retreating silently into the darkness of the jungle are *apparitions* for Marlow, despite their “real” presence in the story. Marlow speaks of “black shapes,” “black shadows,” “moribund shapes,” and “phantom,” when he describes the diseased and starving natives who appear momentarily from behind the trees. He sees the flicker of black limbs or “a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. . . . Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared” (p. 62). In the same way the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel haunt the governess. “He remained but a few seconds—long enough to convince me he also saw and recognized. . . .” (p. 20). She believes the ghosts to be endangering the children, and Marlow, although he comments on the futility of firing into a continent, fears the power of that whole continent’s mass of dark apparitions. He rarely perceives them as whole beings like himself, but rather “. . . a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage” (p. 36).

Furthermore, these apparitions are each at the center of a tragic story that remains consistently on the periphery of the narrators’ perceptions. The tragedy of Miss Jessel, dead in childbirth, and of Peter Quint, dead of too much drink, is only symbolic background information from the point of view of the governess and her fight to save the souls of the children. Along the same lines, the dying black men crouched under the trees and brutalized by the white invader serve only as a symbol for Marlow of the savagery they expose to that white man. They are the evil phantom Marlow wrestles for the soul of Kurtz. These tragedies are appropriated by the mind of the narrator and subsumed into the moral conflict it constructs, thereby becoming symbolic for us as well.

Both the rescue and the apparitions are part of a drama in which the narrators can see their own tabooed desires fulfilled without guilt through another, for the perpetrators of these deeds suffer the consequences as well. Freudian readings of *The Turn of the Screw* are valuable here, for they have exposed the prim and repressed background of the governess and her infatuation with her employer, the man on Harley Street. I would like to add to these readings that even if we grant the presence of the ghosts, we

still must contend with the correspondence of their sinfulness to the governess's romantic and sexual fantasies about the master. For example, the ghosts' enactment of her fantasies takes place in a *moral* setting that expresses the governess's disdain: two servants, one a young governess who gave into her desires, and the other a valet who looks as disreputable as an actor and dresses in the clothing of the master of Harley Street (clothing which are too large for him) *do* have an affair. It ends in death for them both, Miss Jessel presumably dying in childbirth, and it leads to their infamy and the possible corruption of the children as well. The governess exhibits the same general impulse to separate good and evil found in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where, perhaps not incidentally, Hyde always appears in Dr. Jekyll's garments, far too large for him and hanging suspiciously around his wizened body. The governess has the luxury of observing an enactment of her fantasy and her own disdain for that fantasy simultaneously; she can be both perpetrator and judge. In other words, whether there are ghosts or not, the governess is *interpreting*, and that interpretation should be our main concern. Marlow's desires to explore the dark places of the earth (and in himself) result in his observing one of his predecessors lose himself in the darkness and also suffer the consequences. From Marlow's perspective, Kurtz paid the price for his adventure, by never being able to reenter civilization. But, there is also a price paid for this vicarious experience of life.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* stands behind these two works in an interesting way. It is a far simpler tale—the struggle between good and evil within one man is staged with little subtlety but with much force. We never really find out what Jekyll's early sins were, the sins from which he so fiercely desired to be dissociated.

Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures; and that when I reached years of reflection, and began to look round me and take stock of my progress and position in the world, I stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life. Many a man would have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of; but from the high views that I had set before me, I regarded and hid them with an almost morbid sense of shame.<sup>10</sup>

All we do know is that "high views" looked down and judged his pleasures to be shameful, morbidly so. This takes on a sinister quality only because those pleasures are never specified, but the blatant consequence of such restraint, or repression, dispels the sinister effect. James and Conrad make more skilful use of this technique in their tales, where a sense of evil and degeneracy pervades every corner, but is never wholly revealed. If it were, it too would cease to be sinister. "Only make the reader's general vision of

10. Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 78.

evil intense enough, I said to myself . . . make him *think* (sic) the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specification," James wrote.<sup>11</sup> Conrad believed he had succeeded, for he writes of *The Turn of the Screw* that it leaves "a kind of phosphorescent trail in one's mind" along with an "intellectual thrill."<sup>12</sup> Of his own work, Conrad writes "That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck."<sup>13</sup> Unlike the "high views" in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, those in James's and Conrad's works contain the seeds of their opposite in them, for they may be "high" only from the perspective of these narrators and their culture. From another perspective, there is nothing "high" at all about the governess's chastity or Kurtz's pamphlet on the suppression of savage customs. They both judge something to be savage, and in doing so, they attribute great evil to the apparitions they encounter. But their notions of good and evil are undermined in ways that Dr. Jekyll, even in his most tormented hours, never experienced. That is what makes these two nouvelles more engaging than the earlier one by Stevenson.

The price that these two rescuers with their "high views" pay is agonizing uncertainty. The governess herself begins to doubt her own conclusions, her own sanity, and as a result, suspects her own complicity in doing evil to the children. ". . . for if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?" (p. 87) She has an ominous insight that perhaps her good intentions and high ideals could be responsible for harming the very souls she sought to help; a case of the menacing quality of martyrdom. Perhaps her perceptions and resulting behavior are responsible for establishing a fiction far more harmful than that she seeks to eradicate. When Marlow catches his first glimpse of Kurtz's shack he too recognizes that perhaps instead of rescuing Kurtz from the evil around him, he is rescuing the black natives from a man who has corrupted *them*. It may be that the values that Marlow finds so admirable in Kurtz (and in himself) precipitate the evil that he witnesses. Who corrupts whom and what constitutes morality are not easy issues to resolve in these books. Innocence is an elusive and at times ironic idea; opposites collapse into each other.

In addition to the double-edged nature of innocence, there is a conspiracy of silence and lies in these two works. The governess preserves the illusion of order and safety for the master, although it may be unfair both to him and to the children to do so, while Marlow preserves the Intended's

11. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 176. From the preface to "The Aspern Papers," which includes prefatory remarks about *The Turn of the Screw*.

12. Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Master*, p. 55.

13. Joseph Conrad, "Author's Note" (1917), *Youth* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1921), pp. ix-xiii. Reprinted in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert Kimbrough), p. 160.

illusion of Kurtz's last words, although he perceives this to be an injustice to the memory of the dead man. Yet in each case, the illusion contains some truth, for it is possible that there *is* nothing wrong at Bly but the governess's perception or misperception of reality, just as it is possible that Kurtz's "horror" did not mean what Marlow took it to mean. We, as readers, never get any more information than the narrators do, so we are left with the same sense of a fiction alone both separating us from and containing the only meaning available to us.

Despite the vague and ambiguous nature of words, they are the only antidote Marlow and the governess seek. When evil surfaces, it is in the form of silent visual images that appear and disappear—the apparitions of the two servants and of the natives. In contrast, the quest of both the governess and of Marlow is for voices—the former to hear a confession from the children that would exorcise the evil and the latter to hear the voice that can bear witness to that which few men have known. Marlow is obsessed by Kurtz only when he is a disembodied voice. "The man presented himself as a voice." (p. 48) Marlow says before he meets up with him. Later on the boat Kurtz was "A voice! A voice! It rang deep to the very last," (p. 69) while Marlow admits at the end that "His words will remain" (p. 78). Perhaps Marlow feels that the silent apparitions will be dispelled by Kurtz's words. Those words constitute most of Marlow's memory of Kurtz—"He was just a word for me" (p. 27)—and our memory of the story—"I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him?" When Kurtz finally names his experience, he dies. Similarly, in *The Turn of the Screw*, when the governess can wrest from Miles the words "Peter Quint," the silent apparition disappears and Miles dies. In both of these cases, language has magical powers, yet it conceals as much as it discloses. It is the vehicle of lies and the only hope of the narrators, for the silent voiceless apparitions, the unexpressed, is far more frightening.

"The creative art of a writer of fiction," Conrad wrote, "may be compared to rescue work carried out in darkness. . . . It is rescue work, this snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence, disguised in fair words, out of the native obscurity into a light where the struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values—the permanence of memory."<sup>14</sup> By constructing fictions, Conrad believed, the writer rescues something meaningful, if only temporarily, from formless darkness. The unexpressed, it seems, leaves him with a sense of foreboding, just as it haunts the governess and Marlow, while words, like the fictions they create, always trail behind them the obscurity from which they come. Mysteries are not solved in these nouvelles, but they are given names.

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14. Joseph Conrad, "Henry James: An Appreciation" (1905), *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 13-17 [Reprinted in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition.]



All of this is not to suggest that nothing distinguishes *The Turn of the Screw* from *Heart of Darkness*. But it is to suggest how two authors took the themes of "the double" and "the rescue" and approached them in a manner that characterizes what we call "modern literature," across a great chasm from Stevenson's earlier treatment of the same themes. I have tried to explain how our contemporary concerns as readers for the self-conscious edge in literary works correspond to the sensibility of these writers, and together these can still, as Woolf said of James, "make us afraid of the dark." We respond to the works because the uncertainty they generate is met by the uncertainty we willingly provide. Both nouvelles are about the terror of having to make moral choices on uncertain perceptions of evil; they are about false or exaggerated notions of innocence and the evil unleashed in trying to preserve what is only a fraud. And finally, they are structures of words acting as conspiracies of silence. There may be quiet streets in Stevenson's London, but even the sound of footsteps muffled by the night fog in that ordered world cannot compare to the vague stirrings and rustlings of Bly and the jungle. In Conrad's and James's books silences are terrible, while words are used to precariously cover that silence and also to convey the wordless darkness at each book's core.



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