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What Maisie Knew and the Governess Muddled: Cognitive Development in James’s Post-dramatic Fiction

by KATHRYN MILES

Rebecca West once suggested that all of Henry James’s work emphasizes experience and the way it molds one’s intellect, that his fascination with his own impressions was a key impetus for his fiction. In her biography of James, she advises readers to “remember that not only were impressions much to young James, they were all he had” (17). James, she continues, made much of his discovery “that the wine of experience always makes a raw draught when it has just been trodden out from bruised grapes by the pitiless feet of men, that it must be subject to time before it acquires suavity. The lack of this perception matters little in his early work but it is vastly important in shaping his later phases” (27-28).

While I hesitate to join West in ascribing clear connections between James’s childhood and the children in his fiction, I do think that James’s fiction does, indeed, demonstrate the ways our impressions and experiences lead to our cognitive development. At no time is this more apparent than during what Leon Edel has termed the “post-dramatic” phase of James’s career, when he focused on the epistemological processes of “childhood and adolescence,” particularly as they relate to sexuality (Letters 283-84). Texts written during this phase present a series of adolescent characters who serve as models of knowing and being: their experiences and impressions dictate their own cognitive development, and in so doing, offer similar apparatuses for our consideration. Beginning with What Maisie Knew (1897), each of James’s “post-dramatic” works presents a more complex epistemological system embedded in his characters’ experiences and the knowledge that results. These characters must learn to cope with a more complex and beguiling view of the world; each encounters epistemological problems more complicated than those before, problems that challenge each character to arrive at an understanding of the perplexing world in which they live.

In short, what I would like to suggest is that James offers us a sort of progressive epistemological theory that he develops, advances, and ultimately critiques in his fiction: a sort of fictional paper trail that allows us to follow his growth as a philosophical novelist, as well as the growth of the theory that underlies these works. Using one of the earlier texts of this period, such as What Maisie Knew, as a sort of theoretical touchstone, then, can be a useful way to tease out the implicit cognitive theory offered in some of his later and more epistemologically challenging texts, such as The Turn of the Screw (1898).
Perception and Process: James’s Theories of Epistemology

As P.R. Grover argues, James’s epistemological project is unique in that it endeavors to “shift attention from the what to the how” (123). Similarly, Joann Krieg maintains that James’s treatment of knowledge is “not ‘to know’ in the very sense of an action completed, but ‘knowing’ used in the same sense as the word ‘becoming’ and indicating an on-going process” (136).

Best understood in terms of phases, James offers what might be called “an economy of process interesting in itself” (AN 321). Loosely encapsulated, his theory suggests that the human mind begins as a clean slate—something akin to Locke’s tabula rasa—and is incapable of abstract ideas or associations. It is then marked by sensory impressions which, in turn, allow for the construction and retention of associative ideas and abstraction.¹

James divides epistemological development into three basic phases. In the first of these, he bases cognition on “impressions,” or basic sensory apprehension. Ideas formed during this phase reflect “a personal and direct impression of life and a changing reality, changing according to the viewer. It is not consistent with a truth that has only to be discovered” (Grover 126). The most basic, the most fleeting, and the most innocent phase of our development, this stage results in visual knowledge that is vivid but cannot be evaluated by the subject.

Eventually, however, most subjects advance past this stage and discover ways to order their “furnished” data in order to make a “judgement” based on sensory experience and already existing ideas: what James terms the “fruits of the subtlest influences,—birth, education, association” (Letters 9).² This, the second phase of development, allows for a more static and arguably more permanent understanding of the world, in that it demands the ordering and categorizing of sensory data within abstract ideas. It also allows the subject to “retain the consciousness” of an “original impression” by ensuring that data may be categorized within the human mind (Letters 298-99). Literary texts, philosophical and scientific theories, or other static ideas all offer the subject a sort of anchor with which to tie down otherwise fleeting notions.³ It is important to note, however, that while abstract ideas offer a more static understanding of the world, they must not eclipse experiential learning. As James warns in his letters, all ideas must be part of a “vision prompted by

¹. The foundation for James’s theory finds its origin in the theories of Hume, Kant, and Bergson, all of whom explore ideas of sensory data, abstract ideas, and the constant synthesis of the two as the basic mode of all human knowledge: key precepts of each philosopher figure prominently in James’s epistemology.

². This letter is written in direct response to issues raised regarding Locke’s On Human Understanding. Like Hume, James seems to endorse the basic precepts of Locke’s theory of abstract ideas and sensory data; he also suggests that a means of “judgement” and evaluation is needed in any epistemological theory. Thus, in keeping with Hume’s thought, James concludes that, when confronted with a perception, we must be able to “take cognizance of it, measure it, reform it, or cast it off” (Letters 10).

³. James makes a similar argument in his preface to The Portrait of a Lady. He writes, “The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are” (AN 33-34).
life," lest they begin to lack extra-mental integrity (Letters 299). Should abstraction begin to rule a subject's cognitive process, the subject will inadvertently jettison his or her ability to evaluate ideas in light of experience, thereby causing a fantastical (and often misguided) perception of the world.

Ideally, individuals must discover the means with which to evaluate or judge both their perceptions and their resulting ideas. They must also maintain a delicate balance between experiential data and internal response. It is this balance that is the real essence of James's theory. Experience and abstract ideas must be weighed against one another, as each dictates how one perceives the world. And because this basic equation, this balance of personal experience and abstract ideas, allows for an almost infinite number of permutations, the conceptions of reality created from this balance are both unique and highly subjective. James's epistemological system allows for myriad concurrent worldviews without the fear of contradiction and with no interest in verifying an objective reality. It also allows him to conclude, as he does in the allegory of the house of fiction, that we each view the world from our perceptual window.

II

Through Maisie's Window: Growing, Jamesian Style

As THE NARRATOR OF What Maisie Knew consistently reminds us, the telos of the child is both deliberate and specific. Maisie's "vocation" centers on seeing the world and thrilling "with the relish of the picture" (297). But, as we discover in the novel, her lenses and vantage points are forever changing, as are exterior elements such as light and speed of action, thereby making it difficult for Maisie to construct and retain a "picture" of the world. James capitalizes on this very difficulty and uses it as the foundation for the study of his epistemology and its basic phases.

The first of these phases places Maisie in a decidedly passive, and arguably objectified, position in which her initial vision and understanding of the world are based wholly on sensory data and its resulting impressions. We are told, for instance, that her knowledge of the world exists only "in that lively sense of the immediate which is the very air of a child's mind," and in which the past is "as indistinct as the future" (16). As a result, her idea of the world remains a partial and largely sensuous understanding of the places and people she encounters. During Maisie's first reunion with her mother, for instance, she describes her mother as "all kisses, ribbons, eyes, arms, strange sounds and sweet smells" (15). Both fragmentary and purely physical, Maisie's description demonstrates the limitations of her early perceptual process and its resulting ideas. 4 Without the benefit of past experience or pre-

4. But as Geoffrey Smith suggests, this phase also affords Maisie a particularly acute ability to view the world through a gaze untainted by social mores. Because she is "innocent of prior experience," Maisie is also "the most perfect receptacle, the most pristine observer" (224). Smith's choice of description here is particularly apt as a "receptacle" of sensory data, Maisie is an empty vessel that passively receives and contains its contents. Marked by innocence, inexperience, and arguably inactivity, the first of Maisie's phases is both pristine and fragmentary: a state reflected in her understanding and actions (or lack thereof).
conceived ideas, Maisie is unable to draw connections or correlations between what she sees and feels; her vision includes only the random “occasions and connexion of her proximity and her attention” (320). The resulting epistemology, the narrator explains, suffers from “great gaps and voids” that “fail of clearness of sense” (319).

But, as I suggested earlier, James’s system dictates that a subject fill such gaps and voids as he or she begins to inscribe the tabula rasa with accumulating perceptions and experiences. For Maisie, this means first discovering and then utilizing “a term of comparison” acquired from her growing store of memories (35). To this end, she discovers that random occurrences in her past—such as a dental visit or a lesson with a governess—inform her present judgments concerning parental love interests and other grown-up exploits. Indeed, “her fund of observation enable[s] her ... to place” the various people she meets within understandable categories (187). As Maisie graduates from the first of James’s phases, she discovers how to order her impressions by way of this growing reserve of experience. In this regard, she begins to embody James’s maxim that experience “is never limited, and it is never complete; it is as an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue” (AN 172). These silken webs allow Maisie to draw important connections between past and present experiences. They also ensure that she receives present stimuli through the filter of past memory. Because Maisie learns to draw upon, or draw out, her previous experience, she also learns to expand her field of vision. More important, she is able to make sense of the previously unidentifiable bits of sensory data impressed upon her. As James adds sensibility to sensory acquisition, then, Maisie learns to advance from a limited aperture to a broader field of vision. The resulting change in views is distinct. As the narrator of What Maisie Knew explains, this change in vantage point allows Maisie to employ “old forms and phrases” in order to impart meaning on her new sensations. Maisie discovers:

the meaning for which these things had waited. By the time she had grown sharper ... she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she was not yet big enough to play. (13)

Still developing cognitively, Maisie’s understanding remains fragmentary and unclear; there are drawers and closets she simply cannot reach. But she can nevertheless employ her “fund of observation [to] enable her ... to place” her new impressions within pre-established categories (187). Moreover, she can now employ both her visions and her memories as fodder for abstract musings and conclusions.

5. James plays with the idea of “former knowledge” throughout this stage of Maisie’s development (41), as it serves to ensure that “the little girl’s interpretations thickened” (44) and she reaches a more mature understanding of the complex web of relationships in which she is immersed.
During her second stage of development, Maisie also learns to construct more concrete ideas of her own. Once equipped with a ready storehouse of ideas and memories of her parents’ behavior, for instance, she learns to predict and understand their actions in the present. Whereas her mother’s erratic behavior was once the cause of great confusion for the girl, she learns to trust in the patterns she has constructed from past experience. When her return to her mother becomes delayed, the narrator of the novel assures us that Maisie was “old enough now to understand how disproportionate a stay she had already made with her father; and also old enough to enter a little into the ambiguity that surrounded this circumstance and that oppressed her particularly whenever the question had been touched upon in talk with her governess” (47). Still, Maisie’s vantage point provides an obstructed, and somewhat distorted, view of the world. James describes this view as one shrouded in “dusk” to emphasize further the end of Maisie’s youth as well as her impaired perception. Although Maisie has been introduced to the “games” associated with a mature cognitive process, she remains unable to construct an erudite, or even lucid, understanding of that which she perceives, and thus remains unable to play by an adult’s rules.

As James’s implicit epistemological argument suggests, ideas constructed during the second phase of development consist of far more than dusty sensory impressions from days gone by. While the memory of such impressions may indeed form a crucial component of organization and thought, they are only one outlet for such ordering. In fact, such ideas can become quickly overshadowed by ideas presented to a subject by the textual world. Maisie’s introduction to the world of literature, for instance, affords her a new and extremely powerful lens through which to view her environment. What results is the creation of a fantastical world where fiction begins to inform and guide all of her perceptions. One of her first exposures to a written text—her introduction to *The Arabian Nights*—aptly demonstrates this shift. Once she reads the tales, Maisie begins to project them onto all that she sees and feels. The tales:

were in everything, particularly in such an instant “open sesame” and in the departure of a cab, a rattling void filled with relinquished step-parents; they were, with the vividness, the almost blinding whiteness of the light that sprang responsive to papa’s quick touch of a little brass knob on the wall, in a place that, at the top of a short soft staircase, struck her as the most beautiful she had ever seen in her life. (224-25)

As this passage demonstrates, Maisie’s introduction into the world of fiction is both brilliant and confused. Her new role as a reader replaces the complete passivity of an empty vessel by allowing her to consume and apply texts. Nevertheless, it introduces a new set of problems for the epistemological ini-

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5. When Mrs. Wix tells Maisie that Sir Claude “leans” on her, for instance, Mrs. Wix becomes “more surprised than amused when, later on, she accidentally found she had given her pupil the impression of a support literally supplied by her person” (124). Such errors of understanding on the part of young Maisie remind her elders that they must “be explicit” in a way they need not be when conversing with other adults.
tiate. Indeed, as this deliberately hyperbolic account of Maisie’s use of the tales clearly indicates, her application of abstract ideas lacks all sense of proportion, thereby revealing the naivete of young Maisie. The deliberately ironic use of “illumination” in the passage points to the blinding effects of abstract thought and casts considerable doubt on its potential for effecting a more lucid perception of the world. Like many readers, Maisie’s heartfelt embrace of the fictional world begins to eclipse the experiential world that surrounds her.

To paint this phase of Maisie’s development as wholly negative is to ignore the real benefits it affords. By using fiction as a lens through which to view the world, Maisie is, in fact, able to form a more coherent and static interpretation of the world around her. Whereas her initial perceptions of her mother were based only on sensory data (the “ribbons” and “sweet smells” quoted earlier) and consequently lacking in staying power, her later perceptions—perceptions formed during the second phase of development—are clearly more advanced. When faced with her mother during this stage, Maisie discovers that she is now:

Relying upon a combination of previous ideas and storybook fantasies, Maisie places her mother within a context which supersedes her current experiential basis. As Deborah Esch explains, such examples demonstrate the ways reading can facilitate understanding or compensation for a lack of experience. The idea that reading enriches perceptual process is a fundamental concept in James’s epistemology. Within James’s novels and tales, “what is substituted for the unmediated—or undermediated—notion of experience is an analytical activity whose object of inquiry” is often the printed page (145).

This brings us to the third stage of James’s epistemology. In order to argue, and argue persuasively, that reading can replace notions of experience, James must establish two important threads: a way for his characters to maintain a phenomenological understanding of the world, and a way to determine the strength of fit between a particular text and a real-world situation. As he acknowledges in “The Art of Fiction,” the potential for this advancement rests on one’s ability to “say Yes or No,” as it may be, to what the text puts before us. To arrive at this point of discernment—the third of James’s epistemological phases—a subject must begin to manage the “hermeneutic” space of a text and determine its “relationship to ‘reality’” (Malmgren 23).

Accomplishing this transition is no easy task. For the majority of What Maisie Knew, Maisie operates as an undiscerning consumer: she readily devours all essays and stories which pass through her field of vision and does
so without any evaluative mechanisms.\textsuperscript{7} This approach creates a sense of enchantment in which she had "never in such an association felt so uplifted and never above all been so carried off her feet" (211). But as we saw in her application of \textit{The Arabian Nights}, carried off one's feet often necessitates losing sight of the importance of checking textual knowledge against experiential understanding. James gives us no indication that Maisie understands the need to test the strength of fit between experience and metaphoric depiction, nor is there evidence that she attempts to ally like perceptions and texts. Instead, she blithely elides the boundaries between fictional worlds and those within her realm of experience, creating both rapture and rupture: an excitement and stimulation imparted by the texts, and a skewed perception that keeps her from forming an accurate view of the world.

Although long-lived, this sense of rapture does eventually give way to a more critical, more discerning relationship with knowledge. For this transition to occur, Maisie must shed her role as a passive consumer and adopt a set of evaluative mechanisms with which to judge her perceptions. This process occurs both metaphorically and literally during her voyage to France. Once on the continent, Maisie discovers that she has also ventured into the third phase of development, which enables her to manage any epistemological fray. The new Maisie "identified she understood, she adored and took possession; feeling herself attuned to everything" (298). This new role, a role marked by deliberate action, is further enhanced by Maisie's ability to follow ideas and concepts "from point to point" and watch their development (433). Admittedly, she is far from achieving a fully mature epistemological stance, one which would allow her both to see and to inscribe all the intricacies and subtleties of life that James adores; nevertheless, Maisie clearly distinguishes herself as an active agent who can say "yes" or "no" to the images she receives.

As \textit{What Maisie Knew} draws to a close and Maisie reaches the twilight of childhood, there can be little doubt about her potential for success as an active and insightful adult. An inverse relationship of sorts, the nightfall of her childhood is also marked by the illumination of her perceptual world. Her "ability to conceptualize is grounded in intuition as well as observation; and sentience has replaced sensuality as the intellectual (and ethical) norm" (Craig 205).\textsuperscript{8} In so doing, Maisie demonstrates the actualization of the Jamesian epistemological ideal. That ideal, the "power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things" (\textit{AC} 172), comes to life in the form of an adolescent Maisie. At the conclusion of the novel, Maisie can

\textsuperscript{7} As the narrator explains, Maisie felt "as if she were flattening her nose upon the hard window-pane of the sweet-shop of knowledge" (175); and, when she finally gains admittance into this shop, she "plucks" all morsels of ideas as she passes (210-11).

\textsuperscript{8} Craig's essay on the parallels between Maisie and readers of the novel has proven most useful to my study of epistemological states in James's fiction. But because Craig omits all discussion of Maisie's growth and process, I think we are well served in pausing here to establish the specific modes of knowledge enacted by Maisie as well as the philosophy that underlies these stages.
"read the unspoken into the spoken, so that thus, with accumulations, it had become more definite to her that the unspoken was, unspeakably, the completeness" of thought (What Maisie Knew 346). Maisie learns not only to read the text before her, but to incorporate that text within the unwritten text, the text "for which a more comfortable place was Maisie's light little brain, where it hummed away" (262). Her graduation from the third phase of James's process is also, then, a graduation "from the romantic idealism into the social realism of adulthood" (Smith 224). But, as James demonstrates in The Turn of the Screw, entering the world of social realism presents an altogether new set of concerns for cognitive development.

III

Governing Knowledge: "Adult" Epistemology and the Will to Act

Clear, concise, and rigidly delineated, James's epistemological praxis, his treatment of knowledge in What Maisie Knew, offers the reader a well-defined formula for determining cognitive growth. But it is far from complete. As James explains in his preface to the novel, we are only able to follow Maisie's epistemological growth "up to the death—the death of her childhood, properly speaking; after which (with the inevitable shift, sooner or later, of her point of view) her situation will change and become another affair, subject to other measurements and with a new center altogether" (321). While the conclusion of James's novel finds Maisie completing the last of the phases of knowledge acquisition, her story ends well before James can address the myriad variations and complications inherent in any epistemological system and its performance by an adult subject. It is not until we meet Maisie's cognitive successor—the governess in The Turn of the Screw—that we are able to see James's exploration of such nuances.

To this end, James begins The Turn of the Screw by pacing the governess through Maisie's three cognitive phases. Like Maisie, the governess finds her initial entry into the perceptual world marked by passivity. Immobile before the aperture of her surroundings, the governess must receive only that sensory data that crosses her gaze, rather than sensations that she herself seeks out. Furthermore, this data is not merely imparted to the governess; rather, it is thrust upon her with an element of force: she writes that the vision of her employer "struck" her upon their first meeting (149); she was "struck" by the vision of her own reflection (153); and she also "was struck" by the behavior of her young charges, Miles and Flora (155). And although the governess is

9. As several critics have noted, the conclusion of What Maisie Knew does point to the child's developing sexuality. Nonetheless, the novel concludes before we ever really see the ways that this sexuality will complicate her own mode of knowledge. For more information, see Dennis Foster, "Maisie Supposed to Know: Amoral Analysis," Henry James Review 5.3 (Spring 1984): 201-18; and Abigail A. Hamblen, "Henry James and the Power of Eros: What Maisie Knew," Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought 9 (1968): 391-99.
older than Maisie, she too begins without a store of experiential backgrounds or mimetic ideas. This results in distinct (and often erroneous) perceptions. Consider, for instance, an early account of her activities with the children:

we went straight to the lake, as it was called at Bly, and I daresay rightly called, though it may have been a sheet of water less remarkable than my untraveled eyes supposed it. My acquaintance with sheets of water was small, and the pool of Bly, at all events on the few occasions of my consenting, under the protection of my pupils, to affront its surface in the old flat-bottomed boat moored there for our use, had impressed me both with its extent and its agitation. (234)

James’s use of “impressed” captures both the passivity and naivete of the governess, and the pun on “pupils” as well as its ironic use (they are, after all, her “protectors” in this scene, rather than her charges) further emphasizes the somewhat puerile position of the governess. Moreover, his use of an embedded narrative frame further emphasizes the governess’ lack of development: by allowing the aged governess to recount these early experiences, James reifies the process that the governess must undertake as she develops.

In order for the governess to achieve the second phase of development, she must enlist the help of her companion, Mrs. Grose. As the governess explains, any and all of her ideas at this point in her development result from Mrs. Grose’s influence. Marrying Mrs. Grose’s ideology with her own empirical findings, the governess constructs a system of knowledge based on her “dreadful liability to impressions of the order so vividly exemplified, and [her] companion[’s] knowledge henceforth” (175). Mrs. Grose’s “knowledge” supplements the governess’ library of romance novels, which inform all of her perceptions. She tells us, for instance, that her employer and his home appear as if they were out of “an old novel” (149), and she wonders whether her experience might be “just a story-book over which” she has fallen asleep (155-56). These “readings” serve as the overarching lens through which the governess views all of her experiences.

Because the governess has little experience to draw upon, she substitutes the textual world. Her reactions to her new environment clearly indicate this practice. Her employer, for instance, is described as “vast and imposing—this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of his life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel” (149). Such characterizations place the governess on the cusp of James’s first and second epistemological phases. She still relies on her role as a passive observer (note, here, that her initial conception of his home on Harley Street comes to her by way of a sensory blow which leaves a mark upon her consciousness). That her employer endeavors to “judge” the governess only emphasizes her underdeveloped perception.

Helen Killoran suggests that this is even more problematic than it first appears. According to Killoran, there is no indication of Mrs. Grose’s reliability or integrity in the tale. Instead, “the attribution of solid wholesomeness to Mrs. Grose is the perception only of the governess, an unreliable narrator” (“The Governess, Mrs. Grose, and ‘the Poison of Influence’ in The Turn of the Screw,” Modern Language Studies 23.2 [1993]: 13-24). Thus, not only does the governess wrongly choose to accept wholesale the beliefs of someone else, she accepts the beliefs of an insidiously dishonest character.
Rather than use this moment of limbo as an opportunity to initiate a more active and critical discernment, the governess reposes within the world of fictional/experiential juxtaposition, rejecting the need for evaluative mechanisms. This practice intensifies throughout the text, and the governess consistently endeavors to use the fictional world as an accurate and absolute window to the world around her. When dealing with Miles, for instance, she can only conclude that he appears “divine” (161), or like a “little fairy prince” (204). James’s emphasis on uncertainty and bewilderment—two ideas seen as crucial to epistemological development—are noticeably absent here. Even the governess’ eventual question, “was there a ‘secret’ at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an instance, an even unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (166), is clearly rhetorical, if not altogether ironic. After all, as far as the governess is concerned, her life is indeed a mirror image of Radcliffe’s gothic pages.

What are we to make of such ideas? Maisie’s experiences taught us that reading does not necessarily preclude understanding, that it can, rather, enhance our understanding. But as I noted earlier, this occurs if—and only if—some sort of evaluation is made in order to determine the relationship between a text and a situational experience that it is supposed to represent. Reality, explains James, has a “myriad of forms,” some of which are made of such “a very delicate shade” that “one would hesitate to propose it as a model” for the world around us (AC 171). This is the rub for the governess. Rather than recognize a continuum of plausibility—a sliding scale of applicability for the fictional world—the governess insists upon a direct correlation between the worlds of the Bly estate and gothic novels. As a result, she “distorts reality in that instead of explicating, clarifying, unfolding the figure, she infolds, implies, and implicates in both the vulgar sense of involving others in her inaccurate perceptions and in the older sense of twisting those perceptions together to weave an inappropriate but powerful design” (Faulkner 91). A predicament such as this might be charmingly provincial if it occurred in a small child. But as the governess demonstrates, it can become hopelessly tragic when located in the mind of one who must act as a discerning and responsible adult.

As such a figure, the governess is expected to contend with her own impressions and ideas, and reconcile these with an adult sexuality and social position, two requirements wholly unknown to Maisie. These factors insist that the cognitive subject enter into a different sort of epistemology in which ideas are not only based on abstract thought and experiential data, but also on sexual and social mores: gender expectations, desire, and the responsibility of one’s position within society. Recall that, as James explained earlier, any and

11. James provides a detailed account of the merits of bewilderment in several of his prefaces. He writes in the preface to The Princess Casamassima, for instance, that without it “there would be no question of an issue or of the fact of suspense,” both of which aid the reader in following experience (AN 54). Similarly, in the preface to The Turn of the Screw, he argues that ambiguity and fantastical depictions avoid the “pattern of the usual or the true or the terrible pleasant” and, thus, allow the “distracted modern mind” to enter more fully into the fictional world (170-71).
all adult processes are "subject to other measurements and with a new center altogether." For the governess, this new center becomes the typical feminine plot of marriage and parentage, both of which she expects to find at Bly. What results from this addition is a scenario in which James’s later tale uses the first three phases of Maisie’s development as a foundation on which to build a more complicated inquiry concerning human epistemology. In fact, although The Turn of the Screw mirrors the three-phased development inherent in the structure of the earlier novel, the heart of its theme lies in the stages that succeed Maisie’s process. This allows James to complicate his epistemological project by inserting the extenuating conditions of adulthood. It also allows him to trace the development of diseased or faulty perceptual apparatuses when a subject has the opportunity to act upon such impulses. We might conclude, then, that The Turn of the Screw ultimately adds to James’s epistemology a hypothesis concerning the muddling effects of adult sexuality on one’s perception of the world and the dangers of imparting such perception onto others.

His first such exploration of these complications probes the effects that a stunted epistemology has on ideas of the marriage plot. Well versed in romances, the governess believes that she must fall in love and marry. But because she insists upon projecting the story line of romances on her own experiences without pausing to evaluate the viability of this projection, her matrimonial hopes go hopelessly awry. The reason for this difficulty rests in the governess’ problematic approach to textual and experiential data. A perfect example is her first sighting of Quint. Immediately before the governess perceives him, she tells us that “it would be as charming as a charming story to meet some one” (163). And when she does in fact see someone (or something) within the tower walls, she attempts to validate this experience by asserting, “I saw him as I see the letters I form on this page” (165). Rather than using texts as a way to make impressions more static within the mind, the governess creates sensory expectations and ideals out of fiction and romance, thereby skewing the necessary balance between experience and texts. She topples the construction of sound epistemological frameworks by demanding that experiential knowledge acquiesce to the fictional world. Such an inversion has obvious ramifications on her personal life and misguided notions concerning her relationship with her employer.

Only after the governess advances past the marriage plot and attempts to assume the role of the parent does her perceptual process become most tragic.


13. A quick glance at the criticism on The Turn of the Screw indicates the immense interest concerning the nature of Quint and Jessel. While both sides of this heated debate provide compelling cases concerning these “apparitions,” I have no interest in siding with either camp in this study, nor do I intend to take a stand concerning the plausibility of “real” ghosts in the text. What matters to me most is that the governess sees, and believes that she sees, Quint and Jessel. Any argument above and beyond that conclusion undermines what I believe to be one of the most interesting elements of the tale.
Whereas her muddled attempt to actualize the fictive marriage plot creates obstacles for her relationship with the world, her attempt to move into the role of the parent results in the difficulties not only for the governess, but for the children in her care as well. As a governess in turn-of-the-century England, the protagonist of The Turn of the Screw possesses an enormous amount of power and responsibility for the care of Miles and Flora, two young subjects struggling to formulate their own cognitive development. James capitalizes on this power structure in order to demonstrate the extent to which one’s epistemological development (or more accurately, the lack thereof) affects the individual’s behavior as well as the behavior around him/her. Because the governess lacks a sound knowledge base, her treatment of Miles and Flora problematizes their own attempt to navigate the phases of maturation. Rather than teach the children to form ideas, order their sensory data, or even to read the world around them, the governess demands that “almost every branch of study or subject of conversation skirted” what was actually happening around them (210). Instead, she fills their heads with fantasies out of romances and her own imagination until any glimpse of reality disappears behind her own fairy tale. As she gleefully confides to us, “nothing in the whole world of reality was perhaps at that moment so fabulous as our actual relation” (226). This creation of a fantastical relationship outside the bounds of experiential reality is akin to the governess’ first encounter with Quint, and it finds her again rejecting the “real” in order to project a storybook world onto daily life.

One explanation for the governess’ behavior is that it, at least subconsciously, allows her to maintain her uncertain position of power over the children. Not much more than an adolescent herself, the governess must manipulate her construction of reality to remain in control of both her perceptions and her situation as the governess of Miles and Flora. By insisting that they all exist in the realm of fantasy and romance, “she gains some tenuous support for her uncertain authority, her shaky identity. So long as she sustains the illusion she gains a sense of mastery over her situation” (Newman 53). Sustaining the illusion eventually necessitates imparting her own problematic epistemology on her young charges. In order to maintain the fantasy of her perceivable world, she must make accomplices of Miles and Flora. By pacing the children through her so-called “lessons,” the governess ultimately leads them into a fray where perceptual synthesis—the mixing of idea, sensation, and experience—becomes an impossibility. Rather than lead Miles and Flora towards enlightenment, or towards a broader and richer vision, she attempts to redirect their vision towards her own muddled understanding of the fictional world and its relationship to their daily lives. What results is a consciousness shared by the three in which the empirical world is noticeably absent. According to the governess, this means:

that the element of the unnamed and untouched became, between us, greater than any other, and that so much avoidance couldn’t have been made successful without a great deal of tacit arrangement. It was as if, at moments, we were perpetually coming into sight of subjects before which
we must stop short, turning suddenly out of alleys that we perceived to be blind, closing with a little bang that made us look at each other—for, like all bangs, it was something louder than we had intended—the doors we had indiscreetly opened. (210)

Not content to stop short of the mysterious alleys of knowledge that she and the children encounter, the governess urges them to enter these unknown cognitive realms. Eventually, she determines that she must compel Flora and Miles to see the world through the window of her own perceptual project. The most poignant example of this occurs when the governess coerces Mrs. Grose and Flora to acknowledge the vision of the ghostly Miss Jessel. This scene, an absolute series of errors, shows the breadth of ethical implications arising from a single problematic perception. Like any good romantic heroine, the governess quickly acknowledges the reality of Jessel’s apparition with “vividness and emotion.” As she does so, she interprets Mrs. Grose’s “dazed blink” as an indication “that she too at last saw” the reality of the ghost (238). This, of course, is the governess’ first error: as we soon discover, Mrs. Grose does not see the apparition—her aperture does not allow for a ghostly visitation. 14 Misreading Grose’s response, the governess continues her chain reaction of fouled perception and misguided actions. Then turning her attention to Flora, the governess laments:

the revelation ... of the manner in which Flora was affected startled me in truth far more than it would have done to find her also merely agitated, for direct dismay was of course not what I had expected. Prepared and on her guard as our pursuit had actually made her, she would repress every betrayal; and I was therefore at once shaken by my first glimpse of the particular one for which I had not allowed. (238)

The governess fails to access the unspoken, the implied—an ability even Maisie had mastered. The possible reasons for her failure are numerous, but I would like to suggest that the heart of her problem lies in the governess’ expectations. Her textual acquisition and denial of proportion has, in this case, prevented the free flow of sensory data, thereby blinding her and precluding judgment.

The situation worsens when the governess realizes that, although she cannot read Flora, Flora can read her. She feels the effects profoundly: “to see her ... turn at me an expression of hard still gravity, an expression absolutely new and unprecedented and that appeared to read and accuse and judge me—this was the stroke that somehow converted the little girl into a figure portentous” (238-39). But in spite of Flora’s abilities to perceive and judge, she is in no way prepared to deal with the governess’ actions following the encounter. Flora reacts to the governess’ play with a vengeance, shouting, “I don’t know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never have. I think you’re cruel” (240). She is eventually taken away by Mrs. Grose, but even separat-

14. As James explains in the preface of The Portrait of a Lady, this is the subjectivity of experience that makes each person’s perception different from another’s. Thus, in any given situation we will discover several observers who “are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white ... And so on, and on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pairs of eyes, the window may not open” (AN 46).
ing her from the governess does not abate the effects of the governess’ behavior. In fact, Flora’s condition continues to worsen following the episode. The governess’ actions—which in principle ought to educate and nurture young Flora—work as a catalyst for the young girl’s deterioration, until it becomes clear that the only thing that the governess has done is to contribute to Flora’s own moral failing. As Mrs. Grose reports, Flora’s condition deteriorates to the point at which her mode of expression consists of “appalling language” which is “beyond everything, for a young lady” (246).15

After realizing her failings with Flora, the governess adopts a different course of action with Miles. Whereas the encounter with Flora found the governess compelling her pupil to adopt a worldview identical to her own, with Miles she tries to obstruct his vision altogether. In this regard, it is almost as if the governess forces Miles to regress from a later stage of development into a pre-infantile epistemology in which even sensory perception is an impossibility. Because she failed to make Flora old, she now endeavors to make Miles ridiculously young. She tells us:

My grasp of how he received this suffered for a minute from something that I can describe only as a fierce split of my attention.... It represents but grossly what took place within me at the sight to say that on the second my decision was made; yet I believe that no woman so overwhelmed ever in so short a time recovered her command of the act. It came to me in the very horror of the immediate presence that the act would be, seeing and facing what I saw and faced, to keep the boy himself unaware. (257)

The irony of this passage rests largely in the fact that the governess’ action attempts to restrict the action of Miles—a decision that ensures that his apprehension of sensory and experiential data will be thwarted before it ever begins. The governess ultimately endeavors to retard Miles’s growth and subsume his epistemological position under her own.

The governess soon determines that even retarding Miles’s growth fails to thwart his cognitive growth. Still concerned that Miles may possess the ability to read the unspoken, she determines not only to deny Miles all possibility for action, but also to repeal or erase the experience previous action has afforded. And as the tale comes to a climax, we find the governess celebrating her decision to reverse Miles’s development and his subsequent surrender to her devices:

An extraordinary impression dropped on me as I extracted a meaning from the boy’s embarrassed back—none other than the impression that I was not barred now. This inference grew in a few minutes to a sharp intensity and seemed bound up with the direct perception that it was positively he who was ... I felt that I saw him, in any case, shut in or shut out. He was admirable but

15. While the tale does not offer clear evidence that the governess is to blame for the entirety of Flora’s new behavior, I think that it is safe to conclude that there is a direct correlation between this condition and the encounter immediately preceding it. Indeed, even if we assume that there is a ghostly apparition of Miss Jessel observable by Flora, and even if we grant that this apparition has had an obvious influence on Flora’s education, we still must concede that the behavioral effects demonstrated by Flora are not made manifest until after the confrontation between her and the governess.
not comfortable: I took it in with a throb of hope. Wasn't he looking through the haunted pane for something he couldn't see? (253)

Here, the governess relishes her ability to disable Miles's development, and she proudly touts this "stroke of the loss I was so proud of" (261). Having brought him back from the world of fairy tale and fantasy to the basic stage of raw sensory data, the governess now succeeds in denying him even this, the most basic form of knowing. That this climactic scene occurs in front of a window is quite deliberate, as it allows James to bring to fruition an embodiment of his epistemological theory and an allegory of the house of fiction.

As we discover in the concluding pages of The Turn of the Screw, obstructing one's perceptual process, preventing the free flow of sensory data and ideas, not only cripples human development, it is positively deadly. The true turn of the screw rests here: where knowledge leads to action and perception dictates morality. Because the governess muddies the former, she errs in the latter. Hence, the solitude and confinement—both physical and sensory—that the governess urges upon Miles stops his beating heart. An extreme conclusion, perhaps, but one in keeping with James's philosophical framework as it is first outlined in What Maisie Knew and complicated in The Turn of the Screw. Both texts demonstrate the obvious importance of perception within human development, and each in its own way serves as a caveat concerning the severity of this idea. The message, I think, that underlies each text is simple yet significant: if we are our perceptions and ideas, then we are nothing without them.

Works Cited


