

An Example of a Brief Rogerian Argument Used as An Introduction

excerpted from the beginning (pages 951-952) of
Adam McCune, “‘What a Boy (or Girl) Wants’ in *The Turn of the Screw*:
The Children’s Frankly-Expressed Motives for their Performances.”
English Studies, vol. 98, no. 8, 2017, pp. 951-67.

1. Desire and Performance

Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is a story of performance and desire. Contemporary reviews show that, from the beginning, critics who accept the ghosts as genuine have stressed that the “children are supreme actors”¹ who “act their pretty parts of innocent babes.”² On the other hand, the Freudian interpretation, ever since Edmund Wilson introduced it, has described the novella as the story of the governess’s frustrated erotic desire.³ The traditional ghost-centered reading explains the changes in the children’s behaviour (that is, they are playing roles), but does not delve into the children’s desires—why they are performing. The contemporary reviewers quoted above are content either to accept the governess’s interpretation of the children’s behaviour, that the children have willingly and “joyfully responded” to the ghosts’ “invitations to evil” (the appeal of which is left unexplained),⁴ or to believe that the children lack all power of choice as “pawns” who are “in the thrall” of the ghosts.⁵ The Freudian reading has the advantage of explaining the story in terms of desire, but focuses on the governess’s desires, leaving the children’s changes in behaviour unexplained.⁶ I will argue that, first and foremost, *The Turn of the Screw* is the story of the children’s desires, how their desires are inhibited by the governess, and how the children perform childhood and adulthood in an effort to gain what they want.

My argument is, first, that the children’s desires are all perfectly ordinary, and may be summed up by the desire to live for themselves rather than for the governess. In particular, they demonstrate the following desires: they want to amuse themselves (including, on occasion, amusing themselves alone), they want to avoid the less pleasant forms of schoolwork, they want the authority belonging to their social class, and Miles in particular wants the socialisation (school) that will enable him to mature into the social role associated with his gender and class. Second, I will argue that the governess’s desires are opposed to the children’s desires. She craves the children’s presence to the point of monopolising their time and delaying Miles’s education. Third, I will argue that the children use performance to influence the governess in pursuit of their own desires. The governess makes it clear that she has three separate sets of expectations for the children, three possible scripts they might follow: “good” child, “spirited” (mildly “naughty”) boy and miniature adults of their class (little lady or gentleman). The children, in my reading, play each of these roles in turn in an effort to get what they want. Unfortunately, the governess misreads their performances and concludes that both children adhere to a fourth script—the evil child—with fatal consequences.

References

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¹ “Mr. James’s New Book,” 304.

² “*Illustrated London News*,” 308.

³ “The story is primarily intended as a characterization of the governess: ... her inability to admit to herself her natural sexual impulses” (Wilson, 121). If we read the novella according to the paradigm of child studies scholar Jacqueline Rose, we might also say it is the story of the governess’s nostalgic desire for the children. Rose’s great contribution was to direct attention to adult desire in relation to children’s fiction: portrayals of child characters, she argues, construct a nostalgic innocence which is meant to satisfy the desires of adults rather than to benefit children. “Suppose, therefore,” Rose writes, “that Peter Pan is a little boy who does not grow up, not because he doesn’t want to, but because someone else prefers that he shouldn’t. Suppose, therefore, that what is at stake in *Peter Pan* is the adult’s desire for the child” (3). Adults desire the child because it seems to restore them to their own childhood (reimagined nostalgically as a life of “innocence” in an “unmediated” version of the world and of language/culture); that is, Rose argues that some children’s fiction conceives of “a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access. The child is, if you like, something of a pioneer who restores these worlds to us” (Rose, 9).

⁴ “Mr. James’s New Book,” 304.

⁵ “*Illustrated London News*,” 308–9.

⁶ As Mark Spilka observes, many critics strangely treat the children as “passive or unwilling victims without positive desires” (Spilka, 107).