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Turning the Intrinsic Screw: Henry James and Human Nature

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow revealed to the world his theory of human motivation, what he called the "hierarchy of needs." The pyramid-shaped hierarchy's five levels of human desires start with the most basic drives and end with the most difficult desire to attain: self actualization, the stage which gives rise to such fantastic concepts as gods, deities, purity, and ecstasy. The ability of humans to conceive such ideas seems to speak tremendously to the unselfishness of human nature. Yet the truth is quite the opposite; these concepts are merely constructs that humans create in order to seek and idolize an absolute. Ideas of pure and beautiful absolution are a way to escape the reality that in fact, human beings are innately self-obsessed and corrupt any possibilities for divinity around them. Such texts as Henry James's The Turn of the Screw illustrate how these destructive faults in human nature destroy purity and innocence. Each step in the journey of the novel's main character represents the screw-turning and deepening of her greed as she descends through Maslow's stages, until finally only corruption is left in her wake. Much like the Victorian era's Walter Pater and his coined term that each person has within them "molten lava" of selfishness that harms others if released, these displays ultimately prove the disastrous consequences when humans act at the expense of others.

Humans by nature possess what is called a survival instinct, which creates the desire to eat food, drink water, seek rest, and so on. In thinking about Maslow's pyramid-shaped

hierarchy of needs, this survival instinct would be the lowest, most basic level (Maslow 372-376). When someone's desires extend beyond what is simply required to survive, he or she acts, at the heart of the matter, only for his or her self. In The Turn of the Screw, the governess is the embodiment of this selfishness, and her descent through the stages of evil egotism and corruption are important marks for understanding the true power of the self in the world. The tale opens with a preface from the narrator in which he first explains how the children, Miles and Flora, were orphaned and put into the care of their uncle, who then sent them to live in seclusion at the estate of Bly. The narrator then introduces the motivation by which the governess accepts her job, that "[…]the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure, and[…]she faced the music, she engaged[…]which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid young [uncle]. She succumbed to it" (James 5). She seeks and accepts her job as governess not out of any consideration for the children, but out of her desires and fantasies to become rich, high class, and in a relationship with the children's uncle. This material selfishness is the first time any indication of her nature is shown to the reader, and is also the first stage in selfishness extending beyond the survival instinct; it can subsequently be represented by the next step in Maslow's hierarchy, the desire for "safety" and "love and belonging" (Maslow 376-381). As this succumbing to material selfishness is her reason for being at Bly, it is her "first sin" that ultimately causes her terrible journey of haunting throughout the rest of the novel.

The arrival of the governess at Bly signals her descent to the next stage in the advance of her selfishness and corruption. In her interactions with the children, she seeks self-gratification and achievement, the "esteem" level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 381-382). This stage of the novel, as well as the hierarchy, is plagued by ghostly apparitions of two of Bly's former caretakers, and the relationship between the governess and the ghosts is the keystone for

the governess' means of gaining "esteem." The latter half of the novel reveals that the ghosts are never seen by any other characters but the governess, and are thereby created by her alone. They function, as Christine Butterworth-McDermott states, as "'hallucinations' created by the repression of her[…]desire[…]" (Butterworth-McDermott 43). Protecting the children from "evil" makes the lowly governess feel worthy and good: "[…]I was[…]able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me[…]I was there to protect and defend the little creatures[…and their] appeal of[…]helplessness[…]" (James 27). She objectifies the children as a means of becoming valued by others, which speaks to Maslow's concept of "esteem," and continues to put them in strange and damaging situations.

The governess' grasps for self-indulging "esteem" deepen in severity of crime and of outcome. Bly's servant Mrs. Gross continually mentions vague descriptions of the estate's former caretakers Quint and Jessel to the governess, who in turn fills in the gaps of her knowledge by concluding that the "innocent" Flora and Miles were molested by the reprehensible pair. The governess' improvised view of the old caretakers is sexual in nature, and the introduction of such ideas leads the governess to act jealously by seeking out the relief of her own sexual desires through the children: "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. I met his kiss[…]" (James 45). The governess constantly seeks to turn any opportunity of acceptance she obtains from "protecting" the children into sexual release for herself. Since the ghosts are merely the governess' creations, their actions are often mirrored by her. The use of such a device indicates to the reader that the governess' treatment of the children is just as severe as that of the former caretakers, and that "The damaging psychological effects of the Governess's ferocious optimism become clearer as the

plot progresses. Due to her desperation, she "forces" the reading she desires no matter whom she hurts" (Butterworth-McDermott 46). Whether or not the children were really molested by Quint and Jessel becomes a superfluous matter; the governess thinks they were and, in acting upon that pretense, molests the children herself: "[…]I let the impulse flame up to convert the climax of [Miles's] dismay into the very proof of his liberation. 'No more, no more, no more!' I shrieked to my visitant as I tried to press him against me" (James 84). The governess twists these situations to her advantage with the result that she is no worse in character than the ghosts themselves.

The ignoble consequences of these actions at the "esteem" stage become clear through the reactions of the children. The governess' continual play at being the heroine eventually reaches the point that Miles feels smothered. When he talks with the governess about how unusual and uncomfortable it is that she should keep him close for so long, the governess reacts with terror, as she feels her happiness is being threatened. This continues to drive Miles away to the point of disdain. The governess consumes her source of happiness until it is all gone, with the result that the act of using others for happiness will only cause pain.

The screw takes a final turn when the governess sets the children apart as the epitome of innocence and purity:

> […]I had seen him on the instant, without and within, in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his little sister. He was incredibly beautiful, and Mrs. Grose had put her finger on it: everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence. What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the

> same degree in any child—his indescribably little air of knowing nothing in the world but love. (James 13)

When the governess begins to idolize the children, she creates an absolution, something beautiful and divine. To her, they represent the highest possibility of human existence. She now seeks Maslow's "self-actualization," the level associated with morality. This is the final stage in her descent, in which she desires to become an absolution herself, even at the expense of the children.

When Miles and Flora are driven away as a consequence of the governess' "self-gratification" stage actions, the governess realizes her destructive behaviors and seeks reconciliation. She sees the children as the absolute embodiment of innocence, and so she seeks them as a way out of her shameful consequences. The children who were used for the governess to gain money, power, love, sex, esteem, and so on, finally become used as a means for her to gain reprieve for the above offenses. The governess now reaches the "self-actualizing" top of the triangle in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and consequently the children now face their destruction. The governess will go so far as to vilify the children in order to make herself appear innocent: "Because her behavior destroyed the children, thus destroying her dream, the children—not just the ghosts—are now demonized. Their wickedness again highlights the supremacy of the Governess's own goodness" (Butterworth-McDermott 53). At this point the children have already been repulsed and damaged by the governess' smothering, self-indulging actions. In trying to "justify her behavior" (Butterworth-McDermott 53), the governess, even admitting it to herself, seeks to take down the children so that she may become the absolute of innocence. "To do it in *any* way was an act of violence, for what did it consist of but the obtrusion of the idea of grossness and guilt on a small helpless creature who had been for me a

revelation of the possibilities of beautiful intercourse?" (James 81). The governess does not restrain herself, and this figurative, intangible action becomes the catalyst for literal, tangible damage. In the final scenes of the novel, the governess sends the maddened Flora away to her uncle and keeps Miles with her so that she may extract from him an admission of participation in such disreputable acts as stealing and expulsion. In questioning him, the governess can hardly contain her desire to bring him down so that she herself may once again feel ecstasy. When Miles admits his guilt and becomes "demonized," the governess attains her sense of self-actualization, her own justification that her actions, and thereby her character, are innately good. At this, the climax of the pyramid of selfishness, Miles dies. The governess' ultimate culmination of desire cannot occur without Flora being driven mad and Miles being killed. This unavoidable truth of the governess' nature collapses her own achievements. The governess' use, corruption, and disposal of others in the story speaks to the destructiveness of humans acting for themselves in the world.

The Turn of the Screw is a pyramid of a novel; it progresses to a climactic triangular point as the governess' selfishness deepens. This makes it especially susceptible to analysis by means of Maslow's model of human motivation and behavior. The governess' unrestrained actions cause destruction at each level of the "hierarchy," ending finally with the death of Miles. In this way, Henry James shows readers the pernicious results of self-centeredness. If allowed freedom, human badness knows no bounds to its influence and is ready to devour for its own satisfaction. What may appear to be "only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue" (James 77) could in fact be the destruction of divinity. In order to eschew corruption, human nature requires self-moderation. Wrapping in what Henry James's era referred to as a person's "molten lava" means saving others from burning.

Works Cited

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