Reading The Turn of the Screw
— A Sexually Self-repressed and Authoritarian Suppressing Governess

Zhihui YANG
College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University

I. Introduction

For more than a century, at issue in the critical debate stirred up by the novel of The Turn of the Screw is whether it should be interpreted as a ghost story or as the hallucination of a governess with mental dissociative disorder. Edmund Wilson insists on the insanity of the narrator by holding the opinion that the governess is delusional and that the ghosts exist only in her hallucination. In the same vein, psychoanalysis ascribes the dominant portrait of the governess to a psychopathic woman:

[...] the angel in the house might really be an angel of psychic destruction, [...] doing mortal damage [...] to the sexual development of boys like Miles, whose death, of course, is not actual but symbolic of the permanent harm done to the very core—the “heart” —of his sexual being. [...] the damage done to the sexual development of children by Victorian sexual fear and disgust would satisfy James's
Obviously, James shares the governess’s Victorian view of sex and sexuality, especially on the homosexuality which she suspects existing between Miles and Quint, and condemns as disgusting, and which James also labels “sickening horribility” in his discussion of Oscar Wild and his works. Besides, James is also believed to share the governess’ refusal of and distain for the people in the “below” class:

[...]

The image of ghost in the governess’s hallucination is partly due to her prejudice against the servant “in the below”. James intends to insinuate the governess to be an ersatz mother of commitment and dutifulness, but as the executive author he does not preclude us seeking for and interpreting an implied author and therefore seeing the governess in different light. Thus, I propose to forsake the view which ambivalently clings to the supernatural phenomenon of ghost, and instead focus on the theme of sexual repression and authoritarian personality of which the governess is a classic incarnation.

A poor parson’s daughter, in her infatuation with a master of upper class, is haunted by the fear and distrust of male sexuality which is regarded and propagandized as dangerous by the sexual prejudice in the protestant Victorian society. Meanwhile, she is delegated by the upper-class master all authority over Bly as the controller of “the helm”, but when she is “defied” by the “ghost-possessed” and “contaminated” children, she hallucinates that her power is “challenged” and “usurped” by the evil. Consequently, her authoritarian mind is traumatized, by which she is “cornered” and enraged into heroic combat to exorcise “the ghosts” to “rehabilitate” the “sick” children—the “fallen” cherubs, and to restore the perverted order of Bly. She imagines herself as an angle in the house, a dutiful protectress, an ersatz mother, a soul savior and purifier while in reality she turns out to be a protestant Medea, an authoritarian ruler, a ruthless chastiser, and a negligent murderer. So, my thesis is that the governess is characterized by sexually self-repressing mind and authoritarian personality, and, when her sexuality is deprived and her authority is defied, the screw of her sexual and authoritarian desire turns so violently that in her desperate “predicament” she intensively hurts herself and kills
II. A Governess of Sexual Self-repression

1. Medea Seeing Jason

The governess reads "old novels", stories and should be acquainted with Cinderella's fairytale love for the prince, Jane Eyre's chaste love for Rochester, and Medea's unbridled, first-sight love for Jason. The "prospective patron" is no less fatally attractive to the youngest daughter of a poor parson than Jason to Medea—the dignified daughter of a king, and the governess's anxious first-sight love for her patron is no less unbridled than that of Medea for Jason. The romantic fantasies spawned and accumulated, the sexual desire lurking and simmering in her subliminal mind since girlhood is aroused and bursts in vehemence. She is captivated by this "gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life", in his "charming ways with women", like "a figure as rising in a dream or an old novel". The young lady infatuates her patron in the same way Medea infatuates Jason, but her love though the same burning is much less "barbaric" than that of Medea. As a parson's daughter, born in the protestant society and raised up in the "smothered" way, she possesses "decorum" in manners and "dignity" in attitudes even when she falls head over heel in love. The "barbarity" of love and desire of Medea has been "civilised" and suppressed into unconsciousness and imprisoned in her id by the protestant cultivation of female decency, though in the same way that Medea is carried away by Jason, she is instantly "carried away" by the upper master of handsomeness and gallantry in the Harley Street.

In addition to sexual desire, the upper master also arouses her will to power by delegating to her all the authority over Bly, which appeals to her more than a favor. This delegation of power incites her courage and ambition, invokes her sense of "obligation" and responsibility, mitigates her sense of "trepidation", and provokes in her a sense of authority, for she is nominated as the one "at the helm". Her decorum and dignity is consolidated by the newly vested authority; she is promoted from a "young", "untried", and "nervous" daughter of a poor parson to a governor of a castle and its attendants, protectress and tutor of two children. Authoritatively, Cinderella rises to Medea.

Though she has the "vision of serious duty and little company, of really great loneliness", she accepts the delegation in delight of romantic fantasy and prospective authority with a sense of commitment and fortitude. However, the truth is "the 'seduction exercised' by the authorizer and a continuing erotic attraction which
entices the governess to ‘find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism’ of the responsibilities imposed on her” [5], just as Douglass observes “the moral of which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid young man. She succumbed to it” (27) [6].

ii. Apparitions of Ghosts
At Bly, the governess assumes her power as the helm controller, but her romantic fantasies linger on, intensify. While wondering Bly, she indulges in the reverie of “charming story” of romance in which she is subliminally “gazing” the charming image of her employer and hallucinating his coming to join her.

One of the thoughts that [...] used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. [...] and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. (37)

But all of this is consciously repressed. In feminist analysis the governess “herself constructs a fictive male gaze”[7], out of her aroused but repressed sexual desire. As a parson’s daughter, a virginal ingénue, she has been sheltering in the country vicarage and privately brought up in “smothered” way, which means her sexual desire is bound to be subconsciously molested by the “Victorian cliché” of ambivalence, prejudice, distrust, and demonization of male sexuality. Even her employer as “handsome”, bachelor “in a glow of high fashion”, of “expensive habits”, with “charming ways” does not totally “carry away” her qualms about the male sexuality, because as Renner observes there exists in the Victorian protestant culture a widely recognized stereotype of the “predatory sexual male”, a set of typical features and characteristics that such a figure would be presupposed to manifest.

“ [...] the handsome man,” according to general prejudice, [...] “is likely to be a cad.” Quite ready “for his own immediate profit…to defy the conventions that other men subscribe to”, [...] he has no scruples against “taking advantage of the susceptibility which women exhibit in the presence of good-looking men.” Usually with “neat and symmetrical features” and “attractive to many women,” the cad is hampered neither by “a bad reputation nor bad manners [...]”. His aim is not love or even philandering, but amour. [8]

And the faint disapproval of her employer as a dashing young gentleman leading a life of pleasure-seeking but indifferent to his duty of guardianship and care for the two children, is mixed up in her subconscious projection of her precaution and distrust of
male sexuality. In autosuggestion she warns herself that her subconscious flirtation with the male sexuality relaxes her sexual defenses and thus, like those heroines in Victorian novels, she might set foot on the path to self-ruin. The screw of sexual ambivalence and fear subtly turns, which “splits” her attention and the attractive image in her pleasurable reverie transforms into the terrifying apparition of a ghost.

[...] What has actually happened is that the attractive male figure she first imagines is transformed in her own mind into the frightening male figure she subsequently projects. That the transformation is brought about by fear—specifically fear of male sexuality [...] The figure she projects emerges from her own subconscious imprinting by religious and cultural stereotypes of villainously libidinous male, with numerous precedents in the literature of the period. [9]

According to psychoanalysis, the governess’s mind is in the state of condensation—an unconscious process whereby two ideas or images combine into a single symbol. In her psychological condensation, the master and the servant of Bly, the master and his valet merge into one and project as ghost in her hallucination revealing her ambivalent mind of male sexuality.

The image of the ghost appearing in the governess’ subliminal projection with “red”, “close-curling hair”, and “sharp”, “fixed” eyes is suggested to be read closely as a case of sexual hysteria interpreted by the research of the 19th century. Renner sees the governess represent a classic case of sexual hysterics and the fact that the figure she projects is a classic example of “physiognomical cliché deliberately elaborated for ironic effect”;

While red hair [...] is said to characterize “a person supremely good or supremely evil” [...] In the Old Testament the association of red hair with evil would have been reinforced by the story of Esau [...] Satan materialized in the form of a red-haired male. It would not be surprising if a parson’s daughter, hysterically projecting an image of her sexual fear and revulsion, were to envision a figure embodying features of this long-standing assumption about the human from assumed the Tempter himself. [10]

Renner regards the image of ghost as a figure projected in the form of the Tempter himself, because the image is insinuated or “printed” in the governess’ mind by the social culture in which she is cultivated. He also believes the projection “draws on stereotypes established in the physiognomical lore of the preceding centuries in which red curling hair indicates ‘disposition to ardent love’ and ‘is a sign of propensities
much too animal’’ [11]. The red hair is thought to be monstrous and the “small”, “sharp” and “fixed” eyes are supposed to imply the “strong sexual significance” as Renner cites Lavater; “small, and deep sunken eyes, are bold in opposition; not discouraged, intriguing, and active in wickedness […]” The physiognomical lore labels such a figure as “supercilious man” who “despises”, and “is despicable”. So the essence of the projected figure expresses the governess’ “hysteric but unconscious sexual horror […] whose mind projects her sexual fear in a form that draws on the very religious and physiognomical stereotypes with which such a mind as hers would logically be furnished”. [12]

Sexual hysteria is believed to be caused by a profound conflict between a person’s natural sexual impulses and the repression of sexuality required by society—a profound conflict in the hysterical “between their ideas of right and the bent of their inclination; […] a paradoxical sexual instinct by which sexual frigidity is combined with intense sexual preoccupations” [13]. And the sexual conflict and repression is exaggerated by Victorian idealism in the “fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage”. This psychology is later interpreted as “reaction formation” which proposes that emotions and impulses “which are anxiety-producing or perceived to be unacceptable are mastered by exaggeration (hypertrophy) of the directly opposing tendency” [14]. As a kind of defense mechanism, reaction formations belong to “neurotic defense mechanisms”, which involves “intellectualization”, “dissociation”, “displacement” and “repression”. In this defense mechanism:

[t] he instincts and their derivatives may be arranged as pairs of opposites; life versus death, construction versus destruction, action versus passivity, dominance versus submission, and so forth. When one of the instincts produces anxiety by exerting pressure on the ego either directly or by way of the superego, the ego may try to sidetrack the offending impulse by concentrating upon its opposite […]. [a] phobia is an example of a reaction formation. The person wants what he fears. He is not afraid of the object; he is afraid of the wish for the object. The reactive fear prevents the dreaded wish from being fulfilled.

So, The Turn of the Screw “is not a ghost story but a psychological drama with the disastrous effect of Victorian sexual attitudes on the development of children”, and on the governess herself, as Wilson claims, “the problem is with the troubled sexuality of the governess, who […] was greatly attracted to the gentleman who employed her but was also, in an exaggerated but quintessential Victorian way,
deeply fearful of and hostile toward his sexuality” [15].

Obviously, out of the same psychology the ghost of Miss Jessel is a complementary projection, but this time the fear of the male sexuality is replaced by the fear and repulsion of female sexual indulgence. Appearing in the image of ghost, Miss Jessel is the object of the governess’ moral gaze, her other self of female sexuality repressed severely in her unconsciousness. Miss Jessel’s ghost haunts as “the unacknowledged evil of the self, a fragment of the perceiver’s personality” [16], as the projection of shame of a lady of sexually self-abandonment, a middle-class young woman scandalously indulgent in female desire of male sexuality hierarchically below her. Siegel also thinks that the governess is “horrified at Miss Jessel’s sexuality and its consequences and terrified of her own susceptibility to sexual feeling, of which she is subconsciously aware” [17]. The ghost of Miss Jessel is a typical example of counter projection. Jung wrote, “All projections provoke counter-projection when the object is unconscious of the quality projected upon it by the subject. [...] Thus, what is unconscious in the recipient will be projected back onto the projector, precipitating a form of mutual acting out.” [18] What the ghost of Miss Jessel is doing—sitting on the governess’ table writing to sweetheart—is what the governess desires to do but refrained by her sexually ambivalent and precautious mind.

The governess shares Miss Jessel’s social identity as a “housemaid who might have stayed at home to looker after the place” of her father’s houses at Hampshire vicarage before she “comes up to London”; she also shares Jessel’s natural sexual desire for a sweetheart. But she refuses and despises Miss Jessel’s Medea-type sexual impertinence, imprudence and boldness, for which she paid costly. And of course in her consciousness both Miss Jessel and Medea are “terrible miserable women”, who don’t share her female discretion, chasteness and dignity. In spite of their same social origin, Miss Jessel becomes her “other” in sexual morality.

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. While these instants lasted indeed I had the extraordinary chill of feeling [...]. It was a wild protest against it that, actually addressing her—“You terrible miserable woman!” (85, this author’s italics).

But with the same natural and instinctive desire for male sexuality, satisfied or repressed, Medea, Jessel and the governess, all being easily “carried away” by gallant, handsome men, are the sisters of the same clay under their different
clothing. However, in the latter's moral scenario, the latter are distinctive "heretics", who are hideous and evil witch and horrible ghost. Due to this distinction, with her decorum, dignity or moral superiority, the governess has the right to mark them out, to censor them, to judge them, and adamantly oppose them.

To the governess, the image of Jessel in "her dark dress" appearing dark, very dark, "dark as midnight" both outside (her dress) and inside (her moral) not merely signifies death, but also indicates sexual looseness and moral degradation. Miss Jessel is an infringer of protestant code for female manners and attitudes, which accordingly means her death is the embodiment of deserved punishment for the infringement. However, with equal status, Miss Jessel has the same ability and right to govern Bly in spite of her moral and sexual "inferiority", in the same vein that the governess has the same freedom and access to female liberation and pursuit of erotic desire in spite of the Victorian protestant restriction. But the governess chooses to be fettered to feel "safe" and "decent". Actually, in the eyes of the master of Bly, Jessel is both capable and decent as he confirms; "she had done for them quite beautifully—she was a most respectable person." (26) Even in governess' eyes, Miss Jessel in the apparition does not loss dignity at all, and she is somehow unconsciously envious of Jessel's attitude of "indifference and detachment".

[...] in spite of my entrance, her attitude strangely persisted. Then it was—with the very act of its announcing itself—that her identity flared up in a change of posture. She rose, not as if she had heard me, but with an indescribable grant of melancholy of indifference and detachment [...] (85, this author's italics)

But occupied by the phobia of male sexuality from psychological reaction formation, and restrained by her dogmatism of female decency and discretion, the governess herself turn the screw on her subliminal mind fearing that once her dignified moral loosened, her decorous manners failed, her decent attitudes degraded, she would also be seduced and abandoned and follow Jessel's step down to self-debasement, fall into the same shocking disgrace and horrible stigma. In her protestant moral sense, the death of Mrs. Jessel is more a moral scandal than a love tragedy. Miss Jessel's moral and sexual transgression and offence and her "miserable" and wretched fate (as shown by "her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe"), disgusts and shocks her, arouses in her "the extraordinary chill of feeling", and "a wild protest" against her, which drives the governess to repulsion. By expelling Miss Jessel's ghost, she is in fact denying and repressing her
natural erotic desire; Miss Jessel is just the screw turned by the force of the tussle between her natural carnal desire and the protestant dogmatism, which pains her consciousness profoundly.

The governess can be portrayed as a typical representative of authoritarians who tend to have a rigid adherence to conventionality, and are more likely to hold narrower attitudes toward sexuality. Authoritarians “readily submit to oversight and regulation” by dogmatic moralism; they are more likely submissive to sexual restraints and controls. They “denigrate and aggress against those who violate established sexual standards” by endorsing punishments for moral transgressors. Actually, with the ambivalence of male sexuality, submissiveness to religious dogmatism and aggressiveness to transgressors of morality and authority, the prejudicial and possessive mind of James’s governess typifies the authoritarian personality.

III. A Governess of Authoritarian Suppression

1. The Authoritarian Personality

Edward Lobb observes that the “view of the story, in which the reality of the ghosts is essentially beside the point, has as its focus the governess’ attempt to ‘possess’ Miles and Flora, to own them emotionally”, and “sees her fears of ghostly ‘possession’, of haunting, as those of someone who fears a rival”. This possessive consciousness reveals the psychological bent of the authoritarian personality.

According to the theory of the authoritarian personality (TAP), five tendencies of personality can be summarized as follows: 1. concern about maintaining the status quo of the society and strong intension to privilege; 2. voluntary submission to established authorities; 3. strong adherence to conventional moral values; 4. reward for the group-consistent behaviors; and 5. stern will to aggress against moral transgression, social order subversion and all forms of unconventionality. A TAP person “regards the preservation of order and traditional structure as a highly valued end in itself”. Researches on what is called authoritarianism-syndrome focus on three central elements: submissiveness, aggression, and conventionalism. According to Oesterreich, the authoritarian personality has been described as neurotic, antidemocratic, prejudiced, aggressive, conventional, rigid, anxious, dogmatic, dominant, and despotic.
Behavior normally considered authoritarian can be induced by situational factor; [ ...] Cognitive psychology defines authoritarianism (dogmatism) as a certain form of cognitive functioning (closed-mindedness). The individual identifies with his authorities and internalizes their norms and their value systems. These internalized norms and general orientations then become protective as well. The authoritarian personality starts to feel secure by rigidly orienting him-or herself towards these norms. [ ...] Because of the importance of these normative systems in minimizing or warding off anxiety, any criticism of these norms involves an attack on the individual's authorities—which means, in turn—an attack on the individual's sense of security. [23]

ii. Male Privilege and Female Protection from the Class Consciousness

According to Altemeyer, women of authoritarianism are reported to hold "beliefs consistent with an adversarial model of sexual interactions. In romantic or sexual situations, the 'opposite sex' is considered almost as an enemy, one with his or her own strategies, goals, and tactics, one who should not be trusted. This is consistent with authoritarian intolerance of ambiguity" [24].

With their physiognomical resemblance of "remarkable" handsomeness, the master of Bly and his servant merge into and project the image of ghost under their shadow of male sexuality in the governess' ambivalent, hysterical, lovesick mind. The governess' male-sexuality phobia is compounded by her consciousness of authoritarianism. After the ghost is confirmed to be a despicable servant at Bly by Mrs. Grose, the sexual ambivalence in the governess' mind grows into compulsion. In fact, what makes Quint a hideous ghost is his humble social class. In the governess' mind of hierarchy, Quint as a servant "in the below" is unworthy and repellent even if he shares his master's "remarkable handsomeness". Her repugnancy of the ghost conforms the middle-class lady's consciousness of class distinction which is reinforced by her authoritarian personality.

However, in nature, the master and his valet, indulgent in pleasure-seeking, are jackals of the same lair, both being pursuers of hedonism. In Mrs. Grose's eyes, Peter Quint is the master's "own man", the former in the latter's clothes. However, the authoritarian and prejudicial eyes of the governess see Quint a "dirty dog" who in no way belongs to the master's group, even though they are so resembling in appearance and life-style. Quint in his master's smart clothes appears to her as fake and fraud ("they are smart, but they're not his own"). Her bigoted eyes see the
valet in the below totally inferior to the master in the above, and the distinction is never transposable. What’s more, to the governess Quint is guilty in seducing her predecessor—Miss Jessel who is socially above him, which means Quint sabotage established orders by transgressing the borderline of social class. In her social scenario of prejudice, Quint as a servant resembles more ghost than human, and he shares more with ghost than human being in both appearance and morality. The ghosts and servants from the below appear to her as alien and threatening, and they don’t count as real people, as Robbins puts: “it is intriguing, how much the ghosts and the servants have in common, looked at from above.” Servants are listed with animals as possession of the master (“there were, further a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an old pony, and old groom and an old gardener”, 26), and the class or “species” distinction between them is distinctively drawn, severely maintained and guarded as “orthodoxy”. With her authoritarian personality, the governess voluntarily submits to the established caste and privilege—she dogmatically yields to the hierarchy of Victorian society.

As a poor parson’s daughter, she herself is an upper servant, but the governess perceives and internalizes the prevalent norms and values of the dominant class which is supposed to be protective to young women of middle class. In her “closed-mindedness”, these norms and values minimize or ward off moral and sexual dangers and help to maintain female dignity and decorum, so any form of transgression of these norms threatens her sense of security, incurs corruption, depravity, even death, as Miss Jessel exemplifies.

By transgressing the class lines, Miss Jessel is exposed to “contamination” and worse still, she flirts with Quint and submits to and indulges in his seduction. By condescending to and wallowing in male sexuality of the despicable below class, Miss Jessel abandons herself as a lady and descends to a “housemaid” of easy virtue, her dignity stigmatized, her decorum ruined, and becomes a vile ghost, “a horror of horrors” in the governess’ female gaze. Thus, the corollary of judgement on Miss Jessel would be that her tragic scandalous fate was doomed and self-invited, as is confirmed by Mrs. Grose: “Poor woman—she paid for it.” However, the truth is that the governess and her former “vile predecessor” are doing the same “transgressive” thing but in opposite directions as Robbins analyzes:

The former governess, like the present governess, has allowed her erotic desires to stray across class lines; the only difference is that the object of Miss Jessel’s feelings is someone below her on the social scale (Quint) rather than someone above her
(the master in Harley Street) [...]. Indeed, it seems at times as if the fact Quint and Jessel appear to her as ghosts is less important and even less horrifying to the governess than the social violation they committed whiles they were alive. [26]

iii. Unconscious Complicity of Mrs. Grose

Delegated authority over Bly as privilege and honor elates the governess, and Mrs. Grose, the stewardess of the house in charge of the rest servants readily recognizes and submits to her authority. This old, kind but credulous, superstitious woman is easily convinced by the ghost story and even helps to crystallize and identify the ghosts, and in her unconscious complicity Mrs. Grose enhances the governess' sense and desire of power, flatters and caters her authoritarian mind.

I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my superiority—my accomplishments and my function. [...] She offered her mind to my disclosure as, had I wished to mix a witch's broth and proposed it with assurance, she would have held out a large clean saucepan. (71)

The governess feels her "superiority" and leadership oddly recognized, which in return invigorates her romantic fantasy because her efficient management of Bly as a good favor for her employer would also be recognized and approved by him, as she has since expected that he "would stand before her and smile and approve".

For the first time since she gets out of her restrictive life in the country vicarage her mind is filled with odd "elation" from assuming power; she feels beyond herself with gusto because she rises from a housemaid in a poor vicarage, a Cinderella to the ersatz mistress of Bly, a queen of the castle. In her authoritarian mind she should enjoy the submission from the below as she had been submissive to "her above"; she has been lawfully delegated and enjoys the full authority to charge, to supervise, to dominate and control. Her authority is orthodox and duly recognized, which means she counts most at Bly, and nobody is allowed defy her as she herself had never defied the authority above her. She had never defied the power of the masters in the upper class and the patriarchal power of her "whimsical father" in the vicarage, because that is the orthodox order of society, and now in the normal order of Bly she is the "chosen person" to dominate. Hence, her authoritarian attitudes and personality are greatly confirmed and motivated.

iv. Miles—A Moral Enigma

In her elation and contentment of power, the governess' mind is subtly shadowed
by a suspicion of possible moral morbidity of the younger master of Bly. The letter from Miles’ school looms in her sensitive mind a portentous obscurity about the boy’s decency and innocence with his “unmentionable” misdemeanors. She likes children “with the spirit to be naughty, but not to the degree to contaminate. (33)” Though she is also “carried away” by the charm of this little gentleman but she has never been able to get rid of the suspicion about his enigmatic mind and probable misdemeanor: “Is he untidy? Is he infirm? Is he ill-natured?” (88) The intolerance toward ambiguity in her authoritarian mind urges her to pry into the mind of the boy to make sure if his naughty spirit has descended to the degree of being contaminated, especially after Mrs. Grose claims that the Quint’s ghost haunts Bly for Miles. The possibility that Quint as a dirty dog has “contaminated” Miles morally, even sexually, instantly disgusts her mind.

“It was Quint’s own fancy. To play with him, I mean—to spoil him.” [...] “Quint was much too free.” This gave me straight from my vision of his face—such a face! —a suddenly sickness of disgust. “Too much free with my boy?” (49 - 50)

The charming little gentleman begins to disenchant in her eyes, as the pure cherub is likely to be a little cad of profanity, a little “fiend”, even though she is “aching for proofs”.

“ [...] There was something in the boy, [...] his covering and concealing their relation”; “Yes indeed—and if he was a fiend at school! How, how, how?” (61)

The boy’s probable stigma troubles her like an “enigma”, pricks her nerves and drives another screw on her ambiguity—intolerant mind of authoritarianism. She, the protectress, the ersatz mother, the supervisor, is “rightfully” thirsty of the true knowledge of this enigma.

[...] the enigma of what such a little gentleman could have done that deserved penalty. [...] the imagination of all evil that had been opened up to him: all the justice within me ached for the proof that it could ever have flowered into an act. (92, this author’s italics).

Finally, Miles’s precocious speech in the churchyard strikes the governess that the “scarce ten years old” boy is indeed “unnatural” with his wishes to “get away”, to “see more of life”. However, what shocks her most is that the boy “sees through” her mind, knows what she is afraid of and uses that “threatening” her. Miles’ “gage” of “threat” (getting his uncle to come down) puts her prospective romance
in peril, for if the master is summoned down to Bly, her promise of never troubling him will be defaulted, her chance of gaining his approval slim, and the prospect of “reward” dim. And the *approval* and *reward* so dear to her stands for a good chance of a romance she has been fantasizing. At that movement sitting on “her tomb”, the governess’ sensitive and neurotic mind already feels her desire for love frustrated, smothered to death, buried in tomb. She painfully and resentfully realizes that she is “hurt beyond repair” by Miles.

I only sat there on *my tomb* and read into what our young friend had said to me the fullness of its meaning; [ ... ] Miles had got something out of me and that the gage of it for him would be just *this awkward collapse*. He had got out of me that there was something I was much afraid of, and that he should probably be able to use my fear to gain [ ... ] (83, this author’s italics)

[ ... ] That was what really overcame me, [ ... ] I walk around the church, hesitating, hovering; I reflected that I had already, with him, hurt myself beyond repair. (84, this author’s italics).

Her repressed and secretly maintained sexual desire is unintentionally “disclosed” and “threatened” by the little “untidy” boy; she is engulfed by a sense of frustration, shame, and resentment.

By this time she is “completely convinced” that Miles really has been possessed and instigated by the ghost, and he is surely “untidy”, “infirm”, and “ill-natured”. The shame of and resentment soon sublimes or transmutes into anger in her heart; the grief of the faded hope of love is drowned and appeased by her heroic and agitated desire to fight back. She is aroused into authoritarian aggression by the devil’s seduction of Miles and Miles’ “confirmed” corruption and defiance. She has been deprived chance of the sexual gratification, but she still has chance to gratify her authoritarian desire which is a catharsis of her traumatized sexual mind. Instead of being “carried away” by the contaminated and the evil, her spirit of authoritarianism supplies her fortitude to carry on. Her determined will and strength is soon regained and fortified in a form of heroism to redress Miles’ deviance, to purge his contaminated soul, though her arch foe remains Quint’s ghost, and the defiler, the agitator, the original culprit, moral transgressor, the disgusting seducer, the fiend who stabs her moral nerves like a painful thorn. Thus, in her protestant single-mindedness the governess begins to oppressively interrogate Miles on his unmentionable corruption; she hysterically urges the “little cad” to confess, to
repent, to surrender to her authority to be purged and rescued:

"You must tell me now—and all the truth." (72)

"Is there nothing—noting at all that you want to tell me?" (91)

"I'll get it out of him [...]. He'll confess. If he confesses, he is saved." (106).

"Out, straight out. What you have on your mind, you know." (111)

"Staff and nonsense!" "What were these things?" (115)

V: Fall of Children and Bly

The two children are seduced by the two ghosts, and they are now the fallen cherubs, the followers of the evil, as the governess woefully tells Mrs. Grose: "They're not mine—they are not ours. They're his and they're hers!" (74) Her eyes are so completely sealed by her authoritarian bigotry that she no longer sees in the two kids angelic beauty, innocence, but ugliness, sickness which she is so eager to cure.

[...] his clear listening face, framed in is smooth whiteness, made him for the minute as appealing as some wistful patient in a children's hospital; and I would have given, as the resemblance came to me, all I possessed on earth really to be the nurse or the sister of charity who might have helped to cure him. (89)

[...] her incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished. [...] she was literally, she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly. (99)

In the governess' infernal imagination, her protégés, the former charming little angels, now are demonized and "under dictation" of the ghosts to defy her; in her hallucination, the ghost not only possesses and instigates the children, but evades into every detail of her past life, into her innermost consciousness to challenge her, to control her, and to overthrow her:

They had a delight endless appetite for passages in my own history to which I had again and again treated them; they were in possession of everything that had ever happened to me, had had, with every circumstance, the story of my smallest adventures and of those of my brothers and sisters and of the cat and dog at home, as well as man particulars of the whimsical bent of my father, of the furniture and arrangement of our house and of the conversation of the old women of our village. (75)
By abetting the two children, the ghosts have been trying to covet and usurp her authority over Bly, and try to dethrone her from the helm, to possess and dominate her, finally to corrupt and turn Bly into devils' den. Bly had been a fairy land with a castle like that in the "story book" and impressed her as a thorough pleasure when she first arrived. But now Bly becomes a spooky place, lurked by monsters, haunted by ghosts, its serenity and "greatness" subverted, its normal order perverted, the little cherubic prince and princess in the castle seduced, contaminated and fallen. The governess, the commissioned hostess and guardian, is trapped in the "predicament" and besieged on all sides. She painfully realizes her authority has been awfully defied and awkwardly collapsed.

According to her mind of TAP, to disturb the order of Bly is to sabotage the whole system of orthodox order, to derange conventionality; to pervert the moral and mind of the two cherubs is to corrupt the protestant doctrine, so the ghosts are the bitter enemies in the double sense. Bly is falling! The two little angels are falling! Immerged in authoritarianism, conventionalism and protestant moralism her mind is filled with strong sense of mission and thrilling heroism spurring her to hunt out, to exorcise, to exterminate the ghosts. The Armageddon is inevitably impending.

vi. Armageddon

The first maneuver is to separate the sister and the brother by which the two ghosts are alienated. By sending Flora away, the governess is painfully forgoing her sexual desire for the master of Bly, because Flora "will make her out to him the lowest creature" and she will have no chance to gain his approval. Saying to Flora in her heart means saying "goodbye" in frustration to the attractive "Jason" at the Harley Street ( "Good-bye! I've have lost you [...] I have done my best, but I've lost you", 100). Finally, in great pain and desperation, she allows the authoritarian desire to smother the sexual desire, authoritarianism subjugating aphrodisia.

Compared with Flora, Miles is the sharper thorn pricking her nerves of authoritarianism. For three months her mind has been simmering in suspicion of the boy's psychic morbidness, but now he is finally "convicted" and she finds he is "so beyond of" her with his devilish rebellion, with his defiled soul. Miles was out of her control, out of her tolerance. For three months, the governess' anger for the boy looms, amasses, puffs, and eventually blasts like chilly storm. With her authoritarian blindness, she does not at all realize that she is molesting and abusing the boy in her frequent "splits of attention" and hysterical resentment.

The governess instantiates the anti-democracy, prejudice, aggression and
despotism of the authoritarian personality induced by “situational factors”, and the
cognitive psychology defines this mindset as paranoid and as a certain form of
cognitive functioning of closed-mindedness. Diana Baumrind claims that the
authoritarian parents hold the “predominant view of the child as a refractory savage,
a small adult, or an angelic bundle from heaven” [27]. The governess as an ersatz
mother regards Miles as “a small adult”, “a refractory savage” under dictation of the
ghost and “so beyond” of her moral guidance. She believes that “he’s an injury to
others” at school, an injury to her at Bly. The ghost-possessed stubborn boy must be
recovered from the devil and purged, rehabilitated and she becomes so aggressively
militant in her hatred for the devil behind the scene, the arch foe, order saboteur,
the angel and upper-class women seducer. She is fanatically aroused by her wrath
into great excitement and gallantry in the imminent “Armageddon”. This time she is
totally “carried away” by rage, by madness, by hysteria, by her dogmatic
authoritarian prejudice and bigotry, furiously, dangerously.

Left alone with the governess, Mile instinctively and distinctly feels the angst;“Well—so we’re alone.” (109) When his predicament looms and presses under the
governess’ pestering interrogation, the angst grows to perception of danger. He
habitually seeks help from those “in the below”, such as Luke, who have been
raising and protecting him since he was orphaned. To him they really “count” now,
as they always count to him, but to the governess “they don’t count”.

When desperately corned, the little boy surrenders by admitting that he “said
things” at school, from which the governess wins a sense of “blind victory” but is
dimmed by a hesitation on the boy’s possible innocence.

I seemed to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure, and within a minute
there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps
innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he were innocent
what then on earth was I? (115)

Along with the hesitation also comes a self-interrogation: “if he were innocent
what then on earth was I?” This scares the governess: if the boy is innocent, her
heroic action to rescue and purge Miles would be void and vitiated as child
molestation and abuse. No! He is “untidy”, “infirm”, “ill-natured”, and “saying
things” is not all his unmentionable vice. Eventually, the screw of authoritarianism
drives the governess totally mad. At the very moment, her attention fiercely splitting
again, the ghost apparition revealing again, and the Armageddon begins in the true
sense.

Her fury instantly escalated, her aggression intensified and changed into physical violence. She fight desperately. Suffocated, “baffled”, frightened, and captivated by the rage and tyranny of the governess, Miles “frantically shakes” his head gasping for air of life, struggling for freedom. However, the governess, now being a revengeful Medea engulfed by insanity, sees the “little dirty dog” is still denying his corruption, defying her rescuing authority by shaking his “dog’s head”, and she roars in volcanic eruption of rage “No more, no more, no more!” —No more moral transgression, no more authority defiance, no more devil attendance.

The revengeful Medea, furious Nemesis, totally lost in the barbarity of her moralism and authoritarianism, grasps and clutches Miles to the suppression of asphyxia and suffocation. Miles is so petrified that in his “split of attention” of desperation he instinctively cried not to his uncle but to his former servant, friend, “tutor” — “Peter Quint” — for rescue, though both of whom, one indifferent, the other dead, are equally unavailable now. The boy’s desperate cry for help is accompanied by indignant protest against the tyrannical and abusing governess— “You devil!”

Mistaking Miles’s last sentence for naming and renouncing his devil possessor, the governess deems her battle won, her cause achieved, the devil exterminated, which means her protégé is recovered, her authority restored; her authoritarian mind is more than perfectly gratified, and she is proud of herself.

IV. A Tragic Governess of Mental Nonage

Miles’s death is a worse tragedy than the unachieved love of the governess, as Brum puts: “here is a pubescent boy, unhappy in an all-female company, fatherless, asking for the help of his only male relation, who fails him. He reveals precociousness [...]. A sad story of children, ‘orphaned’ in more than one aspect [...]” [28] He wants to cease to lead “a life that is so unnatural for a boy”, he wants “his own sort”, he wants his uncle to know about him. All his righteous wishes are neglected and unfulfilled, and what’s worse he is demonized and deprived of life in the bud for his never confirmed “unmentionable misdemeanors” and moral “contamination”. It is not that Miles hurts the governess with his so-called stubborn defiance and moral corruption, but that the governess hurts Miles “beyond repair” with her madness of authoritarianism and moral dogmatism.

Being the oppressed of sexuality and the oppressor of authoritarianism at the
same time, the governess herself is a tragedy in more than one sense. Due to her authoritarian personality, the governess voluntarily bandages herself into the cocoon of protestant parochialism, through which she maintains her dignity, especially her female sexual decorousness, while at the same time in her a sexual self-repression and ambivalence, the anxious and bigoted young lady falls desperately in love with her employer. She is schizophrenically torn between her natural sexual desire and moral prejudice and restriction. Therefore, there is a reason for her hysteria.

She has planned more than willingly to perform the angel in the house, and undertake her duty in fervent commitment to please and attract her upper-class, carefree dream lover; she has fantasized him coming to live happily with her in the castle of Bly like prince and princess in the “story-books” and “fairy tales”. However, the governess and her dream lover, one being morally self-restrained, is no princess; the other being morally self-indulgent, is no prince. The vague pain of her lovesick heart caused by the employer’s indifference was compounded by the sharp resentment provoked by the defiance of “contaminated” kids and by the furious anger incurred by the vile ghosts. Her mind has been deeply traumatized by both her unquenched sexual crave and her frustrated power appetency. In fact, the governess is more tragic and pitiful than Miss Jessel who she despises and pities, because Miss Jessel with her sexual “indiscretion” has truly loved and been loved, yet she with her sexual demure neither loves nor is loved, her discretion wasted and her decorum maintained in vain.

The governess is a tragic character as both the victim and the victimizer; she has been suppressed and turns back to suppress. She has breathed the fresh air of liberalism and experienced the bright space of freedom when she first arrives at Bly and she is even learning something which is novel to her experience of “smothered life” in the country vicarage.

[...] I now feel that for weeks the lessons must have been rather my own. I learn something—at first certainly—that had not been one of the teachings of my small smothered life; [...] It was the first time, in a manner, that I had known space and air and freedom [...] (36).

It is a pity that she has not learnt enough to get out of her psychological nonage, to reflect on her stereotypical authoritarian mentality and parochial moral attitudes to be self-enlightened and self-liberated, to enjoy the air, space, and to be a real princess of democracy, freedom, equality and tolerance.
According to Oesterreich, authoritarian personality reveals contradictive behavior patterns: on the one hand, they are assertive in their attitude toward traditional morality, norm, moral conformity, while on the other hand, they are submissive to the authority. However, these two behavioral or personality patterns are of the same psychology: the focus on conformity and authority. The governess with her English middle-class’ consciousness, inability to admit her sexual impulses, attempts to suppress and demonize the “transgressors” of sexual code and social rank, but her suffocating moralism and authoritarianism shackling instinctive human desire for sexuality and freedom can only results in added aversion and rebellion, in uncompromising human alienation.

Authoritarian persons defer to the dictation and control of others who offer them the certainty and comfort that they cannot provide for themselves, which is a reflection of mental or psychological nonage, immaturity. Extensions of this basic authoritarian response are the rejection of the new and the unfamiliar and rigid adherence to norms and value systems, as Oesterreich observes:

Authoritarian personalities have not developed mechanisms for dealing independently with crisis situations, they feel themselves attacked very easily. In combination with lack of independence, the authoritarian personalities’ poorly developed conflict-solving strategies place them in a state of emotional and cognitive overload that in turn causes hostile tendencies. [29]

Hostility and aggression belongs to the most important topics of any theory of authoritarianism and Oesterreich judges Authoritarianism to be the “phenomenon of a self-imposed nonage”.

V. A Disillusioned or Regenerated Governess

At Bly, the governess first knows herself as a whole in the glasses.

[...] the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot, all struck me [...] as so many things thrown in [...] (28 – 29)

Like a baby at mirror stage whose “physical ambitions outstrips its motor capacity”, when her individual freedom just “outstrips” the vicarage restriction, she adopts herself an image of morality and authority at Bly, but it is just a mirror image, not her true self. Laura Mulvey claims:

The mirror stage occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrips
its motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition; the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego [...].[30]

The governess sees in the mirror projection an "idealized" self endowed with moral dignity and authoritarian majesty. Along with the death of Miles, when both her ambivalent and self-repressed sexual desire and violent authoritarian desire fade away, when she recovers from her hysterical reverie, she sees the reality, and achieves self-knowledge. It is not that the children are possessed by the ghosts but that her mind is possessed by the dogmatic parochialism and prejudicial despotism; it is not that she has been bringing the children up, but that the children are helping her to mature, to "grow" form "nonage" to coming of age in psychology and personality. She eventually comes to realize she is not the rescuer but the rescuee; the screw of her sexual and authoritarian repression finally loosens and unscrews.

All the happenings at Bly flashes back in her mind like a story of twisty and scary plot and she wonders isn't "it just a story-book over which I had fallen a-doze and a-dream? (31)" It is a relief and fortune that she awakens from the "doze" and the "dream" and with her sobriety and maturity she is approved by Douglas as "the most agreeable woman worthy of any whatever", which made the story both tragedy and comedy—Miles's death and the governess' rebirth.

Notes:
[1] Edmund Wilson, "The Ambiguity of Henry James", Hound and Horn 7 (1934), pp. 385 - 406. Rpt. in The Triple Thinkers, rev. and enl. Ed. New York; Oxford UP, 1948, pp. 88 = 132.
[2] Stanley Renner, "Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling": Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bogeymen, and the 'Ghost', pp. 239 - 240, in Peter G. Beidler, ed., Henry James, The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, Ross C. Murfin, ed. Boston, New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 223 - 40.
[3] Peter G. Beidler. "Introduction: Biological and Historical Contexts", in Henry James, The Turn of the Screw, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, p. 9.
[4] Peter G. Beidler. "A Critical History of The Turn of the Screw", in Henry James, The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, p. 129.
[5] Ursula Brum. “Another View on The Turn of the Screw”, Connotations 11, 1 (2000/2002), pp. 91 - 97

[6] Henry James. The Turn of the Screw, in Peter G. Beidler, ed., “The Complete Text of The Turn of the Screw”, from Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, p. 27. Hereafter, quotations from this novel are all of this version and parenthesized by pages.

[7] Priscilla L. Walton. “What then on earth was I?: Feminine Subjectivity and The Turn of Screw”, in Henry James, The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, p. 260.

[8] Stanley Renner. “‘Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling’: Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bageymer, and the Ghost”, p. 229.

[9] Ibid., p. 225, p. 237.

[10] Ibid., p. 230.

[11] Ibid., p. 231.

[12] Ibid., p. 232.

[13] Ibid., p. 226.

[14] “Reaction Formation”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reaction_form. Retrieved, 2015-8-5.

[15] Stanley Renner. “‘Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling’: Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bageymer, and the Ghost”, p. 237.

[16] Edward Lobb, “The Turn of the Screw, King Lear, and Tragedy,” Connotations 10, 1 (2000/2002), pp. 31 -46.

[17] Stanley Renner. “‘Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling’: Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bageymer, and the Ghost”, p. 234.

[18] “Psychological Projection”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_projection. Retrieved 2015-8-5.

[19] Bill E. Peterson and Elieen L. Zurbriggen. “Gender, Sexuality, and the Authoritarian Personality”, Journal of Personality 78, 6 (2010), pp. 1801 -26

[20] Stanley Renner. “‘Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling’: Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bageymer, and the Ghost”, p. 234.

[21] Stanley Renner. “‘Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling’: Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bageymer, and the Ghost”, p. 234.

[22] Diana Baumrind. “Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior”, Child Development, 37, 4 (1966), pp. 887 -907.

[23] Detlef Oesterreich. “Flight into Security: A New Approach and Measure of the Authoritarian Personality”, Political Psychology, 26, 2, Special Issue:
Authoritarianism (2005), pp. 275–97.

[24] Stanley Renner. "‘Red Hair, Very Red, Close-curling’: Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Bageymer, and the Ghost”, p. 234.

[25] Bruce Robbins. “‘They Don’t Count Much, Do They?’: The Unfinished History of The Turn of the Screw”, in Henry James, The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, p. 286.

[26] Ibid., p. 288.

[27] Diana Baumrind. “Effects of Authoritative Darental Control on Child Behavior”.

[28] Vrsula Brum. "Another View on the Turn of the Screw”.

[29] Detlef Oesterreich. “Fight to Security”.

[30] John Story. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction. Beijing: Pearson Education Asian Limited and Peking University Press, 2004, p. 114. The italics are this author’s.

Zhihui YANG, Ph. D. candidate majoring English literature and cultural studies at College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University. His academic interest covers literary studies and cultural criticism.