

Tales From the Nursery: Re-reading James' *The Turn of the Screw* (a conversation)

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As our presentation is constructed as a dialogue, we share here its main lines and identify the main questions we aim to address. We are also preparing, for distribution in early June, a PDF document that will provide some anchoring points for our work in the form of quotations and additional materials.

Short description

Our starting point is Henry James's masterful mind game on Victorian childhood, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) exposed in Shoshana Felman's hermeneutical tour-de-force "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" (1977). Our aim is to respond to the prompt "the nature of evil children as social and cultural constructs" with the help of psychoanalytic models that foreground the importance of imagined or "fantasmatic" spaces in our adult constructions of childhood – for example: "the nursery". Our working hypothesis is that by shadowing James's and Felman's interpretations of evil children as represented in a literary space we may be able to offer a few conceptual tools related to cultural representations in different media.

These key texts, which focus on a Victorian "moralization" of child, not only mobilize the intricate relational web of assumptions, principles, norms, and discourses that surround the child; they also provide the elements for a humanistic critique of those assumptions, norms, and discourses – a critique, moreover, that reaches across and between disciplines and touches on the questions that organize the very themes of this conference.

Questions up for examination

- The nursery (as a space; as a concept) and family secrets
- Narratives (the stories we tell about childhood (recommended listening: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/521/bad-baby>))
- What we think we know about the interiority of the child: attachment theory in situ and in the literature
- "Attunement" vs. "mirroring" (à la Daniel Stern)
- With Nietzsche, the transition from Bad to Evil; is there such a thing as a child of nature?

- Is there such a thing as a “natural child”?
- The “mediatization” of the child (i.e. images of children, hysteria)
- The transferential stage: literature as a magnifying tool