Light versus Dark: Shades of Evil in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*

James uses light versus dark to showcase the chilling awareness of underlying evil in *The Turn of the Screw*. The narrative provides the reader with glimpses of light and understanding, and stages of dark paranoia and suspicion of the characters. Laden with ambiguity, the story leaves the characters open for interpretation. In other words, the text itself leaves the reader in phases of light and dark when it comes to understanding. James uses simple language that directly references light versus dark, whether it is in a physical or spiritual sense to convey deeper connotations. The way physical darkness is described versus the light of a candle, moon through the window, or the light of day is deeply symbolic and forces the reader to look closer at the text to try and decipher the source of the evil disturbance. As one digs deeper in to the text, the theme of light versus dark allows the reader to see the characters altering shades of evil. The reader is always left in the dark with whether or not the evil is in fact real, or if the narrator in fact sane; once the paranoia is at its peak, we are left to grapple with the death of a young child, an incomprehensible horror. *The Turn of the Screw* uses light and dark to keep the reader in a state of uncertainty and fear due to the inability to pinpoint the origin of evil.

The simplest presentation of the theme of light versus dark is one that carries through to the very end of the novel: the light allowed and withheld by windows and candles. The horror begins with an eerie feeling of evil in the house and it grows to the death of a young child. Early on, of course, the governess notes the large windows at Bly and the sunny grounds. As the story darkens, she tells her account of a pivotal scene involving windows, candles, and darkness. The governess recalls,

I had left a light burning, but it was now out, and I felt an instant certainty that Flora had extinguished it. This brought me to my feet and straight, in the darkness, to her bed,
which I found she had left…the striking of a match completed the picture. [Flora] evidently rested on the sill—the casement opened forward—and gave herself up. She was face to face with the apparition we had met at the lake. (71)

The beautiful contrast between light and dark in this scene is very chilling. The child—half-illuminated by the match and half-submerged by the moonlit darkness—has, in the governess’s words, “[given] herself up.” James’ use of language here seems to merely describe the candlelight (and lack thereof), but the connotations highlight the possession of Flora. The flame of the match is inquisitive and reveals great details to the governess, allowing her to realize that Flora has “[given] herself up” to the spirits. As the reader recalls, the governess learned earlier in the story that a candle extinguishes in the presence of an apparition. When she mentioned her third encounter with Quint on the stairs, she makes a point to say that her “candle, under a bold flourish, went out” (67). With the mysterious extinguishing of the candles, we as readers are uncertain of the source of the evil—whether it is the children, the governess, or the apparitions. It is the preciseness of language that James uses that ties the light versus dark theme even tighter to the characters in *The Turn of the Screw*.

As the plot continues, we see the governess’s use of light and dark language begin to directly reference her belief of the evil in the children, but we must question the foundation of her beliefs as well. James gives us her account but it is up to us to read deeper to determine whether or not she is a stable, reliable narrator. By reading in to the theme of light and dark in the text, we can draw tentative conclusions about the governess’s mental state. Whenever the children leave the house, she says they are to have “gone out.” For instance, the governess uses these terms when Flora is gone missing and is really with Miss Jessel. The most distinctive use of this phrase is when the governess is finally left alone with Miles but knows that he had “gone
out, as he said, for a stroll” (111). The governess uses the term “gone out” to describe the children because it is a term associated with the extinguishing of any source of light; in her account, the extinguishing of candles confirms the presence of an evil apparition. By describing the children in the same way as the candles, we are to assume that the governess believes the children to be possessed. If their light has “gone out,” they are consumed by darkness and are therefore evil. After Miles and the governess have been conversing about the troubling events surrounding the both of them, she asks, “You want so to go out again?” and Miles answers, “Awfully!” (115). Of course it is after this scene that the governess learns Miles need not go out at all; Quint has come to the window for him. She holds him with his back facing the window to protect him from Quint but also to keep him from any light that may be shining through. James does this purposely because it creates ambiguity. Of course, keeping Miles from seeing the ghost is protecting him. However, the fact that she wishes for him only to face her is quite dark. She shields him from the window (a source of light) and embraces him tightly into what we can only assume is darkness. Therefore, we are faced with the chilling option that the governess herself is the source of darkness and evil. This idea of course contrasts with previous conceptions, such as the scene in Miles’ bedroom. When the governess sat with Miles in his bed, the candle was extinguished without the help of an open window. Miles confesses: “It was I who blew it, dear!” (95). It is at that moment that we are to question the parallel between Flora and Miles’ scenes with the candles and if in the fact that they are both possessed by the apparitions. The source of the possession and evil is impossible to pinpoint and keeps the reader reeling in suspense. To try and grasp the references to evil, one must delve even deeper in to James’ use of ambiguous language and imagery. The apparitions bring to light the next layer of dissecting the theme of light versus dark: the ability to see and understand the evil matters at hand. To see and
understand the evil in the text is impossible due to its ambiguous nature, and James references light and visibility countless times to keep the reader thinking and attempting to guess the source of evil.

James uses several metaphors for vision and understanding, all of which the reader needs to interpret in order to fully appreciate the theme of light versus dark. The metaphors for vision especially apply to the apparitions’ apparent possession of the children. Of course, the metaphors are extremely ambiguous in themselves and James does this to make the reader begin to try and decipher the evil at hand, whether it be rooted in the governess, children, or spirits. The frantic (and ultimately failing) interpretation of the origin of evil strikes the most fear in the reader. A particularly important example of this interpretation occurs when the governess sees Quint through the window in the dining room. By meeting his gaze, she realizes “Something…happened this time that had not happened before…his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room, was as deep and as hard as then, but it quitted me for a moment during which I could still watch it, see it fix successively several other things” (44). The window is both a source of light and of visibility (or understanding) in this instance and we can see James’ intention to combine the use of light with the knowledge of the apparitions’ intention to possess the children. Perhaps this further explains the intentions of our narrator as she mimics Quint’s exact actions. She confesses, “I applied my face to the pane and looked, as he has looked, into the room” (45). The governess is looking to see exactly as Quint wanted to see, and it is then that the reader should assume that she too wishes to possess Miles. The reader is encouraged to draw this assumption due to the ambiguity of this scene. Once the reader understands the connotations applied to vision, the governess’s recollection of what she “sees” takes on an incredibly deeper meaning: the governess’s perspective on the evil possession of the
children and the apparent existence of the apparitions Though one can somewhat decipher the
governess’s perspective with the help of her references to vision, the reader still cannot believe
her to be fully credible because the theme of vision applies to the reader’s understanding as well.

James wishes for the reader to further question the source of evil by reading deeper into
the dialogue that mentions vision and light. If the reader sees in the way that the narrative
suggests, they will become fully immersed in the account of the governess and become even
more horrified in regards to the unknown source of evil. By using dialogue that references vision
(light) and setting pivotal scenes in the broad of day, James is opening up the story and the
characters for the readers’ interpretation of the source of evil. We can see the potential of
determining evil’s origin in the governess’s crucial scenes with Flora, Miss Jessel, Miles, and
Quint. After Flora blatantly denies seeing Miss Jessel who is standing directly in front of them,
the governess pleads with Mrs. Grose: “You don’t see her exactly as we see?—you mean to say
you don’t now—now? She’s as big as a blazing fire! Only look, dearest woman, look—!” (102).
Both vision and light are used in this plea by the governess, and the connotations connected to
the words “see,” “fire,” and “look” are expansive. To “see” the ghost is an ability that has
seemingly never come to Mrs. Grose. By begging her to “look,” the governess is desperately
asking Mrs. Grose to not only see the apparition but to see good and evil in the world and
particularly in the children. She wants Mrs. Grose to look at not only the ghost but within
herself—in her own soul—in search of good or evil. To say that the apparition is “as big as a
blazing fire,” she is now comparing the ghost to the flame of the candle which we see played out
in another desperate scene with Miles. The initial connotations of the flame of the candle or the
fire of a match were inquisitive but comforting. Now, however, James ambiguously implies that
the governess is connecting the ghosts to light, vision, and understanding. She is beginning to see
the evil in the world and we can assume she is either enlightened from the heightened awareness or that she herself is the source of evil. Perhaps it really is she that is tormenting the innocent children and little Flora is indeed blind. The reader must also note that the scene with Flora is all taking place in the day light. This is done intentionally because the reader is to begin to see the darkness (evil) even in a light setting. The reader must also interpret the governess’s plea to Mrs. Grose as an equally desperate plea from the author to the audience—James is begging us to look deeper and deeper in to the text but ultimately this leaves us with the greatest feeling of unrest and discomfort. After the governess has her breakdown on the lawn, she reflects that “when I raised my head the day was almost done” (104) so we know that everything is out in the light now but as readers we are still in the dark. Furthermore, the governess realizes that she saw neither Mrs. Grose nor Flora on her return but she “saw, as by an ambiguous compensation, a great deal of Miles. I saw—I can use no other phrase—so much of him that it fairly measured more than it had ever measured” (104). By seeing more of Miles, she is seeing more of his affliction. He is wholly possessed by Quint, more so than Flora by Miss Jessel. This is the governess’s assumption but we cannot assume that she is reliable or even sane. Leading with this note, we need to examine the final scene to appreciate the novel’s ambiguity as a whole.

In the intense final scene, James connects all of the notions of light versus dark to finally unfold the true matter at hand: the demonic possession of Miles. The first sign of this is when the governess embraces Miles and keeps his back to the window. She compares him to a flame in the following lines: “I had to shade, as it were, my flame. Meanwhile the glare of the face was again at the window, the scoundrel fixed as if to watch and wait” (117). The use of metaphor by James is very blatant. The flame of the candle, now connected to the apparition and the realization of evil presence, is now directly tied to Miles. Miles is a flame, and therefore Miles is (in the
governess’s mind) possessed. On the other hand, the reader could see Miles as a flame that needs sheltering from being extinguished by an evil source. The governess keeps his back to the window because she does not want the ghost (who is here compared to a wind that can come through an open window) to extinguish Miles. It seems that she is sheltering Miles, but it is also possible that the governess is the source of evil that ultimately smothered, extinguished, and killed Miles. In this scene, the reader is most conflicted because on one side of Miles is, supposedly, the apparition Quint who has possession of Miles; on the other hand, the governess (a possible source of evil) is attempting to smother Miles in order to kill any good left in the child. Notice how James directly connects the imagery of a flame extinguishing, or having “gone out,” to the immersing of darkness or death upon the soul. This imagery of light versus dark is carried out to the final lines where Miles dies: “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (120). It is extremely important to see that James makes a point to say that it was again day time. The day reveals every detail to the governess and finally they were “alone.” The fact that Miles is now “dispossessed” confirms the connotations of light and flame imagery because there is no longer evil presence and he has in fact “gone out.” The death of Miles in indeed an evil horror in itself, but it takes on even more of an evil form if the governess is insane, because in clutching on to him so tightly in the final moments, she was not trying to protect him but rather to smother him. James does not make either option clear and this is what makes the text so fantastically horrific. The reader at this point should be observing the theme of light and dark through the text but also expanding into the realm of good and evil in the observable world, just as the governess’s narrative suggests.

James uses ambiguous gothic imagery to evoke deep contemplation of good and evil in the reader. Throughout the entire story, we are haunted with the knowledge that something evil
definitely lurks in the house. However, because of James’ light versus dark imagery, we cannot pin-point the source. The governess could be entirely insane and therefore caused the death of an innocent child. On the other hand, the children could indeed have been possessed and the governess only wished to save them. Either way, James has made his point: deciphering good and evil relies on how well you understand light and dark—how much you see and how much you fail to see.