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ANTI-CHRISTIAN MYTH IN JAMES'S THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

by Tom J. Truss, Jr.

The compact, dramatically intense story "The Tree of Knowledge" should not be dismissed with Clifton Fadiman's judgment: it "weighs little and decides nothing."¹ A clue to a fresh meaning is contained in James's account of its inspiration. A friend, James recorded, once commented on a mutual acquaintance, "He had found his father out, artistically: having grown up in so happy a personal relation with him only to feel, at last, quite awfully, that he didn't and couldn't believe in him."² The statement is neatly provocative. The word *father* implies a parallel idea: a creator who creates badly has a child who rejects him. The seeds of a theologically bleak allegory are contained in the statement; and logically, a submerged anti-Christian myth, one discovers, runs through the story inspired by the comment. Interpretation of a James story clearly along this line has not been hitherto suggested.

The plot of "The Tree of Knowledge" is a simple one. Peter Brench attempted to protect his godson Lancelot Mallow, at the threshold of young manhood, from the knowledge that Mr. Mallow, Lancelot's father, is a bad sculptor. Contrary to his godfather's wishes and knowing secretly all along "the truth about the Master,"³ Lancelot went to Paris to study art. Later, he learned that his mother through the years had been aware of "the Master's" shortcomings and had never voiced her knowledge. Finally, the dismayed Peter learned that Mrs. Mallow had always known the truth. Essentially, the story develops Peter's discovery. Everyone except the Master had known of the Master's inadequacies all along, and Peter himself had been living with

¹*The Short Stories of Henry James* (New York: Random House [1945]), p. 433.

²*The Art of the Novel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons [1934]), p. 235.

³*The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (26 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907-1917), XVI, 183.

an imperfect knowledge of his associates. Significantly, James added the character of Peter to the original situation.

By referring frequently to "the Master" but rarely to "Mallow" after the story gets under way, James transformed the sculptor into a godhead-image. The limitations of the godhead, however, are explicitly stated: his creations ignored him ("fancy-heads of celebrities either too busy or too buried . . . to sit," p. 169); and Peter Brench had apostolically assumed for himself the role of guardian and protector. He sheltered the child of the creator, his own godson, from the knowledge that the father ("the Master") was a failure. Directly related to this objective was Peter's wish to keep Mrs. Mallow, in her apparent untiring devotion to her husband, from being hurt. Thus the creator busily pursued his inane work while the priest-Peter, who thought he was the sole possessor of the secret about the Master, geared his own life to keeping the family relations harmonious (he "shared, to the last delicate morsel, their problems and pains," pp. 170-171). Actually, the Master's work was not to Peter's liking, for the guardian had his own ideas about creating. In his mind, "the artist should be all impulse and instinct" (p. 179). Furthermore, the guardian deplored the marbles, and "the Master's ideas . . . had . . . remained undiscoverable to Peter Brench" (p. 176). And surrounding Brench with things which were old, James gave him an "extreme and general humility" (p. 167). The allegorical relation of Peter to the artist now becomes clear. The secret knowledge which the apostle-priest had of the creator would discredit the creator, but for the sake of social untiy he never divulged his insights.

Brench's relation to Mrs. Mallow has its allegorical aspects. She gave his life much of its meaning, for he had been in love with her for years ("she was the one beautiful reason he had never married," p. 167). Although his devotion made him miserable ("I've the misfortune to be omniscient . . . It's why I'm so wretched," p. 174), he persisted in it ("the game for me is only to hold my tongue," p. 188). The apostle's celibacy was a result of his admiration for the Master's admirer. Actually, Mrs. Mallow seems to have embodied for the priest-image in the story the members of a household with their blind devotion to its head. When a Canadian family showed interest in the purchase of a tomb, the wife became quite elated. Some remotely located people were possibly being converted to her husband's school of art. The priest, then, was interested in the happiness of the Master's fol-

lowing, symbolized by the one-time bride, Mrs. Mallow, rather than in the Master and his work. Brench thus kept the wife uninformed about the Master's true nature.

Brench's fear that Mrs. Mallow might learn the truth was projected to his special charge, Lancelot, the rising young intellect, who was in a position to interfere with the wife's devotion to the Master and bring about the collapse of the whole social unit. Brench exerted himself, however, under the handicap of a woefully inaccurate analysis of the situation; for Lancelot, whom Brench had wanted to keep ignorant of the Master's failings, had understood the "value" of the Master's work as soon as he had begun to understand anything (p. 183). For this reason, the member of the rising generation had kept a distance between himself and the Master. Although he had the same knowledge that his godfather had, Lancelot had found it impossible to "continue humbugging" (p. 187), as his godfather had done, and had left home.

The list of ironies in the story is long. The creator was indifferent to those in his intimate circle. The "omniscient" Peter knew very little about those he was most concerned for, and the household would have been just as orderly without Peter as with him. And even with her apparent blind devotion, the wife had continuously known the truth about the Master. The flock knew more than its shepherd Brench. The story has two decidedly imperfect characters, the godhead and the priest, who allegedly keeps the godhead's household happy; but the subordinate members of the unit are more than those in whom a presumed full knowledge is invested. In the parallel of the family unit and institutional religion, the theme of a strong anti-clericalism emerges. Ironically, the institution is removed from real experience: "the whole situation, among these good people, was verily a marvel" (p. 168); and "they lived . . . at a height scarce susceptible of ups and downs" (p. 178).

To enlarge this interpretation, one should relate "The Tree of Knowledge" to *The Turn of the Screw*, which was written during the same period, when James was concerned with the meaning of knowledge.⁴ The technical function of the governess in the longer story and of Peter Brench in the shorter is the same: to care for the rising generation. The governess wished to keep the

⁴See Joseph J. Firebaugh, "Inadequacy in Eden: Knowledge and 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, III, 57-63.

children as innocent as she was—to “save” them, whereas Brench wanted to shelter his charge from his own knowledge of the world. Her actions were motivated by fear; his by love. In addition, the absentee uncle in *The Turn of the Screw* has a counterpart in the sculptor in “The Tree of Knowledge.” Both are inadequate godheads. Furthermore, Lancelot is what one might expect little Miles to become had the boy been allowed to mature. The two stories actually show different aspects of the same general theme. The repression of upsetting ideas has unfortunate consequences—psychological in one instance and priestly in the other.

A specific anti-Christian theme is implied by the delineations and actions of characters in “The Tree of Knowledge.” Brench’s alleged wisdom in actuality was ignorance, and the dedications of his life were based on a mistake. His special secret knowledge was neither special nor secret. In spite of his care, the worldly Lancelot went wherever his intelligence led him, and Mrs. Malloy, with her full knowledge of the Master, went about her affairs as if nothing was amiss. Peter, baffled, admired Mrs. Malloy all the more. The reader interprets these developments by means of Peter’s various reactions to them and arrives at the suggested theme. The tree of knowledge, which traditionally poses the first stage for an intelligent being who is working out his salvation, caused the consternation and bewilderment of James’s priest-image, Brench, who tried to control the growth of the tree. James’s arrangement of events and details implies that the growth cannot be impeded. By observing the nature of the growth, we gain certain further insights to the theme: the concept of a Christian institution is unrealistic, and the office of the ministry is insufficient to contend with the world. James thus constructed a gloomy myth, which connotatively is anti-authoritarian and hence anti-institutional, and perhaps even anti-Christian.