

UNIT NINE

Questions for discussion:

Glazer's film and James's story deal with possession by the dead. How do you understand the idea of possession? How would you characterize the idea of evil in each of these stories? Both the children in James's story and the child in Glazer's film possess knowledge of matters supposedly not known or understood by children. Are pre-adolescent children actually ignorant of such things? Is it a good or a bad thing that they are/are not? The governess in James first presumes that her role is to shield the children from the ghosts. What changes her mind? Likewise, the Nicole Kidman character in *Birth* is at first amused by the boy but eventually comes to take the fact of his possession seriously. What changes her mind? To some degree, every ghost story engages what Freud called "the Uncanny, that is to say, it presents the ghosts as possibly real but also possibly as hallucinations subject to rational explanation. The two stories under consideration here also partake of the Freudian Uncanny—there are grounds for considering the otherworldly phenomena real and also grounds for explaining it away, as a form of hysteria on the part of the governess and the Nicole Kidman character, respectively. How explicit are the grounds for taking the otherworldly as real and as unreal in each case? Which is the better explanation in each case, that the otherworldly phenomena are real or that they are hallucinations?