

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

by Henry James



THE AUTHOR

Henry James (1843-1916) was the son of social theorist Henry James and the younger brother of pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James. Born in New York, he lived most of the last forty years of his life in England. It is no surprise, then, that much of his fiction deals with the relationships between the Old World and the New. Typically, James pictures the New World as democratic, innocent and exuberant and the Old World as aristocratic, wise and corrupt. These themes dominate such novels as *Daisy Miller*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The American*.

After traveling to Europe numerous times in his youth, the family settled in New England before the Civil War. James enrolled at Harvard Law School at the age of 19, but lasted only a year, soon quitting to devote his full attention to writing. He began by writing short stories for literary journals, and soon came to be recognized as a master of the genre. He is considered to be a pioneer in the school of American Realism.

He traveled to Europe for the first time as an adult in 1869, and, after moving back and forth several times between America and Europe, settled permanently abroad in 1875, first in Paris for a year, and then for the rest of his life in London. While in Paris, he met and was influenced by a literary circle including Ivan Turgenev, Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, and Guy de Maupassant. His contact with them convinced him that a novel need not focus on action and plot, but could very effectively concentrate on character. It was in London, however, that he produced the major novels that were to establish his reputation in the annals of American literature. His wide experience gave him great insight into the characteristics of both European and American society, and his novels reflect his understanding of the fundamental differences between the two.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, James turned his attentions to other styles of writing, producing novels dealing with issues of social reform (*The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*), and later trying his hand at plays, with which he had little success or public acceptance. He then returned to prose fiction in the last years of the century, producing,

among others, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). His writing became increasingly symbolic, as may be seen in his later works such as *The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of the Dove*.

In his final years he retired to Sussex, though he did return briefly to America, where he was appalled by the materialism he found there. He became a British subject in 1915 because of his disapproval of American refusal to enter the First World War, and died in London the following year.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins in a drawing room, where a group of friends have gathered. The telling of ghost stories is to be the entertainment for the evening. One who was present at the gathering, who is the narrator for the frame story, tells of a man named Douglas, who told of a manuscript he had received from his sister's governess, a woman of impeccable credentials. This manuscript contained a story so horrifying that he had kept it sealed for years. The group asked him to read it, and he sent home for the manuscript, promising to read it as soon as it arrived. The body of the story is then the governess' manuscript, told by her in the first person. The novel thus is cushioned by three layers of narration - the unnamed Narrator, Douglas, the possessor of the manuscript, and the governess, the manuscript's author. This cushioning raises many questions about the faithfulness of the account and the credibility of the various people who mediate the story to the reader.

The story itself speaks of a 20-year-old woman who is hired to serve as a governess at Bly, a country estate. The owner lives in London, and has no desire for any further communications with the governess or anyone else on the estate. She is told that she will be responsible for the owner's nephew and niece, ages ten and eight, orphans whose parents had died in India. She would be assisted by a housekeeper, Mrs. Grose.

Upon arriving at Bly, the governess immediately strikes up a friendship with Mrs. Grose. She meets the little girl, Flora, who is as lovely and charming as any governess could wish. Later, the boy Miles arrives. He, too, seems too good to be true; yet the governess finds he has been expelled from school for a reason that no one wishes to discuss (we never find out what it was).

The children excel at their studies and are very pleasant company, but the governess soon senses that all is not well. She encounters two ghosts, a young man and a young woman. After describing them to Mrs. Grose, she finds out that they are Peter Quint, the owner's former valet, who died by falling into a ditch while returning home drunk one night, and Miss Jessel, the former governess, with whom Quint had been carrying on an affair. As far as she knows, the governess is the only one who can see the ghosts. They seem to be making threatening overtures toward the children. Her first instinct is to protect the children, but she begins to notice that they behave strangely when the ghosts are present. She suspects that they not only see the ghosts, but have been communicating with them, and that the ghosts are seeking increased influence over them. She learns from the housekeeper that Miles had spent a lot of time with Quint in the months before his death.

The governess becomes increasingly protective of the children. She tries to keep them with her at all times, and drops hints in conversation to try to get them to discuss what they may or may not have seen. Their responses indicate no knowledge of the ghosts, and they begin to grow

restless about the governess' constant hovering about them. Miles finally asks to be sent off to a different school, but the governess is fearful of what may happen if he leaves her protection, and hides the letter Miles writes to his uncle.

One day by the pond, the governess sees the ghost of Miss Jessel in the company of Flora. She speaks directly to Flora about it, and the child is terrified. She then begins to avoid the governess, and finally asks to be taken away by the housekeeper. The governess then concentrates her attention on Miles. In the climactic scene, the ghost of Quint appears again. The governess shields Miles from the ghost, who then disappears, but when she turns back to Miles, the child is dead.

The story is so ambiguous that it has generated a veritable plethora of interpretations over the years. Is it a ghost story of superlative craftsmanship? Is it a Freudian tale of an Oedipus complex run amok? Is it a symbolic tale of sexual repression, or a critique of the Victorian attitude toward homosexuality? It has been called all of these things. But we need to remember that James himself described it as a ghost story, and that any who try to make it more than that are doing little more than speculating while taking advantage of the opportunity to interject their own thoughts into a remarkably open and flexible narrative.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- The Narrator - A guest at the dinner party who, many years later, is describing the story told by Douglas to those in attendance.
- Douglas - He reads the manuscript that he had received years before from his sister's governess - the author of the tale. The book implies that he may have been in love with her.
- The Governess - A 20-year-old woman who is hired to supervise the nephew and niece of a wealthy man. He lives in London and desires to have no contact with Bly, his estate, or its inhabitants.
- The Master - He hires the governess to watch over his charges, but desires no part in their lives.
- Mrs. Grose - The housekeeper at Bly, she befriends the governess and believes her tales of ghostly apparitions. She is the one who identifies the ghosts as former inhabitants of the estate.
- Miles - The Master's nephew, a ten-year-old boy who, though seemingly angelic in all respects, has just been expelled from his private school for an offense that is never specified. He had previously had a close relationship with Peter Quint, and may have been sexually molested by him. He denies any knowledge of the ghosts. Miles dies at the end of the story.
- Flora - The Master's niece, eight years old, and again angelic in appearance and behavior. She speaks of having seen something done by Miss Jessel, but what that "thing" is is never

revealed. Frightened by the governess' talk of ghosts, she insists on being taken away from Bly by the housekeeper.

- Miss Jessel - The former governess, she had an affair with Peter Quint, and appears in ghostly form to the present governess. She is said to have died while on holiday.
- Peter Quint - The former valet to the Master, he virtually ran the estate in his master's absence. He had an affair with Miss Jessel, and developed a close, and by implication unhealthy, relationship with the young Miles. He, too, appears as a ghost, seen only by the new governess.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"I quite agree - in regard to Griffin's ghost, or whatever it was - that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it's not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have involved a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to *two* children?" (Douglas, p.291-292)

"I have not seen Bly since the day I left it, and I daresay that to my older and more informed eyes it would now appear sufficiently contracted. But as my little conductress, with her hair of gold and her frock of blue, danced before me round corners and pattered down passages, I had the view of a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all color out of storybooks and fairytales." (Governess, p.302)

"Both the children had a gentleness (it was their only fault, and it never made Miles a muff) that kept them - how shall I express it? - almost impersonal and certainly quite unpunishable. They were like the cherubs of the anecdote, who had - morally, at any rate - nothing to whack! I remember feeling with Miles in especial as if he had had, as it were, no history." (Governess, p.314)

"That he might was an awful conception, and yet, somehow, I could keep it at bay; which, moreover, as we lingered there, was what I succeeded in practically proving. I had an absolute certainty that I should see again what I had already seen, but something within me said that by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquility of my companions. The children, in especial, I should thus fence about and absolutely save." (Governess, p.322)

"But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day. With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him - it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of the minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped." (Governess, p.403)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. American psychologist William James and his brother Henry James, the author of *The Turn of the Screw*, like many other writers of the nineteenth century, involved themselves in the renewed interest in Spiritism that seized America during that era. What does the ghost story told in *The Turn of the Screw* tell us about the impression the Spiritist movement made on the author? Did he really believe in ghosts, was he uncertain, or was he simply using them as a literary device? Support your answer.
2. German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel taught that history moves forward by the combination of opposites. The thesis begets the antithesis, and the two combine to form the synthesis, which in turn becomes the new thesis, and so on *ad infinitum*. Some critics have argued that Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* has as its central theme such a combination of opposites. Do you agree? What might these opposites be? In what ways are they brought together through the narrative?
3. Do you believe the ghosts in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* are really seen by the children, or are they a figment of the governess' hyperactive imagination? How is the impact of the story altered by the way one answers this question?
4. Some critics have seen in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* a Christian allegory of paradise, temptation, fall and redemption, with the governess as a Christ-figure who places her own life in jeopardy in order to protect her charges from the forces of evil. Does this analogy work? Would you agree with such a critic? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast the role played by the ghosts in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* to that in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. How do these similarities and differences illustrate the respective thought patterns characteristic of Romanticism and Spiritism?
6. One possible interpretation of the ghosts in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is that they are demons. If this were indeed the case, how would it explain some of the key elements of the story - especially the ending? Be specific.
7. The ending of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is deliberately ambiguous. In your opinion, does the death of little Miles represent his loss to the evil power of Quint, his deliverance from that evil power by the exorcism of the demon in his soul, or the tragedy of a little boy being scared to death by his hysterical governess, or even being strangled by her in her hysteria? Support your conclusion.

8. Many critics interpret Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* as a critique of repressed Victorian attitudes toward sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. James is believed to have been a homosexual by many, and these writers suggest that the climax of the story, which they argue involves the suffocation of Miles by the governess, is intended to be symbolic of the repression of homosexual attitudes and desires (Miles' *very close* relationship with Quint) by the sexually repressed Victorian society (the governess, who will not even speak of her love for the Master). Is this interpretation credible? What aspects of the story would either support or undermine this way of reading the novel?
9. Gothic novels, frequently written by women in the Victorian age, were outlets for repressed sexuality (think of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for example), by means of which the unmentionable could be brought out into the open in symbolic form. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is fascinating because it uses the form and structure of a Gothic novel to critique the conventions of the Gothic novel. Discuss how James accomplishes this through the way he handles the issue of sexuality in the story.
10. In the same way that Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* may be viewed as a Romantic novel that critiques the conventions of Romanticism, so Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* may be viewed as a Gothic romance that critiques the conventions of the genre. Which of the two do you think more effectively exposes the weaknesses of the literary genre and mode of thinking it seeks to critique? Support your opinion with specific information from the two novels.
11. Those who seek to repress knowledge often unwittingly promote the very thing they seek to repress. Those who are constantly told to avoid something soon think of nothing else. Certainly this was the case with respect to the Victorian attitude toward sexuality. How does the Prologue of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* demonstrate the truth of this idea?