

## ANALYSIS

*The Turn of the Screw* (1898)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“I meant to scare the whole world with that story... To give the impression of the communication to the children of the most infernal imaginable evil and danger...I evoked the worst I could... When I wrote it, I was too ill to hold the pen; I therefore dictated the whole thing.”

Henry James

“*The Turn of the Screw* is such a deliberate, powerful, and horribly successful study of the magic of evil, of the subtle influence over human hearts and minds of the sin with which this world is accursed, as our language has not produced since Stevenson wrote his *Jekyll and Hyde* tale... Mr. James’s story is perhaps as allegorical as Stevenson’s, but the allegory is not so clear.... These children are accursed, or all but damned, and are shown to have daily, almost hourly, communication with lost souls, the souls that formerly inhabited the bodies of a vicious governess and her paramour, who, in the flesh, began the degradation of their victims.... The strongest and most affecting argument against sin we have lately encountered in literature (without forcing any didactic purpose upon the reader) it is nevertheless free from the slightest hint of grossness.... He simply tells, with no waste of words...a story.”

*The New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Art* III  
(15 October 1898) 681-82

“Mr. Henry James had written nothing more characteristic in method and style than *The Turn of the Screw*... It is a ghost story, psychologically conceived, and illustrating a profound moral law. It is, in fact, an account of the possession of two children by two evil spirits.... It is hardly necessary to say that Mr. James’s tale has nothing in common with the ordinary ghost story; it is altogether on a higher plane of both conception and art. The story itself is distinctly repulsive.”

*The Outlook* LX  
(29 October 1898) 537

“We have never read a more sickening, a more gratuitously melancholy tale. It has all Mr. James’s cleverness, even his grace. The plottings of the good governess and the faithful Mrs. Grose to combat the evil, very gradually discovered, are marvelously real.... His marvelous subtlety lends his examinations of the situation an air of scientific precision. But the clever result is very cruel and untrue.” [Victorians were just as intense about defending the innocence of children as Feminists are about aborting them.]

*The Bookman* XV  
(November 1898) 54

“*The Turn of the Screw* is...made up of feminine intentions, but the heroine—this time a governess—has nothing in the least substantial upon which to base her deep and startling cognitions. She perceives what is beyond all perception, and the reader who begins by questioning whether she is supposed to be sane ends by accepting her conclusions and thrilling over the horrors they involve. The story, in brief, concerns itself with the hideous fate of two beautiful and charming children who have been subjected to the baneful and corrupting influence of two evil-intentioned servants. These, dying, are unable to give up their hold upon so much beauty and charm, but while suffering the torments of damnation, come back to haunt the children as influences of horror and evil, with ‘a fury of intentions’ to complete the ruin they have begun.

The story is told by the governess, who recounts her slow recognition of the situation and her efforts to shield and save her charges. It is the most monstrous and incredible ghost-story that ever was written. At the same time it grasps the imagination in a wise. The reader is bound to the end by the spell, and if, when

the lids of the book are closed, he is not convinced as to the possibility of such horrors, he is at least sure that Mr. James had produced an imaginative masterpiece.”

*The Critic* XXXIII, old series  
(December 1898) 523-24

“*The Turn of the Screw* is the most hopelessly evil story that we have ever read in any literature, ancient or modern. How Mr. James could, or how any man or woman could, choose to make such a study of infernal human debauchery, for it is nothing else, is unaccountable.... The study, while it exhibits Mr. James’s genius in a powerful light, affects the reader with a disgust that is not to be expressed. The feeling after perusal of the horrible story is that one has been assisting in an outrage upon the holiest and sweetest fountain of human innocence, and helping to debauch—at least by helplessly standing by—the pure and trusting nature of children. Human imagination can go no further into infamy, literary art could not be used with more refined subtlety of spiritual defilement.”

*The Independent* LI  
(5 January 1899) 73

“[In *The Turn of the Screw*] Henry James again displays his skill as a delineator of psychic phenomena. In this particular story the theme is the continued influence on two children of a disreputable governess and her accomplice after their disappearance and the discovery of this influence by another governess who is keenly sensitive to psychic impulses. The tangible is here painted with a skill little short of the supernatural.”

*The Chatauquan* XXVIII, old series  
(March 1899) 630

“Mr. James has put still more force into *The Turn of the Screw*, one of the hideous stories of our language.... It is a tale where sinister and spectral powers are shown spoiling and daunting the innocence of the young. There is at first sight something wanton in the ruthless fancy—in the re-invasion of our life by the dead butler Peter Quint and his paramour; in the struggle with these visitants for the souls of the two young and beautiful children, a little boy and a little girl, whom in life they have already influenced; in the doubt, raised and kept hanging, whether, after all, the two ghosts who can choose to which persons they will appear, are facts, or delusions of the young governess who tells the story; and in the final defeat of hope by the boy’s death just at the moment when he may perhaps be saved.... The ghosts [act] as symbols and as actual combatants. The full effect is won by Mr. James’s peculiar gift of speaking in the name of women....[as] the young English lady...desperate and unaided, vainly shelters the children. The tension is heightened by the distrust with which others regard her story, and the aversion towards her inspired by the ghosts in the children themselves.”

Oliver Elton  
“Facts, or Delusions”

*Modern Studies* (Edward Arnold, London 1907) 245-89, 255-56

“His governess, with her queer little flutters, her impassioned self-dedication, faintly recalls no less delightful a prototype than Jane Eyre.... What story in the whole region of fiction can match its deliberate, intentional, insidious horror, the sense and presence of gloating, atrocious, destructive evil which it conveys, the steady, cumulative intensity of the ‘awful hushed cold intercourse’ between living and dead, of the blind groping of love amid the debauched innocence of childhood? The very names convey a devilish innuendo. The actual confrontations...between anguished child and that hideous demon, with ‘white face of damnation,’ are evidence of a subliminal world that centuries of psychical research can only supplement.”

Walter de la Mare  
“Evidence of a Subliminal World”  
*Times Literary Supplement* (13 May 1915)

“I did not dream until the year 1898 that our author could draw a winsome, lovable, charming little boy, who would walk straight into our hearts.... *The Turn of the Screw*...I found then and find again to be the most powerful, the most nerve-shattering ghost story I have ever read... Had he spoken plainly, the book

might have been barred from the mails; yet it is a great work of art, profoundly ethical, and making to all those who are interested in the moral welfare of boys and girls an appeal simply terrific in its intensity.”

William Lyon Phelps  
“Henry James”  
*Yale Review* V (July 1916) 794

“Perhaps it is the silence that first impresses us. Everything at Bly is so profoundly quiet.... We know that the man who stands on the tower staring down at the governess beneath is evil. Some unutterable obscenity has come to the surface. It tries to get in; it tries to get at something. The exquisite little beings who lie innocently asleep must at all costs be protected. But the horror grows. Is it possible that the little girl, as she turns back from the window, has seen the woman outside? Has she been with Miss Jessel? Has Quint visited the boy? It is Quint who hangs about us in the dark; who is there in that corner and again there in that. It is Quint who must be reasoned away, and for all our reasoning returns. Can it be that we are afraid?... Note how masterly the telling is, how each sentence is stretched, each image filled, how the inner world gains from the robustness of the outer, how beauty and obscenity twined together worm their way to the depths—still we must own that something remains unaccounted for. We must admit that Henry James has conquered. That courtly, worldly, sentimental old gentleman can still make us afraid of the dark.”

Virginia Woolf  
“Henry James’s Ghosts”  
*Times Literary Supplement* (22 December 1921)

“Never did he work from his emotions: always he viewed life objectively, coldly, accurately, recording only what he saw within the area he thought worthy of study. Never after his earlier period could he be swept away by his imagination or his feelings.... So fundamental was his scientific habit, his recording only that which had come within the grange of his material experience, that the story may be read not as a ghost story at all, but as the record of a clinic: the study of the growth of a suggested infernal cliché in the brain of the nurse who alone sees the ghosts, of her final dementia which is pressed to a focus that overwhelms in her mind every other idea, and make of the children her innocent victims. As such it becomes a record unspeakably pathetic. The boy becomes a brave little martyr. It is the triumph of science over romance.”

F. L. Pattee  
“The Record of a Clinic”  
*The Development of the American Short Story*  
(Harper 1923) 206-07

“*The Turn of the Screw* has been perhaps the most widely read and discussed of the stories of Henry James.... [Some regard] the governess, who sees the ghosts and tells the story, as a neurotic, suffering from sex repression. Edmund Wilson...finds several matters of Freudian significance, including the governess’s final passion for the little boy, which leads her, in the end, to frighten him to death. He concludes that the story ‘is simply a variation on one of James’s familiar themes: the frustrated Anglo-Saxon spinster.’”

Robert Lee Wolff  
“The Genesis of *The Turn of the Screw*”  
*American Literature* XIII (March 1941) 1-8

“There is probably no other short work of fiction which has been the center, during the first fifty years of its life, of such regular attention and speculation as have been called forth by Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*.... What is unmistakable is that James has hit upon some fundamental truth of experience that no generation can ignore and that each generation wishes to restate in its own terms.... It is probably safe to say that the Freudian interpretation of the story, of which the best known exponent is Edmund Wilson, no longer enjoys wide critical acceptance. If, then, we cannot account for the evil by treating the governess as pathological, we must seek elsewhere an explanation of the story’s hold.

I am convinced that, at the level of action, the story means exactly what it says: that at Bly there are apparitions which the governess sees, which Mrs. Grose does not see but comes to believe in because they are consistent with her own independent experience, and of which the children have a knowledge which they endeavor to conceal. These dramatic circumstances have a symbolic import which seems not too difficult to get hold of: the ghosts are evil, evil which comes subtly conquering before it is wholly seen; the governess, Cassandra-like in the intuitions which are inaccessible to others, is the guardian whose function it is to detect and attempt to ward off evil; Mrs. Grose—whose name, like the narrator's title, has virtually allegorical significance—is the commonplace mortal, well intentioned, but perceiving only the obvious; the children are the victims of evil, victims who ironically, practice concealment—who doubtless must conceal when not to conceal is essential to salvation.... Beneath the strange and startling action-surface, we have the oldest of themes—the struggle of evil to possess the human soul. And if this struggle appears to resolve itself into a Christian form, that...need not be surprising.... The framework action begins on Christmas Eve.... [The governess is a] clergyman's daughter...

The center of horror is not the apparitions themselves, but is the children, and our sense of what is happening to them. What is happening to them is Quint and Jessel; the governess's awareness of the apparitions is her awareness of a change within the children; the shock of ghostly appearances is the shock of evil perceived unexpectedly, suddenly, after it has secretly made inroads.... James devotes an almost prodigal care to creating an impression of special beauty in the children, an impression upon which depends the extraordinary effectiveness of the change which takes place in them. In such children the appearance of any imperfection is a shock.... The children's beauty, we have come to feel, is a symbol of the spiritual perfection of which man is capable. Thus the battle between the governess and the demons becomes the old struggle of the morality play in new dress.... What must come across to us...is echoes of the Garden of Eden.... Bly itself is almost an Eden.... Miles and Flora become the childhood of the race...shown to have within them all the seeds...of their own destruction.... It is not merely the end of a year but the end of a cycle: the spring of gay, bright human innocence has given way to the dark autumn—or rather, as we might pun, to the dark *fall*.... James has an almost religious sense of the duality of man... He makes that sense explicit in terms broadly religious and even Christian.... The universality which has stimulated many critics is the Christian dualism of good and evil...

This is a story of the decay of Eden.... Quint [has] characteristics of a snake.... The coming of Quint is the coming of the serpent into the little Eden that is Bly (both Miss [Katherine Anne] Porter and Mr. [Allen Tate] have noted other physical characteristics of Quint which traditionally belong to the devil).... The master...has nourished a viper in his bosom. The secret influence upon Miles the governess describes as 'poison'... Miss Jessel is a figure of 'unmistakable horror and evil... She is both damned and an agent of damnation—another reminiscence of the Miltonic myth...which reminds us of James's prefatory insistence that the apparitions were to be thought of as demons.... James presents evil both as agent (the demons) and as effect (the transformation in the once fresh and beautiful and innocent children).... The governess 'loves' Miles—a loving which must not be confused, as it is confused by some critics, with 'making love to' or 'being in love with' him. Without such pastoral love no guardian would consider his flock worth the sacrifice. The governess's priestly function is...to act as confessor and to use every possible means to bring Miles to confession; the long final scene really takes place in the confessional, with the governess as priest endeavoring...to protect her charge against the evil force... It is in part through the ineptitude of the governess-confessor-savior, we are led to understand, that Miles is lost."

Robert Heilman  
"The Turn of the Screw as Poem"  
*The University of Kansas City Review* XIV  
(Summer 1948) 277-89

"James's interest in psychical phenomena is well known to his readers, and is the subject of frequent mention in the recollections of his friends... Although he was not a member of the Society [for Psychical Research], founded in 1882, several friends were active in its affairs... That James had read and studied the reports of the Society is evident from the Preface, in which he refers frequently to the 'new' ghost, 'the mere modern "psychical" case,' and to the 'today so copious physical record of cases of apparitions'.... It is important to realize that the ghosts of *The Turn of the Screw* are conceived to a surprising extent in terms

of the cases reported to the Society.... James eschews the incredible ghosts of sensational fiction for the more plausible and so-called 'veridical' apparitions of the reports.... Prototypes of Miss Jessel are abundant in the reports.... Six of the eight apparitions occur in daylight.... Circumstances lend themselves to the interpretation that Quint was murdered and that Miss Jessel committed suicide... At the end of the story, the governess's explanation is still only her theory, but the reader is hard pressed for a better one."

Francis X. Roellinger  
"Psychical Research and *The Turn of the Screw*"  
*American Literature* XX (January 1949) 401-12

"The ambiguities of the tale have led to a large body of interpretations, particularly Freudian and anti-Freudian analyses, of which the best known is Edmund Wilson's in *The Triple Thinkers*... This mysterious tale of ghastly apparitions is recounted from the diary of a neurotic spinster who in her youth was a governess on a lonely British estate. Her unusually beautiful and precocious pupils, the children Miles and Flora, are subjected, she believes, respectively to the evil influence of two ghosts: Peter Quint, once steward of the estate, and Miss Jessel, their former governess. The frustrated new governess, infatuated by the children and particularly by the boy, pits her will against that of the ghosts, for these specters, she believes, morally dominate the children and have an evil relationship with them. She justifies her belief by winning the housekeeper to her cause, although this kindly, simple woman never sees the apparitions. Fearing to report the untoward events to her employers, the children's uncle, for whom she entertains an unrealized and thwarted passion, the governess attempts to exorcise the malicious influences by directly challenging Flora, whose resultant fear is so great she cannot again face the governess. A similarly impassioned attack on Miles results in his death in the arms of the governess, who thought she was saving his life from a demon."

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 776-77

"We are entirely in her mind.... Each reader feels the story differently and fills in the Jamesian blanks in accordance with these feelings."

Leon Edel  
*The Psychological Novel: 1900-1950*  
(Lippincott 1955) 56-68

"Many have found the governess completely untrustworthy—even to the point of denying the reality of the ghosts whose evil workings she reports to us [secular liberals do not believe in ghosts].... I may as well being by admitting—reluctantly since all of the glamour is on the other side—that for me James's conscious intentions are fully realized: the ghosts are real, the governess sees what she says she sees. What she sees disturbs her—as well it might. She is naïve, innocent, human, decidedly *inconscient* about a lot of things she ought to be aware of; she is no paragon of wisdom or even of integrity. But she behaves about as well as we could reasonably expect of ourselves under similarly intolerable circumstances."

Wayne C. Booth  
*The Rhetoric of Fiction*  
(U Chicago 1961) 313-14

"A haunting horror story, *The Turn of the Screw* is told in diary form by an inexperienced young governess in love with her employer on a lonely British estate. She gradually realizes that her precocious young charges Miles and Flora, are under the evil influence of two ghosts, Peter Quint, the ex-steward, and Miss Jessel, their former governess. As the horror mounts the narrator can turn to nobody but the housekeeper for moral support in her attempt at a sort of spiritual battle for the children's souls. At the climax of the story she enters into open conflict with the children, alienating Flora and causing Miles to die of fright.

Some modern critics have attempted to relegate the ghosts to some Freudian corner of the governess' mind. But James, in his notebooks for January 12, 1895, had jotted down as a literary possibility a ghost

story he had just been told by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a story of orphaned children corrupted by wicked servants who later die and haunt them. However, James kept the nature of his ghosts ambiguous. As Elizabeth Stevenson says (*The Crooked Corridor, A Study of Henry James*, 1949), ‘Elaborate psychoanalysis of the governess would turn her into a creature who spoils the point of the story,’ James’s subtle artistry, his understanding of children, and what F. O. Matthiessen calls his ‘extraordinary command of his own kind of darkness...the darkness of moral evil,’ all help to bring out the Jamesian conclusion that ghosts may be worst when seen by daylight. The story was effectively dramatized by William Archibald as *The Innocents* (1950); made into an opera by Benjamin Britten, first performed in 1954; and into a film (1961).”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 1159

“The governess has been maddened by her experiences, which she believes to be the result of either Miles’ and Flora’s sins or to be supernatural effects. She frightens Miles to death by her fears of the ghosts. She never realizes, as the thoughtful reader must, that she, and Miles, and, indeed, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, have all been the victims of that most clever and desperate of Victorian villainesses, the evil Mrs. Grose.”

Eric Solomon  
“The Return of the Screw”  
*The University of Kansas City Review* XXX  
(Spring 1964) 205-11

“For thirty-six years after James published his instantaneously popular *The Turn of the Screw*, the tale was generally read as a marvelously contrived, but pure and simple, ghost-story. There were dissenters from this proposition—principally Edna Kenton, who in 1924 suggested that...[the governess] is ‘pathetically trying to harmonize her own disharmonies by creating discords outside herself’.... The tale, not at all a mere fairy tale, was a sophisticated amulette carefully designed to trick the unwary reader. When Edmund Wilson in the spring of 1934 published ‘The Ambiguity of Henry James’ in *Hound and Horn* VII (April-May 1934, 385-406), this minority view received a clear and forthright annunciation.... Wilson believed that ‘the young governess who tells the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess’s hallucinations.’ The tale has ‘a false hypothesis which the narrator is putting forward and a reality which we are supposed to divine’....

The hallucination theory, however, might falter over one question: if the ghosts are products of her own mind, how can she, independently and accurately, without any previous knowledge of him, describe the apparition Quint?... ‘How did the governess succeed in projecting on vacancy, out of her own self-conscious mind, a perfectly precise, point-by-point image of a man, then dead, whom she had never seen in her life and never heard of?’... And in 1947, when the *Notebooks* were first published, further evidence was offered which seemed to indicate that James did indeed intend to write a bonafide ghost-story... Many critics today remain divided into two camps: that which sees a ghost-story and that which sees a psychological study.”

Martina Slaughter  
“Edmund Wilson and *The Turn of the Screw*”  
*Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Robert Kimbrough  
(Norton Critical Edition 1966) 211-14

Michael Hollister (2015)