Henry James’s life

Henry James (1843–1916) was born in New York City. His father, Henry James, Sr., was an unconventional and free thinker who had inherited considerable wealth and who was acquainted with important writers and philosophers. James’s older brother, William James, became an eminent philosopher (“pragmatism”) and psychology scholar (one of the most famous American one of the end of the century and of the beginning of the XXth century), author of the renown Principles of Psychology (1890) and The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). The James children were educated in a variety of schools and with private tutors and had the privilege of making use of their father’s excellent library. In 1855 the James family began a three-year tour to Europe, an experience that probably influenced James’s later preference for Europe over his native land. After a year at Harvard Law School, he began writing short stories and book reviews. He continued to travel widely from a base in England, where he chose to settle. He became a British citizen in 1915, a year before his death. By the time James died, he had written one hundred and twelve short stories and novellas (the most famous are “Daisy Miller” and “The Turn of the Screw”), as well as literary and dramatic criticism, plays, travel essays, book reviews, and twenty novels, including The Portrait of a Lady (1881), The Bostonians (1886), The Wings of the Dove (1902), The Ambassadors (1903), and The Golden Bowl (1904).

Although James had many friends and acquaintances, he was considered a very reserved man. He never married, and the absence of any known romantic attachments has led many critics to think that he was a repressed or closeted homosexual, particularly after the discovery of some letters to a young Danish sculptor. James wrote The Turn of the Screw in 1897, a moment in which he was extremely depressed. In 1895 he had been upset by the fiasco of his play Guy Domville. Shortly thereafter, he began writing The Turn of the Screw, one of several works from this period that revolve around large, irregular houses.

Like many writers and intellectuals of the time, James was fascinated by “spiritual phenomena,” a field that was taken very seriously and was the subject of much “scientific” inquiry in the wave of Positivism. Henry James, Sr., and William James were both members of the Society for Psychical Research, and William served as its president from 1894 to 1896.

James had written ghost stories before The Turn of the Screw and by the end of his life he wrote about twenty of them. At that time the ghost story was a popular form, especially in England, where, as the prologue to The Turn of the Screw suggests, gathering for the purpose of telling ghost stories was something of a Christmas tradition. According to James’s notebooks and his preface to the 1908 edition of The Turn of the Screw, the germ of the story had been an anecdote told to him by the archbishop of Canterbury: a story of small children haunted by the ghosts of a pair of servants who wish them ill. In the archbishop’s story the evil spirits repeatedly tried to lure the children to their deaths. James changed the story in order to make everything—the presence of the ghosts, their moral depravity, their designs on the children—purely a function of hearsay. As careful readers have noted, the ghosts are visible only to one person in the tale—the governess who serves as both narrator and protagonist. 4’ e 30”

Summary of the story

An anonymous narrator recalls a Christmas Eve gathering at an old house, where guests listen to one another’s ghost stories. A guest named Douglas introduces a story that involves two children—Flora and Miles—and his sister’s governess, with whom he was in love. Douglas informs his audience that a handsome bachelor persuaded the governess to take a position as governess for his niece and nephew in an isolated country home after the previous governess died. Douglas begins to read from the written record of the governess herself, and the story shifts to the governess’s point of view as she narrates her strange experience.

The governess begins her story with her first day at Bly, the country home, where she meets Flora and a maid named Mrs. Grose. The governess is nervous but feels relieved by Flora’s beauty and charm. The next day she receives a letter from her employer, which contains a letter from Miles’s
headmaster saying that Miles cannot return to school. The letter does not specify what evil Miles has done to deserve expulsion, and, alarmed, the governess questions Mrs. Grose about it. Mrs. Grose admits that Miles has on occasion been bad, but only in the ways boys normally are. The governess is reassured as she goes to meet Miles.

One evening, as the governess walks around the grounds, she sees a strange man in a tower of the house and exchanges an intense stare with him. She says nothing to Mrs. Grose. Later, she catches the same man glaring into the dining-room window, and she rushes outside to investigate. The man is gone, and the governess looks into the window from outside. Her image in the window frightens Mrs. Grose, who has just walked into the room. The governess discusses her two experiences with Mrs. Grose, who identifies the strange man as Peter Quint, a former valet who is now dead.

Convinced that the ghost seeks Miles, the governess becomes rigid in her supervision of the children. One day, when the governess is at the lake with Flora, she sees a woman dressed in black and senses that the woman is Miss Jessel, her dead predecessor. The governess is certain Flora was aware of the ghost’s presence but intentionally kept quiet. The governess again questions Mrs. Grose about Miles’s evil behavior. Mrs. Grose reveals that Quint had been “too free” with Miles, and Miss Jessel “too free” with Flora. The governess is worried, but the days pass without incident, and Miles and Flora express increased affection for the governess.

One evening something startles the governess from her reading. She rises to investigate and she sees Quint halfway up the stairs. She refuses to back down, exchanging another intense stare with Quint until he vanishes. Back in her room, the governess finds Flora missing from her bed. Noticing movement under the window blind, the governess watches as Flora emerges from behind it. The governess questions Flora about what she’s been doing, but Flora’s explanation is insignificant. The governess does not sleep well during the next few nights. One night, she sees the ghost of Miss Jessel sitting on the bottom stair, her head in her hands. Later, when the governess finally allows herself to go to sleep at her regular hour, she is awoken after midnight to find her candle extinguished and Flora by the window. Careful not to disturb Flora, the governess leaves the room to find a window downstairs that overlooks the same view. Looking out, she sees the faraway figure of Miles on the lawn.

Later, the governess discusses with Mrs. Grose her conversation with Miles, who claimed that he wanted to show the governess that he could be “bad.” The governess concludes that Flora and Miles frequently meet with Miss Jessel and Quint. At this, Mrs. Grose urges the governess to appeal to her employer, but the governess refuses, reminding her colleague that the children’s uncle does not want to be disturbed. She threatens to leave if Mrs. Grose writes to him. On the walk to church one Sunday, Miles mentions the topic of school to the governess. He says he wants to go back and declares he will make his uncle come to Bly. The governess, shaken, does not go into church. Instead, she returns to the house and thinks about leaving. She sits on the bottom stair but springs up when she remembers seeing Miss Jessel there. She enters the schoolroom and finds Miss Jessel sitting at the table. She screams at the ghost, and the ghost vanishes. The governess decides she will stay at Bly. Mrs. Grose and the children return, saying nothing about the governess’s absence at church. The governess agrees to write to her employer.

That evening, the governess listens outside Miles’s door. He invites her in, and she questions him. She embraces him impulsively. The candle goes out, and Miles shrieks. The next day Miles plays the piano for the governess. She suddenly realizes she doesn’t know where Flora is. She and Mrs. Grose find Flora by the lake. There, the governess sees an apparition of Miss Jessel. She points it out to Flora and Mrs. Grose, but both claim not to see it. Flora says that the governess is cruel and that she wants to get away from her, and the governess collapses on the ground in hysterics. The next day, Mrs. Grose informs the governess that Flora is sick. They decide Mrs. Grose will take Flora to the children’s uncle while the governess stays at Bly with Miles. Mrs. Grose informs the governess that one of the servants didn’t send the letter she wrote to her employer, because he couldn’t find it.
With Flora and Mrs. Grose gone, Miles and the governess talk after dinner. The governess asks if he took her letter. He confesses, and the governess sees Quint outside. She watches Quint in horror, then points him out to Miles, who asks if it is Peter Quint and looks out the window in vain. With the words, “Peter Quint, you devil!” he falls into the governess’s arms, dead. 7’ (tot. 11’ 30”)

Reactions and interpretations

*The Turn of the Screw* first appeared in the journal *Collier’s Weekly* in twelve installments at the beginning of 1898. For about twenty years nobody questioned the reliability of the governess as a narrator. With the publication of a 1934 essay by the influential Freudian American critic Edmund Wilson, a revised view of the story began to circulate. Wilson’s Freudian interpretation, that the governess is a sexually repressed hysteric and the ghosts mere products of her excitable imagination, echoed what other critics had previously suggested in the 1920s. All criticism since has had to confront the central ambiguity in the narrative. Is the governess a hopeless neurotic who hallucinates the figures of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, or is she a brave young woman battling to save the children from damnation? There are passages of the text that appear to lead in one direction and other passages that lead towards another one. The central arguments that can be assumed for the interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* as a ghost story are:

1) The governess is presented from the beginning in positive terms. The fact that she is nervous is normal because this is her first job.
2) Mrs. Grose is excessively happy to see the governess (she is not alone any more in fighting against the ghosts).
3) The reason for Miles expulsion for school is mysterious.
4) Mrs. Grose recognizes the ghost of Peter Quint when the governess describes it to her.
5) Though Mrs. Grose does not see the ghosts she claims she believes they exist.
6) The children meet regularly with the ghosts; their behavior looks strange and perverse. At the end Flora is transformed even physically and says horrible things.
7) Miles, before dying, confesses to see Peter Quint (“Peter Quint − you devil!”)
8) Miles’s death can be explained only in supernatural terms: he dies because he is *dispossessed*.

Similar arguments can be assumed for an interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* as the story of the hallucinations of a neurotic or even “crazy” governess.

1) From the beginning the governess is presented as unstable (nervous, easy to fall in love, etc).
2) The fact that Mrs. Grose is excessively happy to see the governess is only within the mind of the governess.
3) The governess constructs evil phantasies on the letter from the school.
4) Mrs. Grose recognizes Peter Quint because the governess pushes her to do so.
5) Mrs. Grose never sees the ghosts. She believes in the ghosts because she is superstitious and very dependent on the governess.
6) The children never see the ghosts. Their “strange” behavior is the normal behavior of all the children. At the end Flora reacts hysterically because she is afraid of the governess.
7) In the final scene Miles does not see Peter Quint, but pronounces his name because the governess pushes him to do so. “You devil” is addressed to the governess.
8) Miles dies because he is scared by the governess. *Dispossessed* is a term used by the governess.

More recently critics maintain that the beauty and terror of the tale reside in its unsolvable ambiguity, arguing that both interpretations are possible and indeed necessary to make *The Turn of the Screw* the masterpiece that it is. According to these critics the best literature is extremely ambiguous and quite often can legitimately allow different question.
The problem, then, is not to choose one of the two (or more than two) interpretations, but to understand which kind of reactions these ambiguities create in the readers. Most of the ambiguities of this text come from the structure of understanding reality on the part of the governess: SENSATION $\rightarrow$ HYPOTHESIS $\rightarrow$ CERTAINTY

At the same time the story questions important **themes** and **ideas** of literature such as:

a) the corruption of the innocents and the idea that children are pure (and idea questioned by psychoanalysis);
b) the destructive consequences of thinking of being a **hero** (or heroine);
c) the problem of the (Victorian?) reticence of some **taboo** topics as those related to sexual behavior

Important **motifs** of this story are:

a) the unreliability of the **vision**
b) **silence** as a sign of a supernatural life

Important **symbols** of the story are

a) light as symbol of safety, twilight as symbol of danger.
b) the **written word** is the symbol of material reality, while the spoken word of the evanescence of meaning.