

Review Article

Essay on the Turn of the Screw by Henry James

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OVERVIEW

The Turn of the Screw, a deceptively simple novella by Henry James, has generated considerable debate from the time the author penned it in 1897 to the present. A ghost story, the tale utilizes many of the conventions found in other 19th-century examples of the genre--an ancient estate, a plucky young woman, and a commonsense housekeeper, for example--but it also introduces psychological, theological, educational, historical, sociological, and sexual issues that continue to fascinate modern readers. Most of James's supernatural fiction was written between 1891 and 1900; of this body of work, The Turn of the Screw is the most celebrated and widely read. The story is a masterpiece of ambiguity, and James refused to clarify its meaning, saying that "it just gleams and glooms".

In a letter of 1898, James identifies the source of his plot as a story told by the father of Archbishop Benson (letter to Percy Lubbock in Smith, 124). Leon Edel, James's biographer, discovered an additional source in "Temptation," by Tom Taylor, an 1855 story that includes a villain named Peter Quint, a probable model for Peter Quint in James's novella. Peter Beidler suggests that a case of an eight-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy accused of demonic possession, discussed by James's brother William in an 1896 lecture, may also have contributed material for The Turn of the Screw. The fact that James mentions "witchcraft cases" in the preface to his collected works lends credence to Beidler's suggestion.

The story is nevertheless uniquely Jamesian in its ironic opacity, its refusal to be definitively interpreted. Contributing to its complexity is a narrative structure by means of which the long-dead governess's written account

is read by Douglas, an acquaintance of the governess, to a small group of guests at a country inn, among whom is the chief narrator of the story as James presents it to the reader. The reliability of each narrator is open to question. The existence of the ghosts is therefore open to question.

A young woman, the naive daughter of a British country parson, takes a job at Bly, an isolated estate. Her employer, a carefree bachelor now living in London, wishing not to be burdened with the upbringing of his orphaned niece and nephew, tells the governess that he expects her to handle all contingencies at Bly and not to consult him about decisions concerning his wards. The governess finds eight-year-old Flora, her youngest charge, enchanting and engaging. Flora's brother Miles, who arrives at Bly after his expulsion from school, seems also charming and innocent. The governess and the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, cannot imagine why he was expelled; nor do they ask. The governess proceeds to educate both children at home, a task that she finds delightful.

The idyl at Bly is soon interrupted, however, by the ghosts of the former governess, Miss Jessel, and Peter Quint, who once served as valet to the children's uncle. According to Mrs. Grose, the bachelor uncle had left the children under Miss Jessel's care, and Miss Jessel became intimate with the valet, who spent considerable time with the children, particularly Miles. The thoroughly Victorian Mrs. Grose implies that this relationship was highly inappropriate, partly because of Quint's class and partly because of his character.

The governess assumes when the ghosts appear that they wish to contact, possess, or at least influence the children.

She believes she must "save" them , become "an expiatory victim" , and "protect and defend" her pupils from unfathomable horrors. But she veils her mission in silence until she concludes that her pupils also see the ghosts and are faking their innocence; she then tries to force them to admit their complicity with evil.

In the end, Flora turns against the governess, and Mrs. Grose takes her away to London. Left with Miles, the governess attempts to coerce the child to "confess" to consorting with the ghosts . When Quint's ghost appears at the window, Miles claims not to see him. The governess, in a last ditch effort to thwart Quint's designs upon the child, grabs Miles, who then dies in her arms.

Edmund Wilson, in his oft-cited interpretation of James's novella, contends that the ghosts are merely figments of the governess's disturbed imagination. He acknowledges Edna Kenton as the first to opine that the governess "is a neurotic case of sex repression" who projects her own desire onto the two ghosts . He supports Kenton's view with Freudian theory and with the observation "that there is never any reason for supposing that anybody but the governess sees the ghosts" .

Others, such as R. W. B. Lewis, believe that the ghosts are meant to be real. Lewis reminds readers that Mrs. Grose corroborates the governess's vision by identifying Quint as the ghostly figure the governess describes. For Lewis, the specters evoke what James himself called "the reader's general vision of evil" . Robert Heilman agrees that the ghosts cannot be dismissed as the "symbolization of evil" , which he characterizes as "ubiquitous, mysterious, and, though limited in scope, eternal" .

Peter Beidler makes a good case for the objective existence of the ghosts, claiming that the children do not see the ghosts because they are possessed by them. The children are, hence, both innocent and evil , a reading that maintains what Rimmon calls "the moral and epistemological" dimension of the novella .

Contemporary critics are split on the issue of whether or not the governess "invents" the ghosts. However, they read the ghosts less often as generalized, "ubiquitous, mysterious" evil and more often as representatives of specific, marginalized behavior condemned by Victorian mores. Smith, for example, recognizes a "reverberating current of homophobia" in the tale and believes that James also portrays a rigid "English class consciousness" in his characters. Pifer sees in the story suggestions of "childhood sexuality," "pedophilia," and "child abuse" .

One must conclude that James's work "gleams and glooms" as much for the present generation as it has for

past generations. No doubt, this classic will also speak to whatever specters haunt us in the future.

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