

Henry James

- born in New York in 1843.
- belonged to a rich family who could afford the private tutors and governesses that educated him
- spent the last 53 years of his life in England, becoming a British subject in 1915, one year before his death

Henry James

- brother of philosopher and psychologist William James
- recognized as the best short story writer in America at the age of 25
- remained a bachelor
- went to England where the most well-known writers of the period, such as Conrad and Kipling, accepted him as a friend and appreciated his books

Henry James

- 20 novels, 112 tales, 12 plays, several volumes of travel and criticism, and a great deal of literary journalism
- testifying to his importance, a character named "Henry James" appears in at least a half-dozen novels, the best-known of which is *The Master*, by Colm Toibin

Themes

- not interested in public affairs and the economic and social changes of the period
- deeply interested in the contrast between the old world and the new one, between the European way of life, which he considered fascinating, sophisticated, rich in culture and tradition but corrupting, and the American one which he considered too rigid, Puritan but innocent

Founder of psychological realism

- because of the emphasis he placed on psychology and human consciousness, he is regarded as the forerunner of the 20th century “stream of consciousness” novels and the founder of psychological realism

First phase

- The International theme: Creation of “The American Girl”
- *Daisy Miller, The American, The Europeans, The Portrait of a Lady*

Second phase

Novels and stories that deal with social and political issues, and also with children:

- *The Bostonians, What Maisie Knew, The Turn of the Screw*

Third phase

Return to the international theme

This stage is characterized by the depiction of intricate subtleties of character and feelings and by the use of a complex, convoluted style to express delicate nuances of thought

Examples: The Ambassadors (1903), The Wings of the Dove (1902)

Techniques

- Innovatory use of the narrative voice
- Rejection of the omniscient narrator in favor of spectator-narrators
- Situations and characters are presented through the eyes of his characters (“centers of consciousness”)

Techniques

- Eliminates the author and gives the reader the illusion of being present at the scene of action.
- Presents events and the minds of the characters directly, without comments or explanations: Dramatize, only dramatize, is his lesson.

Turn of the Screw

- It is a novelette, that is a short novel, a literary type in which James excelled
- A Gothic romance
- Gothic romances deal with an intense experience in a setting isolated from the conditions of everyday life

- An air of mystery, horror and terror, that doesn't depend on what will happen but on what is happening
- Strong undercurrent of sexuality and sadism, as well as a strange and nightmarish quality

- A folktale because it tells the story of children fascinated by creatures from the other world
- It deals with the effects of ghosts on those who see them
- The ghosts reveal the past of the people that see them

Raises questions :

- Do the ghosts really exist?
- Is it a story of hallucinations?
- Harold Goddard and Edmund Wilson gave the “The hallucination theory”
- The ghosts are seen only through the governess’s eyes

Plot

- An anonymous narrator recalls guests narrating ghost stories on Christmas Eve
- Douglas introduces a story that involves two children—Flora and Miles—and his sister's governess, with whom he was in love
- Reads from the governess's written record of events from his home
- A handsome bachelor persuaded the lady to be the governess for his niece and nephew in an isolated country home after the previous governess died
- The governess becomes the narrator

Plot

- The governess meets Flora and a maid named Mrs. Grose at Bly
- Receives a letter from her employer informing Miles's expulsion from the school
- No reason for expulsion is revealed
- Mrs. Grose admits that Miles has on occasion been bad, but only in the ways boys ought to be

Plot

- One evening, the governess sees a strange man in a tower of the house
- Again she sees the same man glaring into the dining-room window, and she rushes outside to investigate
- She discusses her two experiences with Mrs. Grose, who identifies the strange man as Peter Quint, a former valet who is now dead.

Plot

- She feels that the ghost is after the children and she becomes careful
- One day, when the governess is at the lake with Flora, she sees a woman dressed in black
- She guesses that woman is Miss Jessel, the former governess
- The governess is certain Flora was aware of the ghost's presence but intentionally kept quiet.
- The governess is on her guard and Miles and Flora express become attached to her

Plot

- One evening, when something startles the governess from her reading, she moves towards the stairs to find out
- There, a gust of wind extinguishes her candle, and she sees Quint halfway up the stairs
- Back in her room, the governess finds Flora is missing
- Flora emerges from behind the curtains
- The governess questions Flora but Flora's explanation is unrevealing

Plot

- The governess is not able to sleep well
- One night, she sees the ghost of Miss Jessel sitting on the bottom stair, her head in her hands
- She is awoken after midnight to find her candle extinguished and Flora by the window
- Looking out, she sees the Miles in the lawn

Plot

- Miles 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
- Mrs. Grose urges her to appeal to her employer, but the governess refuses saying that the uncle does not want to be bothered
- One day on the way to the church, Miles says he wants to go back and declares he will make his uncle come to Bly
- The governess decides to leave the job
- She goes home and finds Miss Jessel sitting at the table
- She screams and the ghost vanishes
- She decides to stay at Bly and agrees to write to her employer

Plot

- That evening, the governess goes to Miles's room and 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 Flora is missing
- She and Mrs. Grose find Flora by the lake
- There, the governess sees an apparition of Miss Jessel
- Flora and Mrs. Grose, 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
- 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 Luke 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
- Miles confesses he took the letter
- The governess sees Quint outside
- She points him out to Miles, who asks if it is Peter Quint and looks out the window
- He cries out, then falls into the governess's arms, dead

Characters

- **The Governess** - she is a twenty-year-old woman who has been put in charge of educating and supervising Flora and Miles at Bly. Her new job puts an immense responsibility on her, since she has no one to supervise or help her. She is intelligent as well as sensitive and emotionally volatile. Over the course of two short interviews with her employer, she fell in love with him, but she has no opportunity to communicate with him. She views herself as a zealous guardian, a heroine facing dark forces. However, we never know for certain whether the ghosts and visions the governess sees are real or only figments of her imagination. No one else ever admits to seeing what she sees, and her fears, at times, seem to border on insanity.

Characters

- **Mrs. Grose** - A servant who acts as the governess's companion and confidante. Mrs. Grose, who is illiterate, is very aware of her low standing and treats the governess with great respect. Mrs. Grose listens patiently to the governess's constantly changing theories and insights, most often claiming to believe her but sometimes questioning whether the ghosts may not be imaginary. According to one theory she is supposed to be the real villain who killed Quint and Miss Jessel.

Characters

- **Miles** - A ten-year-old boy, Miles is charming and very attractive. He seems unnaturally well behaved and agreeable for a child, never fights with his sister, and tries constantly to please his governess. He is expelled from school for an unspecified but sinister reason. He seems to be a good child, but he often hints that he is capable of being bad.

Characters

- **Flora** - An eight-year-old girl, Flora is beautiful and well mannered. Although the governess loves Flora, she is disturbed that Flora, like Miles, seems strangely impersonal and reticent about herself. Flora is affectionate and always ready with an embrace or a smile. She is so unusually well behaved that her first instance of misconduct is disquieting. The governess eventually becomes convinced that Flora sees the ghost of Miss Jessel but keeps it secret.
- **The Children's Uncle** - The governess's employer, a bachelor who lives in London. The governess agrees to take on her role at Bly as she is attracted towards him. The uncle is friendly and pleasant, likely rich, and successful in charming women. He hires the governess on the condition that he should not to be bothered about the children.

Characters

- **Peter Quint** - A former valet at Bly. Red-haired, handsome, and exceedingly clever, Quint is the first ghost the governess encounters at the estate. He was something of a scoundrel while alive, and apparently a bad influence on the children, Miles in particular. Mrs. Grose also says that he had a relationship with Miss Jessel.
- **Miss Jessel** - The former governess, a young and beautiful but infamous lady. Miss Jessel apparently had an inappropriate relationship with Quint, who was well below her class standing. The governess describes Miss Jessel's black-clad ghost as miserable, pale, and dreadful. The governess believes Miss Jessel's ghost is haunting Bly with the intention of corrupting Flora.
- **Luke** - A servant at Bly. Luke is expected to deliver the governess's letter to the children's uncle, but he cannot find it. Miles uses Luke as an attempted escape route and asks to see Luke before telling the governess what she wants to know.

Characters

- **Anonymous Narrator** - The narrator of the prologue. The anonymous narrator is an educated guest at the Christmas Eve gathering. The narrator is most likely a man, since he speaks disdainfully of the sensation-hungry women at the gathering. The narrator may be a stand-in for Henry James, as he mentions he has a title for the tale at the end of the prologue. As Douglas repeatedly hints, the narrator will find a deeper meaning in the story.
- **Douglas** - The teller of the governess's tale at the Christmas Eve gathering. Douglas knew the governess, who had been his sister's governess after her time at Bly, and may have been in love with her. He is the only one who has heard the tale, since the governess left him in charge of her manuscript after she died. Douglas was fond of the governess and introduces her as a “most agreeable” person, giving her credibility regarding the tale to come.
- **Griffin** - A storyteller at the gathering. Griffin tells a ghost story involving a child and his mother.
- **Women at the Gathering** - Guests at the house. The women are characterized as sensation hungry and eager to hear the most “dreadful” and “delicious” ghost stories.

Themes

The Corruption of the Innocent

- The governess only rarely indicates that she is afraid the ghosts will physically harm or kill the children. In fact, Miles's death comes as a shock to us as readers, because we are unprepared to think of the ghosts as a physical threat. The governess's fears focus almost entirely on the potential “corruption” of the children—whether they were corrupted by Quint and Jessel when the latter were alive and whether they continue to be similarly corrupted by the ghosts. Before she even knows about Quint, the governess guesses that Miles has been accused of corrupting other children. Although the word corruption is a euphemism that permits the governess to remain vague about what she means, the clear implication is that corruption means exposure to knowledge of sex. For the governess, the children's exposure to knowledge of sex is a far more terrifying prospect than confronting the living dead or being killed. Consequently, her attempt to save the children takes the form of a relentless quest to find out what they know, to make them confess rather than to predict what might happen to them in the future.

Themes

- The story doesn't make any clear and definitive statement about corruption. Certainly, the governess's fears are destructive and do not result in her saving the children. Notably, while the governess is the character most fearful of and vigilant for corruption, she is also the least experienced and most curious character regarding sex. The governess is horrified by Miss Jessel's sexual relationship and apparently fascinated by it as well. We might conclude that the governess's fear of the children's corruption represents her projection of her own fears and desires regarding sex onto her charges.

Themes

The Destructiveness of Heroism

- The governess's youth and inexperience suggest that the responsibility of caring for the two children and being in charge of the entire estate is more than she could possibly bear. Her isolation is largely her employer's fault, because he chooses to remain absent and specifically tells her to deal with all problems by herself. However, the governess responds to her experiences at Bly by taking on even more responsibility—to bury the headmaster's letter and keep Miles at home; to be the one who sees the ghosts rather than the children and who attempts to screen them from any exposure to the ghosts; and to save the children from the ghosts' corrupting influence. These decisions are all self-conscious and she intends to please her employer. Clearly, she is misguided. The master never comes down or sends any letter, and her crusade to save the children is an even worse disaster. Flora leaves the estate sick and Miles dies. Whether or not the governess was correct in thinking that the children were being haunted, she was definitely wrong in thinking she could save them.

Themes

- The fact that the governess was misguided in adopting a heroic stance suggests several interpretations. One possibility is that the forces of corruption are too powerful for one person to oppose. Perhaps the governess could have succeeded only with the concerted efforts of the school and the uncle, and perhaps the children could not have been saved. The governess's attempt to guard the children may have proven to be more damaging than the knowledge from which she wanted to protect them.

Themes

– Forbidden Subjects

- The headmaster expels Miles from school and refuses to specify why. The governess has several guesses about what he might have done, but she just says he might be “corrupting” the others, which is almost as uninformative as the original letter. The governess fears that the children understand the nature of Quint and Jessel's relationship, but the nature of that relationship is never stated explicitly. The governess suspects that the ghosts are influencing the children, but she isn't explicit about how exactly they are being influenced. This excessive reticence on the part of the characters could be a satiric reflection on Victorian reticence about sex.

Motifs

Vision

- Throughout *The Turn of the Screw*, references to eyes and vision emphasize the idea that sight is unreliable. Characters lock eyes with each other several times in the novella. The governess shares intense gazes with both Quint and Miss Jessel and believes she can determine the ghosts' intentions by looking into their eyes. Although she and Miss Jessel do not actually talk, the governess claims Miss Jessel's gaze appears “to say” she has a right to be there. At times, the governess regards the clarity of the children's eyes as proof that the children are innocent.

Motifs

A Ship Lost at Sea

- Early on in the novella, the governess imagines herself at the helm of a “great drifting ship,” and the metaphor of Bly as a ship lost at sea soon proves to be appropriate. When the governess goes out to look for the vanished Quint, she describes Bly as “empty with a great emptiness,” as though it is a vast, unlimited sea. After her first ghostly encounters, she decides she will save the children but later cries that they are hopelessly “lost.” Her navigation skills have failed her, and she envisions the children drowning. The ship imagery extends further when, soon thereafter, she imagines Miles “at the bottom of the sea,” a disturbing image that foreshadows Miles's fate.

Motifs

Silence

- Prior to the governess's ghostly encounters, she experiences a hush in the world around her. When she first sees Quint in the tower, the sound of birds stops and the rustling of leaves quiets. The governess takes the scene to be “stricken with death.” The governess's sense of a hush is more marked when she meets Quint on the staircase. She interprets the “dead silence” of the incident as proof that the encounter is unnatural. In fact, she remarks that the silence is the specific thing that marks the event as unnatural and that otherwise she would have assumed Quint to be a living being.

Symbols

Light

- Candlelight suggests safety in the governess's narrative, while twilight suggests danger. On a number of occasions, the governess's lighted candle is extinguished, always with the implication that something is awry. At the top of the stairs, her candle goes out at the exact moment she sees Quint. She views him in "cold, faint twilight." A week or two later, the governess wakes up to find her candle extinguished and Miles on the lawn in bright moonlight. Her view of him in that light suggests danger and, in a way, prefigures his imminent death. Later, Miles blows out the governess's candle, plunging the two into darkness. The lack of moonlight implies an absence of the supernatural, and the blowing out of the candle indicates a loss of protection.

Symbols

The Written Word

- In *The Turn of the Screw*, events become fully real only when they have been written down. The governess at first refuses to record the circumstances at Bly in a letter to her employer. If she preserves the events in a material document, she will have reached a point of no return—she will be forever unable to deny what happened. She also has relied on threats and passionate speech to persuade Mrs. Grose of her visions and theories, and convincing someone through the written word will be much more difficult. Eventually, she does write the letter, and she also writes down the entire account in the manuscript that we are reading. The manuscript, unlike the letter, allows her to present events in a way that will persuade her readers she is both sane and telling the truth. In keeping with the ambiguity of the tale, the trajectories of both written records, the letter and the manuscript, are interrupted, which further impedes our ability to determine whether the events are or are not “real.” The letter is never sent, and the manuscript stops short of a definite conclusion. These interruptions suggest the story remains unresolved—and cast doubt on its reliability.

Frame Story

- A narrative structure containing or connecting a series of otherwise unrelated tales.
- A story that is used as a surrounding structure, or frame, for a number of other stories.
- A story within a story

- The id- Quint, Miles, Flora
- The ego- the Governess
- The super-ego – Miss Jessel
- The garden at Bly- the Garden of Eden
- Miles and Flora – Adam and Eve
- Quint and Ms Jessel – the Devils
- The Governess – an angel and Christ like mediator

- Perhaps the most unorthodox interpretation of James's story is the one presented by Eric Solomon in his 1964 essay "The Return of the Screw". Solomon is convinced that the evil in the story does not come from the ghosts, if they exist, but from the housekeeper Mrs Grose (the person whom he believes Sherlock Holmes would immediately identify as "the least obvious suspect"), who is deliberately playing on the governess' imagination. Mrs Grose is accused of the murder of both Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, for which, according to Solomon, love and personal ambition would have been adequate motives. Well rid of the master's former valet and the old governess, she had for a time regained full control of Flora. The arrival of the new governess poses another threat to her prospects of rising above her present station:

- but the awful truth of the tragic end is that the mad governess in an attack of total delirium, actually takes the life of an innocent ten-year-old. The violent scene begins with her being reduced " . . . to the mere blind movement of getting hold of him, drawing him close . . . ," while she ". . . just fell for support against the nearest piece of furniture . . ." (pp.84–85)

- Then the governess prepares for her final onslaught: "My sternness made him avert himself again — and that movement made *me*, with a single bound and an irrepressible cry, spring straight upon him" (p.87). The now desperate little boy, calling *her* a devil, correctly assumes that it is the ghost of Peter Quint she is seeing in the middle of her frenzied attack, since she has just told him it is not the one of Miss Jessel (which Flora had told him about at breakfast). The governess replies: "What does he matter now, my own? — what will he *ever* matter? I have you. . ." Whereupon she either strangles or frightens poor Miles to death: ". . . I launched at the beast [she thinks she is striking out at Quint] . . . 'There, *there!* '" Now the governess tells us: ". . . he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day . . . he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss . . ." This cry was arrested by the strangle-hold which she kept up for long enough to suffocate him: ". . . at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held" (p.88). Alas, it was the body of the little boy and not the "beast" in her insane mind.