

Leggere...

The Turn of the Screw

Henry James

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U.S.A. Historical background

After the *War of Independence*, America expanded but displaced other native groups including Indian tribes and Mexicans and increased the number of Afro-American slaves. So, it was necessary to make important social reforms about public school, the treatment of prisoners, the insane and the poor, the slavery, and the rights to women.

In 1861 the United States faced their first great crisis between the increasingly industrial and commercial North and the agricultural South which maintained slavery.

Soon after the Republican **Abraham Lincoln** became President in 1860, 11 southern states seceded from the Federal Union (1861). The result was a costly and bloody Civil War which lasted four years and was won by the northern countries. Slavery was abolished and the Union was preserved, but the most immediate problems were to help ex-slaves and to create loyal state governments. In the following decades, railroads expanded and industry grew creating a new class of wealthy industrialists, a rich middle class, a vast proletarian working class and a larger numbers of immigrants and of migrants from rural areas formed the new labour force.

U.S.A. Literary Background

Poetry

In the early 1850s poets wanted to write an original American poetry. **Walt Whitman** with *Leaves of Grass* (1855) created a democratic poetry mixing colloquial diction, prose rhythms of journalism, the repetitions of the Bible and the musicality of popular opera. **Emily Dickinson** wrote very original short, untitled poems, nearly 2,000, only few of them published before her death.

Prose

- The adventure novels were enriched with symbols and became allegories of man's eternal struggle towards truth such as **Herman Melville's** *Moby Dick* (1851)
- In the period of the civil war numerous works about slavery started being published written by black people, now freemen. The first African-American novels **William Wells Brown's** *Clotel* (1853) and **Harriet E. Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859) point out the contrast between American ideals of liberty and the real living conditions of American black people.
- Other novels are a response of the white writers to the abuses of slavery like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by **Harriet Beecher Stowe** which demonstrates how the slave system violated the most basic ideals of humanity.

New movements and way of writings became increasingly important in American fiction after the Civil War:

- **Regionalism**, about regional differences; **Bret Harte's** *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches* (1870), is a collection of stories about California.
- **Realism**, about the hidden struggles of city life; **Kate Chopin's** (Katherine O' Flaherty) *The Awakening* (1899) deals with the sexual and artistic awakening of a young mother who abandons her family.
- **Naturalism**, about a predetermined fate that makes human will ultimately powerless; **Samuel Langhorne Clemens's** (Mark Twain), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) portrays Southern characters sketching many sides of life and human nature;

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869) deals with psychology and moral development in four young women showing concern with childhood and adolescence; **Stephen Crane's** *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) is about a young woman's life in a New York City slum, and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), is an intense examination of the fear and the state of the human mind during the Civil War; **Frank Norris's** *McTeague* (1899), is a portrait of the effects of greed, and *The Octopus* (1901) depicts the conflict between farmers and the railroad owners in California.

- **Interior monologue**, introduced to describe social portrayals; **Henry James** used this technique under the influence of his brother, the philosopher William James in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881); *The Ambassadors* (1903) and the *Golden Bowl* (1904); **Edith Wharton** (Edith Jones) set her novels among the wealthy and worldly elite of New York City and focus on social definition and convention or on the mental and emotional traps that limit people's desire and ability to change. (*The House of Mirth*, 1905; *Ethan Frome*, 1911; *The Age of Innocence*, 1920).

Drama

From the 1820s to the 1840s there was a vogue for so-called Indian plays. *Metamora, or The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829) by **John Augustus Stone** is a melodrama set in an earlier period of frontier history (the 1670s) and deals with the impossibility for savage people, who live in harmony with nature, to survive with the white man.

In the 1820s **William Henry Brown** organized in New York City an African American acting troupe, the *African Theatre* that produced plays by Shakespeare as well as African American plays, including *The Drama of King Shotaway* (1823) written by Brown.

Henry James (1843 - 1916)

Henry James was born in New York City in 1843. Together with his brother, William, Henry followed his family to Geneva, Paris, and London, as his father was a remarkable intellectual and social theorist.

In Boston Henry briefly attended Harvard Law School, but soon stopped to concentrate on his writing. He found success very early and often

In novels such as *The American*, *The Europeans*, and *Daisy Miller*, James perfected a sort of psychological realism. His primary subject was the social maneuverings of the upper classes, particularly the situation of Americans living in Europe. For James, America represented optimism and innocence, while Europe represented decadence and social sophistication. James himself moved to Europe early on in his professional career and was naturalized as a British citizen in 1915 to protest America's failure to enter World War I.

First written in the 1880s and extensively revised in 1908, *The Portrait of a Lady* is often considered to be James's greatest achievement.

While he was a dedicated observer of human beings in society, James was a socially distant man with few close friendships. He never married and openly claimed to practice celibacy. He devoted his time to write: he produced nearly 100 books, including *The Golden Bowl*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and the ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*.

He died in 1916, shortly after receiving the English Order of Merit for his dedication to the British cause in World War I.

The Turn of the Screw (1898)

Plot

A group of friends sit around the fireplace of an old house in 1890s England, telling ghost stories. One of them starts telling a true story about two children. It is about a girl who accepts as governess to a boy and a girl at Bly. The previous governess died and the children are in the care of the housekeeper. There is one condition: she cannot contact him at any time and must deal with all problems herself. At Bly the governess meets a beautiful eight-year-old girl, Flora, and the housekeeper Mrs. Grose. The boy, ten-year-old Miles, will return from school in a few days. The night before his arrival, the governess receives a letter from the headmaster of his school refusing to allow Miles to return to school after the summer holiday. Once at home, Miles seems to be just as beautiful and angelic as his sister and, for a time, the governess is very happy. One evening, walking in the park, she sees a man in one of the towers of the house. At first she thinks it is the uncle of the children but then realizes it is a stranger. The housekeeper says that the man is Peter Quint, the uncle's former valet, but Quint is dead. Mrs. Grose tells her that Quint spent a great deal of time with Miles and asks the governess to protect the children. Many ghostly apparitions occur both of Quint and of the previous governess Miss Jessel. The governess is certain that the children meet with these ghosts in secret. She thinks the ghosts want to possess the children and lead them to their deaths. The governess decides to write to their uncle, but she does not post the letter. Flora starts being ill. The governess sends Mrs. Grose and Flora by coach to the uncle immediately, and plans to stay alone with Miles who dies in her arms.

Sources

Literary sources - James admitted also many influences from public sources, "intellectual echoes" as he called them – the idea of the ghosts had already attracted great minds like Shakespeare's. Surely it can be seen as a modern gothic novel for the presence of ghosts, the atmosphere and the place where the action develops.

Autobiographical sources - It is reported that, after an awful opening night of one of his plays, James had tea with his friend, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward White Benson. During the visit, they spoke about ghosts. The Archbishop told James the story of two orphan children left in the care of depraved servants that brought up the children to be evil. After the servants' death they haunted the house and the children to get them in their power.

Ghosts were a topic very discussed in James' family: his father was very interested in spirits and his brother William actively researched the phenomena. The critic Oscar Cargill in his study *The Turn of the Screw and Alice James* supposes that the idea of a disturbed mind could come by his sister's mental disease: his sister Alice suffered from violent bursts of hysteria and Henry James took care of her in her worst periods. His love for Alice may have been the reason he made the governess the heroine of the tale. Alice's companion Kate often came around the turn of the stair unexpected – and the ghosts of the story appear on the stairs or somewhere unexpectedly. Besides both Henry and William James should know Sigmund Freud's study *The Case of Miss Lucy R.* Lucy R., a governess came to Freud for treatment because she suffered from depression and was "tormented by the subjective sensations of smell." Freud discovered that Miss Lucy R. had been reproached by the father of the children because a man and a woman visitor had kissed. So the story may have started out as a ghost narrative, but it seems to have quickly developed into something more.

Setting

The preface takes place in a room of a palace that the reader understands to be a beautiful, rich building. Then the story moves to Bey, the country town where the action narrated begins. The description is not detailed and the place seems to have no peculiarities that could haunt the minds of a dreamer. It is this lack of particularities that suggests something unusual is going to happen. The tower where Peter Quint is seen assumes a deeper meaning in the fantasies of the governess and, for some critics, it acquires a Freudian significance in her frustrated mind. The house is a large building with no characteristic features but a window, the threshold between living people and ghosts.

Characters - They are flat characters as they do not undergo a change in the story; they have already experienced the turning point of their life when the narration takes place. Reading attentively, they are symbols used by the author in order to convey his message to the reader.

The Governess - The protagonist of this story has not got a name. At the age of twenty she goes to London to get a job. Dougal, the man who owns the manuscript, depicts her as a charming young lady. She fascinates him even if she is ten years older than he is. She is the youngest daughter of a country parson and needs to secure a job in "the service of the classroom". The critics have given a different interpretation of her personality. They all agree that she is a very emotional woman, but there are two guidelines to read her behaviours:

- She is the innocent, pure, sensitive girl that witnesses the presence of the two evil ghosts and understands that they pervade the life of Flora and Miles. She commits her own life to serve the children's lives, guided by the devotion and the fascination she feels for their uncle, even if she met him only once at the beginning of the narration.
- The other interpretation is that the ghosts are only vision of her over-emotional imagination, of a dreamer's mind. The girl, infatuated by the handsome figure of the uncle and repressed by her education, creates these ghosts in her mind and, haunted by these visions, corrupts the souls of the innocent children, so fond of her, until Miles dies.

Any interpretation the reader accepts, the governess remains a girl whose honesty and resolution brings her to the extremes. The only real problem that the story stresses is the fight between good and evil.

Mrs. Grove - She is both the housekeeper and the servant of the house. Simple, illiterate, the woman rises the sympathy of the reader because she represents reality. Mrs. Grove is the true innocent of the story. She believes in the governess' words because she herself wants to understand the truth. She recognises Quint and Miss Jessel in the description of the young woman and decides that the best resolution to take is to get in contact with the uncle.

The Children

Both Miles and Flora are enchanting and amazingly beautiful. They are both described as two living creatures emanating light. But the words used to depict them seem to reflect something peculiar who give them inhuman and almost supernatural characteristics.

At the beginning of the story, they are both innocents. Step by step they lose their childish purity to become corrupted either by the governess or by Mr. Quint.

Miles , a precocious, intelligent boy who undergoes a process of corruption, fighting against evil represented by Peter Quint and/or by the governess. He behaves strangely also because he is always under the constant and attentive look of the governess who is interpreting all his remarks as they had further and deeper meanings. In the story there are some hints concerning Miles's supposed strange behaviour. He has said some "things" to his companions at school; he has been sent away from the college and once leaves at night and blows out the candle. They can be either simple coincidences or games of a ten-year-old boy over-watched by his governess, or real proves of the presence of evil in his soul. However, Miles is the victim of Quint's presence and of the governess' frustration. At the end he cannot but die under the weight of this evil world.

Flora, the eight-year-old girl is less involved in the story. She seems to know about the ghosts , but she does not openly admit of their presence. The governess supposes Flora is just playing the game of deception with her. Like his brother, Flora has fallen from innocence to evil influenced by the atmosphere of the story.

The Ghosts "reek with the air of evil": they are like demons that haunt their victims and cause them woe. Their villainy is felt on the children and pervades the story with their evil.

Peter Quint, the servant that emulates his master also in his clothes. The information we get about him is from Mrs. Grose and the town-people. Quint is very handsome, but he has an evil look and his red hair seem to stress his similitude with the devil himself. The atmosphere he emanates is of corruption - his aspect, his relationship with the former governess, his strange and morbid involvement with the children, with Miles, in particular, and his death on the road from a blow in the head. Quint never really acts, because he is a ghost, and what the reader is told are only inferences.

Miss Jessel, the former, beautiful and charming governess who died after a relationship with Peter Quint. Mrs. Grose did not approve their love affair as they met accompanied by the children and involved them in speeches and facts that did not belong to children's minds. She is a woman who lost her purity and became involved in tragedy. Miss Jessel has a lesser role than Peter Quint in the governess' frustrated fantasies.

The Uncle does not have a role in the story, but his presence is very pervasive. It is he that affects the governess and fills her thoughts and makes her accept her position. Everybody is reluctant to get in touch with him for fear to prove inadequate. Some critics have pointed out that he too can be the fruit of the mind of the country parson's daughter .

Douglas, the owner of the manuscript written by the governess, he is the man who introduces the story. Douglas is deeply involved in the tale because of the fascination the governess had on him while she cared for his sister. Of course his attraction means that he sees the story from her own point of view.

The narrator appears only in the preface of the author, when he gives some information about Douglas and about the atmosphere of the story. He is so interested in the tale that Douglas leaves the manuscript to him.

Commentary

The English critic D. Punter analysis the work as a Gothic novel of the XX century. He writes, "The whole story moves in a miasma of uncertainty". He points out the question if the governess is or is not a "reliable interpreter", what she observes is not the focus of the story as the insolubility of the matter is the central point in James's purpose. Punter stresses that the governess "prides herself on her *sensitivity* like other Gothic heroines"; they are "unfitted by reason of birth expectation and training". The governess wants to place herself at the centre of a world she does not belong to. imposing her presence and love to the children for whom she is a peripheral figure. "The misty figures of Quint and Miss Jessel appear to symbolise several things to her: the tendency of the children to develop private world of their own, their growing awareness of sexual and emotional life, their perpetually threatening independence and adulthood. She is in many respects a typified Victorian figure, totally self-righteous in her insistence on the necessary repression of children and in her confidence in her own approach to education". As a matter of facts, she is only struggling to get her power over the children.

Fortune

***The Turn of the screw* has influenced future works included:**

- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) offers references to the story.
- Joyce Carol Oates' *The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly* (in the collection *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, 1994) is a retelling of the novel from the point of view of the ghosts.
- Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) alludes to *The Turn of the Screw* when a similar ghost story is told to the narrator by his aunt.
- Toby Litt's *Ghost Story* is a modern adaptation of the novel (2004)
- Donald Thomas's *Sherlock Holmes and the Ghosts of Bly and Other New Adventures of the Great Detective* (2010) is a sequel of the events described in *The Turn of the Screw*.
- Adele Griffin's *Tighter* is a modern adaption of the story (2011).

Adaptations

1961 - *The Innocents*, directed by Jack Clayton, written by Truman Capote and William Archibald, starring Deborah Carr

2009 - *The Turn of the Screw*, British television production directed by Tim Fywell, and loosely based on the 1898 novel of the same name by Henry James.

Notes

William James - (1842 –1910) American philosopher and psychologist, was brother of novelist Henry James, and of the diarist Alice James. He wrote among other works *Principles of Psychology* and theorized the *stream of consciousness technique* (derived from S. Freud's free association) a mind-world connection, which had a direct and significant impact on avant-garde and modernist literature and art.