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# The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Fiction by Henry James







With an Introduction by R. W. B. Lewis



THE TURN OF THE SCREW AND OTHER SHORT FICTION

*A Bantam Book*

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## Introduction

Writing late in life to his old friend Henry Adams, Henry James described himself with a sort of jocular earnestness as "that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility." Discussion of James's work over the years has for the most part concentrated on its almost matchless artistry, at the rare finish or "finality" of his characteristic writings and the unending play of sensibility that quickens them. This is altogether proper: for whether we know it or not, it is the vigor of James's literary art that seizes and holds us as we read his stories and novels, and as a good many of us reread the best of them—five such are included in this volume—again and again. Yet even with a writer of Henry James's artistic stature, it is always warming to remember that his work was the product of an individual human being who lived in various actual places at actual times, who belonged to a family, who grew up here and went to school there, who hoped and worried, who struggled and doubted as other men do, and who had his own personal experiences and private obsessions.

To come at James's stories in this manner is not to diminish them or even to explain them—not at least, as the saying goes, to explain them away. But it may be to make them more humanly recognizable, and insofar a little more accessible. And this in the long run can make the ultimate literary achievement all the more imposing.

The stories here at our disposal, biographically considered, show James deploying certain purely external facts of his personal and family story, and at the same time projecting his deepest apprehensions and most vital private concerns. In the leisurely opening of *Daisy Miller*, for example, the young American dilettante Winterbourne is said to be spending a good deal of

time in the Swiss city of Geneva because, in part, he “had an old attachment for the little metropolis of Calvinism; he had been put to school there as a boy.” So Henry James had been, going to school in Geneva in 1859–60, at the close of a long stay abroad by the whole family. The Jameses had come over in 1855, when Henry was twelve, the very age at which Winterbourne had been brought to Europe, and about the same age (Winterbourne reflects) as the bumptious child Randolph Miller, whom Winterbourne encounters in the hotel at Vevey.

There follows something like a James family in-joke, initiated by Randolph’s remark that “My father ain’t in Europe; my father’s in a better place than Europe.” Winterbourne supposes this to be a delicate way of saying that Mr. Miller has gone to heaven, but Randolph disabuses him. “My father’s in Schenectady. He’s got a big business. My father’s rich, you bet.” James is slyly invoking the memory of his grandfather, the first of the American William Jameses and a very big businessman indeed: a multimillionaire at the time of his death in 1832, with a base in Albany but with large holdings in upstate Schenectady, including a mortgage on the entire property of Union College, which the novelist’s father, Henry James Senior, had attended.

The themes casually glanced at in that exchange—the alleged superiority of America to Europe, the role of great wealth—have a continuing relevance to the narrative of *Daisy Miller* (and to later writings). But they do so within a different and more urgent personal perspective. During the years just prior to *Daisy Miller* (1878), Henry James—with *The American*, *The Europeans*, and other volumes—had been slowly finding his voice as a writer of fiction, and after living for a stretch in Paris and then taking up residence in London, was gradually deciding that Europe, rather than America, was to be the setting for his life’s work. Both developments were periodically questioned by his slightly older brother William. The latter had taken his medical degree at Harvard in 1869 and a few years later had been appointed instructor in physiology in the same university. The two brothers were, in many ways, uncommonly companionable and mutually admiring; but William—still insecure at this early stage in his career—felt called upon to assert his older sibling’s expertise in matters of literature and life choices.

He was peculiarly harsh about Henry’s story of 1872, “Guest’s



Confession'' (itself a minor and somewhat unattractive tale). Pointing to a couple of Frenchified phrases in the narrative, William wrote: "Of the people who experience a personal dislike . . . of your stories, the most I think will be repelled by the element which gets expression in these two phrases, something cold, thin-blooded, and priggish suddenly popping in and freezing the genial current." *Daisy Miller*, on one important level, is an imaginative response to this critique. As though to test its validity, as a description not only of his writing but, by implication, of his very nature, Henry created a figure called Winterbourne, a name that—since "bourne" means "boundary" or "limit"—suggests an individual perhaps fatally limited by his wintriness, his freezing, thin-blooded character.

There can be no question that the young man's name is intended to convey such a meaning—not, surely, in a tale in which the two other chief figures are called Daisy and Giovanelli. The springlike quality of the enchanting, perplexing teenaged Miss Miller is the more stressed by her nickname, since her baptismal name, as we are told, is Annie. As for the oddly gallant small-time Roman lawyer Giovanelli, his name combines the Italian word for young (*giovane*) with the suffix meaning little (*elli*). So springtime and extreme youthfulness, as the story unfolds, are poised against a prematurely aging wintriness of spirit. And against, to borrow William's other adjective, priggishness too: Daisy's recurring word for Winterbourne, "stiff," is her provincial way of calling him a prig.

Henry ran a grave danger, William told him, in distancing himself from his native land, from its manners and its habits of speech. "Keep watch and ward," William urged in 1876, "lest in your style you become too Parisian and lose your hold on the pulse of the great American public." Winterbourne uses markedly similar language when, after meeting Daisy Miller, he realizes that she is an American type he can no longer decipher. "He felt that he had lived at Geneva so long that he had lost a good deal; he had become dishabituated to the American tone." The motif is reinforced by Winterbourne's aunt, Mrs. Costello. "You have lived too long out of the country," she warns him. "You will be sure to make some great mistake." With this, Winterbourne seems to agree when, at the story's end, he says to

his aunt, "You were right. . . . I was booked to make a mistake. I have lived too long in foreign parts."

But there are fertile ironies at work here, as patterns shift and meanings change, and as the graceful choreography of the story moves on through the diverse Roman settings. The rigidly snobbish Mrs. Costello meant that her nephew had been so long removed from the centers of acceptable society—including the wealthy expatriate group in Rome—that he might attend more than was proper to the unconventional Miss Miller. Winterbourne, on the contrary, understands at last that his long absence from the more free-natured milieu of America led to a fatal failure to appreciate Daisy for what she was.

Winterbourne's failure is Henry James's triumph; in fact, the first resounding triumph of his literary career. James brought into being a male figure who fulfilled brother William's worst fears; and conjoined him with a human reality—an altogether *American* young American girl—of the sort that Henry (in William's view) was losing the knack of dealing with. Winterbourne is all too sadly unable to deal with Daisy, any more than are Mrs. Costello in Vevey and Mrs. Walker in Rome (the spectrum of snobbery in this story is worth a close look). But the personal point is that Henry James was *not* Winterbourne; it is through his protagonist's myopia that James artfully brings the reader to perceive Daisy's true qualities: staunch but unknowing, brave but vulnerable, unmannered but constantly open and honest, irresistibly likeable, and, in several meanings of the term, innocent. Daisy Miller's spirit, Edmund Wilson once said, goes marching on. It is one of the vibrant creations of our literature, forged by the cunning of art out of Henry James's strenuous, fraternally fostered self-searching.

Like other writers who make literary use of their own experiences—and all writers do, needless to say—Henry James drew alternately upon the circumstances immediately surrounding the composition of a story, as in *Daisy Miller*, and upon moments and events of a more remote past, as in *Washington Square*. In this latter novella, of 1881, James is insistent on dates, on distances in time, and on the relative ages of his characters—Dr. Sloper was twenty-seven when he married the wealthy Miss Harrington in 1820, their daughter Catherine was

born in 1826, and so on. The intention is at once to fix the historic moment of the main action and to establish its remoteness from the present, even—for such is the effect of the opening sentence—its once-upon-a-time character. That action occurs, we are to understand, in the New York City of the late 1840s and early 1850s: that is, the time of Henry James's own New York childhood.

The scene, as the title tells us, is Washington Square, at the lower end of Fifth Avenue. It was on Washington *Place*, the little street that runs eastward from the square to Broadway, that Henry James was born in April 1843. While he was still an infant, the family moved into a house on West 14th Street, near Sixth Avenue, and here the Jameses remained until their departure for Europe in 1855—the longest and happiest period of residence in one location that Henry was to know until he settled in London as a man of thirty-three. The afternoon walks from 14th Street regularly took the children over to nearby Washington Square and provided James with those vivid impressions that he reevokes with unexpected nostalgia in the third section of the novella—that “tenderness of early associations,” as he writes, that makes the Washington Square area seem to him still “the most delectable” portion of the city. One source of the charm, we notice, is a grandmother living “in venerable solitude” in this area, and dispensing “a hospitality which commended itself alike to the infant imagination and the infant palate.” Henry James's maternal grandmother, Mrs. Elizabeth Walsh, was indeed at mid-century living in widowed but hospitable solitude in the old Walsh home on Washington Square.

This setting is the context for the story's developing drama, the always low-keyed and well-mannered but nonetheless brutal battle of egos being waged by the implacably self-assured Dr. Sloper, his passively stubborn daughter Catherine, and the engaging but scoundrelly Morris Townsend. There is no need here, presumably, to follow the twists and turns of the power struggle to its bleakly poignant conclusion, nor to examine the secondary but important roles played in it by Mrs. Penniman and Mrs. Montgomery. What may be emphasized here is the relation *between* context and action, and the nearly mythic dimension that relation adds to the story's meaning.

It is the invasion of an idyllic, even Edenesque world, a world



of "once-upon-a-time," of childhood innocence and tender associations and clearer moralities, by the hard facts of human nature and conduct: by greed, hypocrisy, cruelty, unbending vanity, addleheadedness, and calamitous self-deception. It is, more simply, the modern story, almost the American story: the historical invasion of a simpler time by what James elsewhere called "the money passion." And it is what the boy who grew up near Washington Square had to discover and come to terms with, as a mature literary artist committed to depicting the world he knew as it intractably was.

Even in this matter of money, it can be added in a footnote, James turned to biography. Amid all the talk about money and legacies in *Washington Square*, the major recurring reference is to an income of \$10,000 a year. This is Mrs. Sloper's fortune and, in turn, becomes the whole of her daughter's inheritance; Catherine's loss of a vaster sum from her father is what causes Morris Townsend, after vocally measuring the relative sums involved, to abandon her. \$10,000 a year is also the precise amount that James's father, the elder Henry, received as his inheritance from the grandfather's estate in the 1830s. Henry James, in his memoirs, would pretend that he was never able to find out the size of his father's legacy. *Washington Square* can persuade us otherwise, as it can suggest why money, in all its practical and nearly metaphysical ramifications, became one of the most obsessive motifs in Henry James's fiction.

"The Turn of the Screw," which was completed in December 1897, has become the best known and most widely read of Henry James's shorter fictions, and has been the most frequently dramatized. It is also by far the most hotly debated of his writings, and by critics of every persuasion. The central issue, to the arguing of which there seems no end, is: are the alleged ghosts of the former valet Peter Quint and the former governess Miss Jessel genuine phantoms, with diabolical designs on the two children Miles and Flora? Or are they pure hallucinations on the part of the new governess? Are they projections from a sexually repressed person's daughter who has fallen secretly in love with the children's lordly uncle—and who, experiencing and resisting the sexual attraction, invents images, in the outcome disastrous, of perversity and horror?

We can edge towards that issue by again taking biographical stock. In 1897 Henry James, after two decades of residence in London, took a long lease on an agreeable place called Lamb House in the village of Rye, in Sussex. Leon Edel, in the fourth volume of his superlative biography of James, speculates persuasively that James felt a profound ambivalence about his new home, that a sort of terror mixed with his satisfaction as he contemplated this—for James—radical and unprecedented move. James's letters in these months contain not easily explicable expressions of fear. The first consequence, in any case, was "The Turn of the Screw," which James began to write almost instantly after signing the lease for Lamb House, and in which the cozy environment of Rye in Sussex was subtly transformed into the terror-infested Bly in Essex.

But if the narrative of "The Turn of the Screw" begins at roughly the late 1897 moment of writing—though the careful reader will see that the Christmas Eve gathering of the prologue actually took place several years before that moment—the main story carries us back to a period at least half a century earlier. In no other story, not even in *Washington Square*, does Henry James invite us so patently to engage in arithmetic: the governess had died twenty years before; Douglas had met her while at college twenty years before that; the events recounted to him by the governess on a summer afternoon were of yet older vintage. We won't be far wrong if we date the ghostly encounters, or the hallucinatory visions, around 1845; but we should keep in mind that what we get are not the events themselves at the time of their occurrence, but the governess's much later brooding, circling, self-questioning memory of them. These temporal recedings, these dippings in memory, serve to reduce visibility; they shroud the actions in a mist atmospherically appropriate to a tale of phantasms.

They also take us back once more to the years of Henry James's childhood, but with a crucial difference. For in "The Turn of the Screw," as against *Washington Square*, the very problem, or a central element of it, is whether the children, Miles and Flora, really are innocent, and whether they inhabit an innocent world. More largely and disturbingly, the problem is the true moral nature of childhood life, and American readers in the 1980s have every reason to shudder at the suggestion that the



best behaved children may, when out of sight, be exposed to unspeakable depravities.

In defense of any theory about "The Turn of the Screw," one would have to go through the narrative almost sentence by sentence—an enjoyable task since surprise, disclosure, and further mystification lurk in virtually every phrase of this hypnotically fascinating story—but this is beyond our scope here. Forgettable minor facts would have to be scrutinized—for example, that ten years after the drama at Bly, the governess was still being employed in high places. To the world at large, obviously, she continued to be regarded as a person of integrity and balance, anything but an hysterical young woman whose insane fantasies had brought about the death of the ten-year-old boy in her charge.

Those critics, Edmund Wilson and Leon Edel among them, who do see her in this lurid light can make much of her state of mind when she first espies Peter Quint up on the tower—daydreaming about the uncle, imagining that as in some "charming story" he might appear and smile at her approvingly. It is her erotic yearnings, they say with some cause, that conjure into existence the figure on the battlements and her distrust of them that transform it into something threatening. But the same critics are hard put to explain how, after the *second* encounter, the governess is able to describe the apparition in such detail that the stupified Mrs. Grose recognizes it at once as the late Peter Quint—a person whom the governess had hitherto never even heard mentioned.

A key ground rule for any discussion of this tale is that we must accept the governess's account of the doings and sayings of the other *humans* in it, especially of the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose. The story, otherwise, is simply a trick, boringly ingenious and not worth our time. So we must take it as fact that, following the heated scene at the lake, Mrs. Grose was an actual witness to Flora's outburst of violent and venomous obscenities directed against the governess: "beyond everything, for a young lady." It is this episode that brings Mrs. Grose to believe what the governess has been saying about the ghosts and their evil intentions towards the children.

Another ground rule, admittedly a much more slippery one, is that we should trust Henry James himself when he tells us what

he had in mind when composing any given story. In speaking about "The Turn of the Screw" in the collected edition of his work, James talked forthrightly about Peter Quint and Miss Jessel as "my hovering blighting presences, my pair of abnormal agents"; he described them as the "haunting pair" driven by a "villainy of motive." He was careful not to make that motive explicit, and recalled telling himself, while writing the tale, "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough . . . and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars." Most readers today who accept the ghosts as real suppose that their villainous motive was sexual corruption of some homoerotic kind. But this, as James would say, may be as much a comment on modern readers as on the story; the identity of ultimate horror may be different tomorrow.

James also remembered his aim of keeping very clear and *accurate* the governess's "record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities"—and then added "by which I don't mean her explanation of them, a very different matter." What can this mean? My own view, for what it is worth, is that the ghostly figures do, fearfully, exist, and that they are determined to gain control over the children—Peter Quint of Miles and Miss Jessel of Flora; thus far the governess has read the challenge correctly. But I have come to believe that this attempt is not successful, or not entirely so; in this regard, the governess's disturbed imagination has run away with her. Henry James's histrionic genius would never settle for an either-or account of experience, especially of the kind established by many critics of "The Turn of the Screw": it is *all* the ghosts' wicked responsibility, or *all* the governess's doing. Peter Quint and the governess collaborate, by a dreadful collision of psychic energies, in the death of young Miles.

Both "The Beast in the Jungle," of 1902, and "The Jolly Corner," of 1906, arose from Henry James's uneasy retrospective look at his life as he moved into his seventh decade. Had he, in his whole-souled commitment to art, somehow missed out on life itself? For James in these years, to judge from his fiction, to live meant to love, or as Edel has put it with luminous simplicity,



"One really hadn't lived until one learned to love." Had he ever loved? He continued to be troubled, as it seems, by the memory of Constance Fenimore Woolson, the American woman and writer with whom he had once had a chaste, evasive courtship, and who had died in Venice, perhaps a suicide, in the early 1890s. Had he failed her—had he missed some gesture of appeal, some signal of emotional need? These and other aspects of his self-inquiry went into "The Beast in the Jungle," the overcast story of John Marcher, who believes himself marked out for some unique if terrible destiny and spends a lifetime waiting for the moment to strike; only to discover that a lifetime of nothing *but* waiting had been that destiny all along.

The story needs to be read twice, because only then can one grasp the almost agonizing irony of some of the exchanges. At the outset, Marcher reencounters a young woman named May Bartram, to whom—though, typically, he has forgotten the fact—he had confided his strange conviction some years earlier. May agrees to keep the vigil with him, and for three decades the two of them wait together in London for Marcher's fate to arrive—in his figure, for "the beast to spring." Marcher does wonder if he should allow himself to fall in love with May Bartram, and even marry her, but decides (the irony here is well-nigh unbearable) that it would be unfair to ask her, or any woman, to share in what might be a catastrophic event. May ages, fades, sickens; and as she does so, Marcher comes to suspect that she has guessed the nature of his special destiny. He taxes her: "You know something I don't. You've shown me that before." And she replies, "I've shown you, my dear, nothing." Exactly: what she has shown him, or covertly tried to, is precisely the nothing that is his life, and their life together. When she assures Marcher, a little later, that he is not fated to suffer, he remarks, "Well, what's better than that?" "You think nothing is better?" May asks.

What Marcher has to learn, of course, is that nothing—that is, the nothingness of his aridly self-centered existence—is incomparably worse than suffering. Standing beside May Bartram's grave, Marcher realizes, as the beast crouches to spring, that "he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened." It is, in its way, a positive statement: Marcher had been the one man for whom what was to have

happened was an appalling emptiness of experience. If he had loved May Bartram, he would have lived; and upon her death he would have suffered and so would have felt the pang of lived experience the more intensely. This is Marcher's tragic moment of consciousness; for up to now—it is one of Henry James's most astonishing narrative feats—the story has come to us through the “consciousness” of a man who has no consciousness, no awareness whatever, within the tight enclosure of his ego, of the reality of other human beings.

Henry James may have been thinking about his father's teachings when he wrote “The Beast in the Jungle”; for the pivot of Henry Senior's visionary theory about human development was that the individual must undergo a destruction of the ego (Henry Senior called it a “vastation”) in order to become accessible to the inflowing spirit of love and, hence, humanly mature. The younger Henry was certainly thinking about his father, and his brother William too, when he wrote “The Jolly Corner.”

Most immediately, he was thinking about himself. In 1904 Henry James, at the age of sixty-two, came back to his native New York after twenty-nine uninterrupted years of absence in Europe; and one of the first things he did was to seek out his old “birthhouse”—alas, no longer in existence—on Washington Place. In “The Jolly Corner,” Spencer Brydon, age fifty-six, comes back to *his* native New York after a European absence of thirty-three years and is irresistibly drawn to revisit and explore his own birthhouse, still standing on “the jolly corner.”

This return to the scene of his childhood and early manhood, along with Brydon's musing observations on the immense changes that have occurred in New York during his European years, lead him not unnaturally to speculate on what he might have become, how he might have “turned out,” if he had never left the city. Henry James, equally impressed and dismayed by the new urban look of skyscrapers and office buildings and a sort of ferocity of money making, may easily be imagined wondering about himself along similar lines. For Brydon, the key to it lies in the very atmosphere of his old home; gradually it takes the form of a phantom figure hovering somewhere in the house, his *alter ego*, or other potential self. He takes to prowling the house late at night, candle in hand; and eventually, just before dawn on his final visit, the phantom materializes before him.



"The Jolly Corner" is one of those truly great works of literary art which respond with a rush of vibrations to any sensible critical method brought to bear on them. It can be read, more or less straightforwardly, as a singularly gripping ghostly experience, or as a parable of modern American urban history, or as a dramatized case study of self-estrangement and mental aberration, or as a dark allegory of the creative process. The present approach points us, instead, to what amounts almost to a tradition in the story of the James family: the nightmarish encounter with some other part of the self. Henry James was fully cognizant of this tradition; "The Jolly Corner" is perhaps the most family rooted of all his stories.

The novelist's father had just such an experience in the spring of 1844, when, sitting comfortably in his rented cottage in England, he was suddenly conscious of another and hideous presence in the room, some "damned shape" that threatened his sanity and his life. William James, casually entering the dressing room of his Cambridge home in the winter of 1870, was seized abruptly by the hallucinatory image of an epileptic idiot—in whom he clearly and desperately recognized his own potential being. Henry's sister Alice underwent several comparably shattering moments in her twenties and thirties.

Henry James himself, remarkably enough, experienced his own real-life nightmare of the endangered ego some years *after* writing "The Jolly Corner." All these episodes testify to a shared, profound anxiety among the Jameses about the stability and integrity, the fundamental status, of the self; each of them had, after all, so precariously vital a self to begin with. But distinctions can be noted. If William James, for instance, identified his visitant on the spot as a self-projection, Henry Senior in 1844 lacked the psychic courage to do so. Spencer Brydon resembles Henry Senior in quite failing to acknowledge that the phantom other is the surfacing, or materializing, of a long suppressed portion of his nature.

In Brydon's case, what had been suppressed—what, the narrator says, "had been dormant in his own organism"—was a strong business instinct. Earlier in the story, Brydon, overseeing the erection of an apartment house on the second of his two New York properties, had surprised himself with his ability in the enterprise, with "a capacity for business and a sense for

construction''; and the phantom, when he appears, is unmistakably an enormously successful tycoon. *This*, though he refuses to admit it, is what Brydon might have become. On Henry James's part, the phantom can be taken as the reincarnation of a great "capacity for business" that had been missing from the family since the death of William James of Albany, the only figure of financial power in the whole history of the clan.

For Henry James personally, the important word was not so much "financial" as "power." When Brydon asks his confidante Alice Staverton how she thinks he might have turned out, she answers for both of them, "What you feel—and what I feel *for* you—is that you'd have had power"; and what causes Brydon, at the moment of confrontation, to faint dead away is the felt presence of overwhelming power, "a rage of personality before which his own collapsed." Henry James had no undue longing for large-scale wealth, but he was obsessed by the theme of power. He had, of course, no access to power in the worldly sense, a sense incarnate in the phantom. Yet he knew—no one better—that in a story like "The Jolly Corner" he was exercising, supremely, the only power at his command: the power of art. The creative act, as he saw it, was nothing else than the direct imposition of a special kind of power upon the materials of life. It was Henry James who, replying to some strictures by H. G. Wells in 1915, said with finality: "It is the art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance . . . and I know of no substitute for the force and beauty of its process."

*R. W. B. Lewis, Gray Professor of Rhetoric at Yale University, was the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his biography of Edith Wharton.*



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