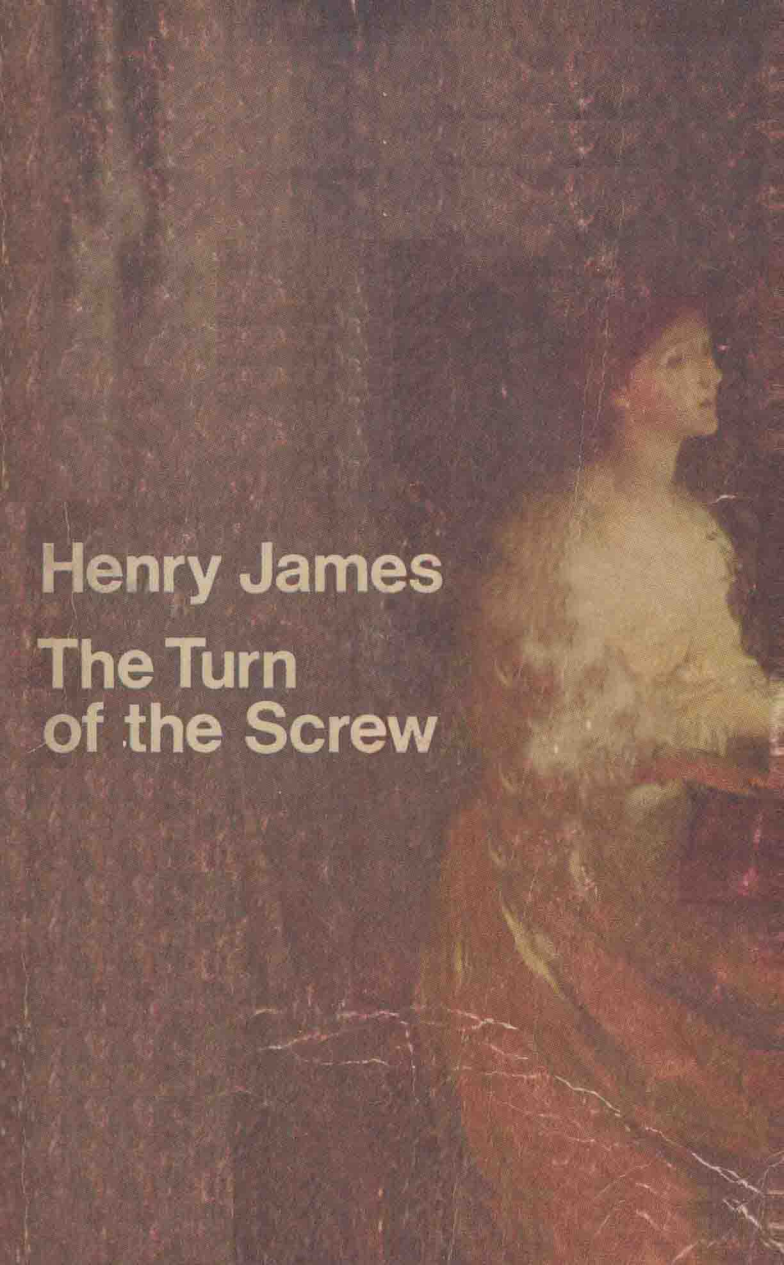
Henry James
The Turn
of the Screw

HENRY JAMES

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INTRODUCTION BY
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EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,

and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side

INTRODUCTION

INTEREST in Henry James has grown steadily since his death in 1916. Some critics still condemn the complexities of his prose; others continue to regard him as a recluse in an ivory tower who, turning his back on the major problems of life, produced books of 'marvellous inutility.' He was, they maintain, perversely preoccupied with the exquisite analysis of characters so unlike the rest of mankind as to deserve no analysis at all and with contriving for them situations of no interest to anyone breathing a less rarefied air than theirs. But the dominant tone of the critical chorus has in recent years become one of appreciation or praise. More and more thoughtful attention has been given to James's fiction and his critical writing and more and more has been written about his robust devotion to his art, his search for technical means of solving basic problems of the writer of fiction, his influence on later story-tellers, and, most important, his brilliance in illuminating man's 'inner life' and its consequences in behaviour. He is not now, and was not during most of his life, a widely popular author but his audience has increased to an extent which suggests that he was occasionally an artist in advance of his times. He seems to have anticipated some psychological theories generally accepted only since his day, in the light of which the depth and meaning of his work is more readily comprehensible than it once seemed. Not only the labours of psychologists and critics but also the experience of readers during a troubled half-century have made clear the significance of his work and its relevance to fundamental and persistently pressing human concerns.

Born in New York City in 1843 he was educated principally in Europe. By 1876 he had published in the United States promising pieces of fiction and criticism, and had decided to devote himself wholly to literature.

In December of that year he began living in London and visited America only occasionally thereafter. As an expatriate he was fascinated by the differences between the European or English scene and the American, and between his compatriots and their transatlantic neighbours; as an artist he saw the possibilities of the 'international theme' for fiction. Again and again throughout his career he turned in his novels and stories to one or another aspect of it.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, published in 1898, however, James was working in another of his favourite genres—'the ghostly tale.' In 1895, during a conversation about the deplorable scarcity of 'really effective and heart-shaking ghost-stories,' James heard from Edward Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, the general outline of a tale dealing with unhappy and apparently haunted children in an English country house. The Archbishop's narrative was only a 'shadow of a shadow' but it excited James and gave him the situation for *The Turn of the Screw*. He was delighted because the thinness of the tale in the story as he heard it kindled his imagination without clogging it with fact, and he felt that he had found a 'little note for sinister romance' of the most vivid sort. Some two years later he crystallized the 'strangely gruesome effect' of Archbishop Benson's tale into the long story or short novel which is probably the best and certainly the most celebrated of his 'ghostly' fictions. It was printed serially in *Collier's Weekly* in the United States in the spring of 1898 and appeared in London in the same year with James's story, 'Covering End,' in a volume called *The Two Magics*. *The Turn of the Screw* was, its author said later, a piece of mere ingenuity, cold artistic scheming, an 'amusette,' and he wrote of it to H. G. Wells as 'essentially a pot-boiler and a *jeu d'esprit*.' It was more than that. It was certainly carefully contrived by a master of fictional technique who was quite conscious of the devices he used; but its real quality came from the spell the theme

exercised upon him, its appeal to his sharp sense of the pervasive reality of evil. He had read many tales of the supernatural and 'ghostly.' He was the brother of a psychologist and more aware than most writers of his time of the new vistas which professional students of the mind were opening. Some of his personal experiences, too, as revealed by recent biographers, notably Mr Leon Edel, seem to have sharpened and deepened his realization of the dire ubiquity of fear and of evil, whether literally definable as such or nightmarishly potent on the unconscious plane.

The American critic, Mr Edmund Wilson, in his brilliant essay, 'The Ambiguity of Henry James,' argued that there are no ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw*, and that the horrifying apparitions seen by the governess and by her alone are hallucinations in the tormented mind of a sexually repressed woman. She, not the supposed spirits of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, is the real source of the children's haunted state, and little Miles's fear of her brings about the catastrophe. The story can be read with this interpretation and a few of James's own comments may seem to support it. Mr Wilson's thesis has been much debated, but appreciation of the story need not depend on its acceptance or rejection. Mr Edel has pointed out that the story can be taken as a gruesome tale of the ghostly, as a fascinating story of a psychiatric case, or as 'a projection of Henry James's own haunted state,' produced by some circumstances of his life. Whichever interpretation one chooses, the story's enchantment remains. Its very 'ambiguity,' its resistance to any final formulation in terms of the 'realistic' or actual, is a major source of its strength.

James himself carefully explained that one kind of ambiguity seemed necessary if he was to achieve the effect he sought. Just what was the evil which beset the children, or, if one prefers, was imagined by the governess to beset them? What are the horrors in the background of the story? Was the children's strange relation

to Miss Jessel and Quint imagined or real, sexual? Or did it involve some other bond, some corrupting 'possession'? To such questions James gave no answers. The evil, he said instead, must not be reduced to the narrowness of the definable. A 'sense of the depths of the sinister,' of 'portentous evil,' must be conveyed and 'the offered example, the imputed vice, the cited act, the limited deplorable present instance,' would not do. Nor would specifically identified brutalities, immoralities, or infamies. There could be no named absolute of wrong, because particularized wrongs would vary in emotional weight according to the experience and prejudices of the reader. Therefore the story must offer an intense 'general vision of evil.' The reader's imagination would supply details enough. 'Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications.'

This is not the doctrine of conventional realists or of naturalists who spell out at length the nature of the wrongs and woes they treat, but that of an artist with keener psychological insight than theirs into the power of mystery to create terror. Once move the reader to sympathize with a pair of afflicted children, once convince him that some horror threatens them, and his imagination will supply him with 'all the particulars.' James's theory may not be always applicable, but in *The Turn of the Screw* it worked brilliantly. Had the 'particulars' been presented literally, the story would have lost much of the vibrant suspense it now has, and its tone would have been changed to one of prosaic realism. Such a change would have deprived the tale of its greatest merit—its evocation of a compelling sense of real horror, not a mere momentary feeling of fright, discomfort, or distaste for ugliness and wrong.

The Turn of the Screw illustrates admirably how determinedly James sought as an artist to come to grips with the murkiest recesses of the unconscious, the irrational, and the most profound 'inner life' of men and women.

He is said to have told a friend who complained that she could not understand what happened in the story that he could not either, that Archbishop Benson had given him an impression of mystery which he had transmitted —'but as to understand it, it is just gleams and glooms.' James's sensitivity to the evocative impression, and the eagerness with which he pursued his artistic quest even into regions of the mind where the only landmarks are 'gleams and glooms,' together with his tireless self-discipline and arduous experimentation in his effort to perfect literary techniques capable of expressing all that he wanted to say, are major sources of his artistic power.

KENNETH B. MURDOCK.

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THE TURN OF THE SCREW

THE story has held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to note it as the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child. The case, I may mention, was that of an apparition in just such an old house as had gathered us for the occasion—an appearance, of a dreadful kind, to a little boy sleeping in the room with his mother and waking her up in the terror of it; waking her not to dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again, but to encounter also herself, before she had succeeded in doing so, the same sight that had shocked him. It was this observation that drew from Douglas—not immediately, but later in the evening—a reply that had the interesting consequence to which I call attention. Someone else told a story not particularly effective, which I saw he was not following. This I took for a sign that he had himself something to produce and that we should only have to wait. We waited in fact till two nights later; but that same evening, before we scattered, he brought out what was in his mind.

'I quite agree—in regard to Griffin's ghost, or whatever it was—that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it 's not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have been

concerned with a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to *two* children——?'

'We say, of course,' somebody exclaimed, 'that two children give two turns! Also that we want to hear about them.'

I can see Douglas there before the fire, to which he had got up to present his back, looking down at this converser with his hands in his pockets. 'Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It 's quite too horrible.' This was naturally declared by several voices to give the thing the utmost price, and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: 'It 's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it.'

'For sheer terror?' I remember asking.

He seemed to say it wasn't so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. 'For dreadful—dreadfulness!'

'Oh, how delicious!' cried one of the women.

He took no notice of her; he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of. 'For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain.'

'Well, then,' I said, 'just sit right down and begin.'

He turned round to the fire, gave a kick to a log, watched it an instant. Then as he faced us again: 'I can't begin. I shall have to send to town.' There was a unanimous groan at this, and much reproach; after which, in his preoccupied way, he explained. 'The story 's written. It 's in a locked drawer—it has not been out for years. I could

write to my man and enclose the key; he could send down the packet as he finds it.' It was to me in particular that he appeared to propound this —appeared almost to appeal for aid not to hesitate. He had broken a thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter; had had his reasons for a long silence. The others resented postponement, but it was just his scruples that charmed me. I adjured him to write by the first post and to agree with us for an early hearing; then I asked him if the experience in question had been his own. To this his answer was prompt. 'Oh, thank God, no!'

'And is the record yours? You took the thing down?'

'Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*' —he tapped his heart. 'I 've never lost it.'

'Then your manuscript——?'

'Is in old faded ink and in the most beautiful hand.' He hung fire again. 'A woman's. She has been dead these twenty years. She sent me the pages in question before she died.' They were all listening now, and of course there was somebody to be arch, or at any rate to draw the inference. But if he put the inference by without a smile it was also without irritation. 'She was a most charming person, but she was ten years older than I. She was my sister's governess,' he quietly said. 'She was the most agreeable woman I 've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever. It was long ago, and this episode was long before. I was at Trinity, and I found her at home on my coming down the second summer. I was much there that year—it was a beautiful one; and we had, in her off-hours, some strolls and talks