

COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH
AND STUDY GUIDE

BLOOM'S
M A J O R
SHORT
STORY
W R I T E R S

Henry

James

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HAROLD BLOOM

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User's Guide

This volume is designed to present biographical, critical, and bibliographical information on the author's best-known or most important short stories. Following Harold Bloom's editor's note and introduction is a detailed biography of the author, discussing major life events and important literary accomplishments. A plot summary of each short story follows, tracing significant themes, patterns, and motifs in the work, and an annotated list of characters supplies brief information on the main characters in each story.

A selection of critical extracts, derived from previously published material from leading critics, analyzes aspects of each short story. The extracts consist of statements from the author, if available, early reviews of the work, and later evaluations up to the present. A bibliography of the author's writings (including a complete list of all books written, cowritten, edited, and translated), a list of additional books and articles on the author and the work, and an index of themes and ideas in the author's writings conclude the volume.



Harold Bloom is Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University and Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Professor of English at the New York University Graduate School. He is the author of over 20 books, including *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963), *Yeats* (1970), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *Agon: Toward a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), *The American Religion* (1992), *The Western Canon* (1994), and *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (1996). *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sets forth Professor Bloom's provocative theory of the literary relationships between the great writers and their predecessors. His most recent books include *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, a 1998 National Book Award finalist, and *How to Read and Why*, which was published in 2000.

Professor Bloom earned his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1955 and has served on the Yale faculty since then. He is a 1985 MacArthur Foundation Award recipient, served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in 1987–88, and has received honorary degrees from the universities of Rome and Bologna. In 1999, Professor Bloom received the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Criticism.

Currently, Harold Bloom is the editor of numerous Chelsea House volumes of literary criticism, including the series BLOOM'S NOTES, BLOOM'S MAJOR DRAMATISTS, BLOOM'S MAJOR NOVELISTS, MAJOR LITERARY CHARACTERS, MODERN CRITICAL VIEWS, MODERN CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS, and WOMEN WRITERS OF ENGLISH AND THEIR WORKS.

Editor's Note

My Introduction reflects on Henry James's status as the major American writer of prose fiction and examines Spencer Brydon, protagonist of the fine short story "The Jolly Corner."

As there are some 24 Critical Views excerpted here, I will confine my comments to a few I find most illuminating. The eminent critic Harold C. Goddard provides a pre-Freudian reading of "The Turn of the Screw," while Robert Weisbuch probes James's conception of evil in that well-known story.

On "The Beast in the Jungle," Allen Tate discusses James's success with the short-story form, and Ruth Bernard Yeazell explains the metaphor of the beast.

Charles R. Smith provides an interpretation of "The Lesson of the Master," while Philip Horne uses the story to outline Henry James's goal of literary perfection.

Potentiality in "The Jolly Corner" is discussed by Millicent Bell.

The character of Daisy Miller is examined in essays on the story of that name by both William Dean Howells and Kenneth Graham.

Introduction

HAROLD BLOOM

The ghostly tales of Henry James enjoy such a masterful critique in the author's prefaces to the New York Edition that we do well to follow in the master's wake. "The Jolly Corner" is my own favorite among James's ghostly forays, where he sought "the strange and the sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy." And yet James manifested a certain reticence on "The Jolly Corner," as he expresses:

I was moved to adopt as my motive an analysis of one of the conceivably rarest and intensest grounds for an "unnatural" anxiety, a *malaise* so incongruous and discordant, in the given prosaic prosperous conditions, as almost to be compromising. Spencer Brydon's adventure however is one of those finished fantasies that. . . speak best to the critical sense for themselves—

"Almost to be compromising" is, for Henry James, a rather strong phrase, and implies here that Spencer Brydon's adventure could as easily be Henry James's.

Henry James is certainly the major American writer of prose fiction, outshining his precursor Hawthorne, and his antithesis, Faulkner. Perhaps only Emerson and Walt Whitman (to both of whom James condescended) should be regarded as more central to the American literary achievement than was Henry James. His "Jolly Corner" is a classic American ghost story, aesthetically superior to the more notorious "The Turn of the Screw," and also to Poe's "William Wilson," which is also a tale of the *doppelgänger*, the sinister double or *alter ego*.

What Spencer Brydon *sees* truly is compromising for Henry James, the grandson of the founder of the family fortune, since Brydon beholds the commercial alternative to himself. Henry James Sr. had lived as an Emersonian/Swedenborgian visionary, while William James became the major American philosopher-psychologist, and Henry James Jr. the major American novelist. James suffered from a peculiarly American guilt at having failed to make his own fortune, and he finds his surrogate in the equivocal aesthete Spencer Brydon.

What *can* happen in a good ghost story? Stephen King, the Edgar Allen Poe of our cultural decline, crowds his ghost-novels with grisly events, but then King belongs to our visually obsessed age, where everything is seen on a screen, including King's latest offering. Nothing *happens* in "The Jolly Corner" except that Spencer Brydon confronts his own image, and sees instantly the plutocrat he has failed to become. All of us have failed to become much that we desired, or thought we desired.

It is a curious irony that Henry James, who never married and apparently never wanted to, consigns Brydon to a likely marriage with the lady who has seen him through his ordeal. Whether this is to be reward or punishment is left unanswered by the story:

Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there to measure himself with his power to dismay. This only could it be—this only till he recognized, with his advance, that what made the face dim was the pair of raised hands that covered it and in which, so far from being offered in defiance, it was buried as for dark deprecation. So Brydon, before him, took him in; with every fact of him now, in the higher light, hard and acute—his planted stillness, his vivid truth, his grizzled bent head and white masking hands, his queer actuality of evening-dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk lappet and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe. No portrait by a great modern master could have presented him with more intensity, thrust him out of his frame with more art, as if there had been "treatment," of the consummate sort, in his every shade and salience. The revulsion, for our friend, had become, before he knew it, immense—this drop, in the act of apprehension, to the sense of his adversary's inscrutable manoeuvre. That meaning at least, while he gaped, it offered him; for he could but gape at his other self in this other anguish, gape as a proof that he, standing there for the achieved, the enjoyed, the triumphant life, couldn't be faced in his triumph. Wasn't the proof in the splendid covering hands, strong and completely spread?— so spread and so intentional that, in spite of a special verity that surpasses every other, the fact that one of these hands had lost two fingers, which were reduced to stumps, as if accidentally shot away, the face was effectually guarded and saved.

The *other* Spencer Brydon, one hand mutilated, perhaps symbolizes less the un-lived life than unattained power, more over others than over the self. James, a great dramatist of the self in fiction, failed always in his attempts at stage drama. There may be a link between the ghostly splendor of "The Jolly Corner" and the power Henry James never achieved over a theatrical audience. ❀

Biography of Henry James

Henry James was born in New York City on April 15, 1843, the brother of William James, who would be a notable philosopher-scientist. The James family was wealthy and socially prominent, and the father, Henry James Sr., was interested in both theology and philosophy, as well as the cultural life of his own city. He exposed his sons to all the cultural advantages New York, New England, and even Europe had to offer. Henry was privately tutored in New York, and he received special schooling abroad from the time he was 12 until he was 17; during these years his family lived in London, Switzerland, France, and Germany. His father was drawn to any location where he could find intense intellectual activity.

Henry studied painting briefly, but his studies were interrupted by an accident that injured his spine when he was 18. The injury also, however, kept him from being drafted into service during the Civil War. At 19 he was admitted to Harvard Law School, and two years later he began writing and earned his way into the most prestigious literary magazines.

One of his short stories, “A Passionate Pilgrim,” which appeared in *Atlantic*, described the cultural attraction and repulsion between England and America, an attraction and repulsion that was just as strong in Henry James’s own mind. He continued to travel abroad often, and the “idea” of Europe is a central part of his fiction. He saw America as being illuminated by her European past. In his writing he returned again and again to what he called the “possibility of contrast in the human lot . . . encountered as we turn back and forth between the distinctively American and the distinctively European outlook.”

In 1875, James published his first collection of short stories, *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales*. The same year the *Atlantic* serialized his first important novel, *Roderick Hudson*. In this novel, a talented young American sculptor goes to Florence to study, where he is ultimately destroyed by the artificial materialism of the international society he finds there.

These works established James's first success and launched the early period of his career. During this first period, he continued to examine the American abroad, comparing the innocence and freedom of the New World with the experience and conventions of the Old World. He also wrote *The American*, *The Europeans*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *Daisy Miller* during these years. All of these works explore the contrasting social values of America and Europe.

In James's second period, the middle years of his career, he wrote "social" novels, turning from the international theme to complex social issues in both Europe and New England. He wrote *The Princess Casanoviana* and *The Bostonians* during this phase, but these books were never as popular as his other works. As a result, his income dropped considerably, and he turned to writing plays for the stage.

For the last 15 years of his career, however, James turned his efforts back to fiction. His style became increasingly complex, filled with ambiguities and psychological symbolism. His characters were more intense (and also more abnormal), and the social situations in which they moved were more and more full of nuance and obscure significance. The short novels he produced during this period—*The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl*, *What Maisie Knew*, and *The Turn of the Screw*, among others—are considered to be the peak of James's literary achievement.

James believed that prose, like poetry, could be invested with symbolic meaning. He was one of the first authors to use psychological devices to intensify a story's influence over the reader. By putting the reader "inside the narrator's head," he made the reader a part of the story's psychological process. He also influenced the shape that the novel would take in the years to come. Authors like D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Willa Cather, and Virginia Woolf would use his techniques and carry them still farther.

From the time James was 24 until his death, he lived mostly in England. When World War I began, he became impatient with America's unwillingness to become involved in the war, and in 1915 he became a British citizen.

Although Henry James was an accomplished author, successful in his own right, he lived most of his life in his brother's shadow. He always saw William as being better than himself; "I was always his absolute younger and smaller," he wrote, "hanging under the blest sense of his protection and authority." His brother's death was emotionally devastating, and yet William's death enabled Henry for the first time to possess the knowledge of his own authority and achievement. He was frequently referred to as "the Master" in literary circles, an acknowledgement of his genius.

In 1915, in London, Henry James suffered two strokes. He died shortly after of pneumonia. Throughout his life he had struggled with the contrast between innocence and evil. If he reached no definite answers, before his death he came to believe that life is a process of *seeing*; through true awareness we attain understanding. ☼

Plot Summary of “The Turn of the Screw”

In 1897, after five years of writing almost exclusively plays, none of which were popular successes, Henry James was invited by *Collier's Weekly* magazine to write a twelve-part ghost story for serialization. He was happy to receive the commission, since his failed experiments with theater had been motivated specifically by financial woes. The product of this assignment was “The Turn of the Screw.” It would eventually become one of James’s most contentiously debated pieces of fiction, though James publicly declared in the 1908 preface to the story that it was nothing more than a “fairy-tale, pure and simple.” The literary establishment has largely ignored this assertion, however, because the story is so layered with ambiguity, rife with conspicuous omissions, and set in a curious structure.

The narrator of the story opens in eager anticipation of hearing a ghost story, which will be read presently, by a man named Douglas. It is Christmas Eve, a fire is burning, and the narrator is one of a hopeful audience, waiting to be scared senseless. Douglas presents a ghost story, which he claims to be a piece of history rather than fantasy. He proceeds to read from the hand-written journal of a woman to whom all the incidents happened. It is not long before the woman’s narrative winds itself around us, the readers, and we are allowed to forget completely that the story is a manuscript being read aloud. By the time the story ends, both Douglas and the original narrator have disappeared altogether from the consciousness of the reader, replaced totally by the woman who relates her chilling tale. We remember the first two layers of narration vaguely, if we remember them at all.

The woman who transcribed the terrible events begins her story when she takes a position as a governess on a sprawling country estate outside of London, called Bly. Her principal responsibility, a little girl named Flora, was orphaned some years prior, along with her brother Miles who is away at school. At the time of their parents’ deaths, they became the legal charges of their uncle, an English gentleman. The uncle has left Bly completely to the care of the servants, however, living full-time in his London residence, and when he hires the new governess, one of the conditions of employment is that she never contact him for any reason.

The new governess is a replacement for a previous one, Miss Jessel, though the new one does not find this out for some time. Miss Jessel had left her position and then subsequently died of some obscure ill, not long after the valet at Bly, Peter Quint, had himself died by slipping and falling on some ice while drunk. Before their deaths, Quint and Miss Jessel had become intimate and had encircled little Miles and Flora in their lives. But Quint and Miss Jessel were, according to the domestic staff at Bly, a depraved pair. The children were exposed to any amount of evil the reader may choose to imagine, since the exact nature of their depravity is always foggy.

When the new governess arrives, she is greeted by lovely little Flora and Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, who tends Flora temporarily. Only days after the governess's arrival, Miles returns to Bly from boarding school with a note of expulsion. The reason for the dismissal is not included and the governess is left to imagine the worst.

Miles and Flora turn out to be an angelic pair, however, and the governess is continually astonished by their contented and precocious sweetness. The tremendous pleasure she takes in the children is soon clouded, however, as she begins to see apparitions—a man with red hair and a woman in black. The housekeeper informs her that Quint and Miss Jessel fit these descriptions, and the governess concludes that they have returned to possess the souls of the innocent children.

The governess becomes obsessed with protecting the children from Quint and Miss Jessel. Everything begins to fall under suspicion, including the very fact that the children have so few problems. She finds them to be too happy, and strangely satisfied to continue just as they are. She also notices that they never mention the names of Quint or Miss Jessel. The governess tries to keep them within her view at all times and to shield them from the elusive poisons floating about Bly.

Her effort becomes more and more desperate, and the ghostly visitations more frequent, until finally she finds a way to rid both children of the demons. Unfortunately, in the process, Flora falls into a feverish delirium and Miles loses his life completely.

The precise sequence of revelations and the private logic the governess attaches to this sequence are both vital to any understanding of the story. The governess feels herself to have championed the good and saved her charges from demonic

possession. But little Miles is dead, and we, the readers, cannot know exactly what killed him. "We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped," the story concludes. What made it stop?

By the end of the book, the governess's presentation of the events does not satisfy us any longer. In subtle ways, she has proved herself to be less than a completely reliable narrator. She, for example, is the only person at Bly to have seen the ghosts. Miss Grose believes her but does not see them herself.

There are dozens of interpretations of "The Turn of the Screw," but among the most popular and enduring is the theory that the governess is hysterical, or worse, that she has fantasized the whole situation against which she claims to battle. According to this interpretation, the governess, an unworldly country parson's daughter, is given so little support, so much responsibility and so many unexplained circumstances, that she finds herself perched continually on the edge of the discovery of some secret horror—which is to say, she is on the edge of insanity.

Another dimension to her alleged madness is her infatuated love for her employer. She barely has time to note it in her journal, but it is obvious that she is smitten. He exists, however, in a social sphere that he can never leave and she can never enter. Her desire to see him, in spite of his remoteness, is not insignificant. Add to this her insomnia and her unquestioning confidant, Mrs. Grose, and the combination is perfect to make an unbalanced young woman imagine ghosts and daydream about evil.

The story certainly offers some support for this interpretation, but this perspective does not eliminate all inconsistencies. We are still faced with numerous questions, amongst them the question of Douglas, the reader of the governess's story, who was himself once the charge of the governess in an entirely different setting. If she *was* insane at Bly, why would she have gone on to be the well-loved governess of Douglas and his sister? And how would the governess have been able to give such an accurate description of Quint, whom she had never seen? All variety of explanations have been provided by scholars and critics, but none are definitive.

The Freudian reading stresses the governess's repressed sexual desires as the source of her hysteria, even though James could have

known very little about Freud at the time he wrote this piece. Most recently, critics have shied away from the “either/or” approach and placed supreme value on the story’s ambiguity itself.

James would probably have been astonished at the volume of literary fervor generated by a work he considered insignificant. His own remark referring to it as a mere fairy-tale is, understandably, disregarded—the psychological complexity of the governess seems too great, whichever way she is interpreted. It cannot be denied, however, that James was writing a ghost story for popular consumption in a weekly magazine. Of all his numerous ghost stories, he wanted this one to keep his audience up at night. The late nineteenth-century reader, lacking the excess of high-voltage stimulation to which the modern reader is accustomed, did, in fact, find the story petrifying. As a tale of horror, “The Turn of the Screw” was a huge hit. The notorious obscurities and liberal blank spots were the tools of a master craftsman. James knew that the most terrifying ghosts he could summon were those we, the readers, create ourselves in the dark recesses of our own minds. ❀

List of Characters in “The Turn of the Screw”

The Narrator must be identified even though he recedes completely before chapter one. He opens the story with childish excitement about hearing a ghost story.

Douglas reads the hand-written manuscript that he contends is a true account and not a story at all. The manuscript was written by a lovely woman he had known many years previous but who was now dead. The woman had been a governess to his sister after the events of the story. Douglas also disappears before chapter one.

The governess becomes the first-person narrator as chapter one opens. She is a high-strung young woman from the English countryside, who has answered an advertisement placed by a London gentleman concerning his niece and nephew. He offers her the position which is to be carried out at his country estate, Bly. There, she takes charge of little Miles and Flora and begins to sense evil and see apparitions.

The London bachelor is the rich uncle of Miles and Flora who sends the governess to her position with the explicit instructions that she is never to bother him about anything, ever. The governess never hears from him again.

Mrs. Grose is the head housekeeper at Bly, and the temporary caregiver for the children. She quickly becomes a sympathetic confidant to the governess.

Flora is the angelic little girl for whom the governess is originally commissioned to care.

Miles is Flora's brother who was away at boarding school until a few days after the governess's arrival. Miles is sent home with an expulsion notice but with no indication as to the reason.

Peter Quint is the former valet at Bly who died when he slipped, intoxicated, into some ice. The governess believes she sees his ghost first.

Miss Jessel is the former governess at Bly. She had been very intimate with Peter Quint while she was there, but had left and then died of some illness. This is the second ghost the governess sees. ❀

Critical Views on “The Turn of the Screw”

LEON EDEL ON POINT OF VIEW

[In this extract taken from his book *The Psychological Novel: 1900–1950* Edel discusses the influence of point of view on “The Turn of the Screw.”]

The governess’s imagination, we see, discovers “depths” within herself. Fantasy seems to be reality for her. Anything and everything can and does happen, in her mind.

The attentive reader, when he is reading the story critically, can only observe that we are always in the realm of the supposititious. Not once in the entire story, do the children see anything strange or frightening. It is the governess’s theory that they see as much as she does, and that they communicate with the dead. But it is the governess who does all the seeing and all the supposing. “My values are positively all blanks save only so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness,” James explained in his Preface. But we have one significant clue to the author’s “blanks.” In his revision of the story for the New York Edition he altered his text again and again to put the story into the realm of the governess’s feelings. Where he had her say originally “I saw” or “I believed” he often substituted “I felt.”

We have here thus in reality two stories, and a method that foreshadows the problems of the stream-of-consciousness writer. One is the area of fact, the other the area of fancy. There is the witness, in this case the governess and her seemingly circumstantial story, and there is the mind itself, the contents of which are given to the reader. The reader must establish for himself the credibility of the witness; he must decide between what the governess *supposed* and what she claims she saw. Read in this fashion, “The Turn of the Screw” becomes an absorbing study of a troubled young woman, with little knowledge or understanding of children, called upon to assume serious responsibilities for the first time in her life. She finds support for her own lack of assurance by telling herself she is courageous and “wonderful.” Yet in reality and by her own admission, she is filled with endless fears: “I don’t know what I *don’t* see—what I *don’t* fear!”