

Entertaining dread:  
the contrived  
aesthetic experience  
of fear in henry  
james' "t...



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The Turn of the Screw has been read by some analysts as a straightforward ghost story and by others as a psychologically accurate – whether pre-or post-Freudian — portrait of mental illness or repression breaking out.

However enjoyable it is to consider Henry James' short story from any of these or similar points of view, it strikes me as particularly interesting to look at it as a kind of metafiction, a story about storytelling that explores the power of language to create mood or to evoke emotional or psychological responses through the power of suggestion.

In some ways this story and its opening frame are reminiscent of the almost archetypal scenario of children sitting in the dark telling spooky stories. Also, it calls to mind a particular scene in the Wonderworks film adaptation of Lucy Maude Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables. In that scene, the characters Anne Shirley and Diana Berry are alone together in a gloomy wood, and they start reciting to one another all the chilling ghost tales they can recall and talking about how “deliciously frightened” they are. In the novel, Anne confesses to her aunt that “Diana and I just imagined the wood was haunted. All the places around here are so-so-COMMONPLACE. We just got this up for our own amusement. We began it in April. A haunted wood is so very romantic.... Oh, we have imagined the most harrowing things” (Montgomery 229). Similarly, Henry James demonstrates in his Turn of the Screw a keen understanding of the delight that typically imaginative people derive from being scared and, indeed, in scaring themselves.

James' story is a masterful sort of meta-chiller that works on the imagination of the reader while allowing events recounted by characters within the story to work on the imaginations of other characters, to effects at times obvious

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and at other times ambiguous. Part of the ambiguity surrounding the story involves whether the governess who narrates her own tale has effectively scared herself with phantasms and other observations that originate in her own mind. Her indirect reference to certain then-contemporary works of Victorian horror or gothic suspense (*The Mystery of Udolpho*, *Jane Eyre*) may be a hint from the author about her or about the story in which she finds herself. “ Was there a ‘ secret’ at Bly—a mystery of *Udolpho* or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (James 312). Although the interpretation of the story and the question of its realism are debatable, it seems obvious that James intended, while telling a chilling tale, also to explore the complicity of the imaginative audience member in creating the effect - the pleasurable dread or terror - such tales may convey.

Whether or not these kinds of stories are true is less important than the effectiveness of the storytelling style, whether the narrative elicits the desired response in hearers or readers. Of course, James occasionally uses some fairly heavy-handed means to evoke the edgy mood in *The Turn of the Screw*, even beginning his story with a discussion about what makes a tale the kind of story that can hold listeners “ sufficiently breathless” (James 291), what gives it each successive “ turn of the screw” (James 292). Also, the author has his characters offer their own commentaries on the emotional impact of their stories - Douglas refers dramatically to the “ dreadfulness” of the account he is leading up to telling, even stating that it is “ beyond everything. Nothing that I know touches it,” with respect to its “ uncanny ugliness and horror and pain” (ibid).

This is quite a dramatic setup for a story that has yet to be revealed. Such a characterization creates anticipation, primes the reader for a strong response and demands a payoff. It is a bold move on the part of James, since to fail to provide a sufficient emotional payoff could leave the author open to accusations of overstatement or melodramatic superfluity. And speaking of the superfluous, throughout the story there is continual repetition of emotionally evocative pejoratives like dread, horror, queer, insane, corrupt, et cetera, as well as frequent use of exclamation points and italics. The text itself seems emotionally manipulative, bent on an effect, and if the reader is unwilling or unable to go where the text is apparently leading, the effect would certainly be, from an author's point of view, unfortunate, and the story would likely fail to satisfy.

James leaves the reader with little reason to doubt that the payoff he has set up is coming. However, one of the author's principle means of manipulation in *Turn of the Screw* is delayed gratification. There is much hesitation, holding back of details after the insinuation of what is to come, inviting the listeners within the story as well as readers of the story to let their imaginations flow into the gaps. Again, the author is not at all subtle about it; he blatantly points to the technique early on (James 297), in an exchange between Douglas, his secondary-in the ordinal sense-narrator, and one of his listeners.

So far had Douglas presented his picture when someone put a question. "And what did the former governess die of? – of so much respectability?"

Our friend's answer was prompt. "That will come out. I don't anticipate."

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“ Excuse me – I thought that was just what you are doing.”

Further down the same page, after giving out a few more thin details, Douglas makes an insinuation, a reference to some unforeseen danger in the governess’s story, of which she was unaware at the outset but of which “ she did learn. You shall hear tomorrow what she learned.” Again Douglas gives out more sparse information and, as the primary, unnamed narrator states, “ with this, [he] made a pause that, for the benefit of the company, moved [him] to throw in” his own titillating guess about what was still to come in the narrative. This prompts Douglas to get up, turn his back on his audience, and stir the fire before going further with his tale – that is, his setup of the governess’s tale.

While I count three main narratives in *Turn of the Screw*, nested like Babushka dolls, there are technically several more stories within stories in this complex narrative, and even more storytellers mentioned than there are narratives given, rather than summarized or referenced. Notably Douglas begins his allusion to the unnamed governess’s story after at least two other narrators, Griffin and another, have told their own ghost tales to the company, to varying effect. Within Douglas’ story, there is the governess’s tale, in which she speaks of what she learns from Mrs. Grose and, even before that, of being told by her master what he judged to be his own pertinent history: “ He told her frankly all his difficulty – that for several applicants the conditions had been prohibitive. They were, somehow, simply afraid. It sounded dull – it sounded strange; and all the more so because of his main condition” (James 297). Meanwhile, Miles, the governess’s male charge, has a number of opportunities in dialogue to tell his story, carefully

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clipped as it is by his wariness and clouded by the impressions and interpretations of the governess who transcribes it.

All this underscores the likelihood that James is telling a story about storytelling, about the impact of the interplay between text and allusion, reference and repetition, insinuation and inference, hesitation and anticipation, mood and manipulation. With an audience that is willing to be guided — or capable of being mesmerized — and an author who is adept at it, as James is, a story can create impressions, misdirect or focus attention, and evoke particular and highly entertaining effects, dreadful or otherwise. In the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, the author has given his short story just enough masterfully contrived “turns” to encourage his readers, especially those with the right sort of susceptibility to his techniques, to give an added twist or two to a tale already fraught with delightfully chilling torque.

#### Works Cited:

James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Novels*. Signet Classic, New York: 1962.

Montgomery, Lucy Maude. *Anne of Green Gables*. Bantam, New York: 1981.