On the last scene of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*

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What happens in the last scene of ***The Turn of the Screw***?

Any answer to this question depends on one's interpretation of what is arguably this famous story's most notorious feature: its ambiguity.

Its ambiguity consists in the fact that it is possible to read the story in at least two quite different ways: It can be read as a ghost story, or as a study of suggestion and hallucination.

One's choice between these two interpretations depends on one's answer to the question: Does the text of the story itself, by virtue of its discernible assumptions, explicit or implicit, require the reader to accept, in order to make sense of it, the existence of ghosts, or not?

In trying to decide whether the reader is expected to accept belief in ghosts, or not, or at least to suspend disbelief in them, in order to make sense of this story, some critics have looked to its author for guidance. They have consulted Henry James's ***Preface*** to ***The Turn of the Screw,*** although it was written considerably later than the story itself, and also at entries in his more nearly contemporary ***Notebooks,*** and passages in his correspondence.[1] Henry James, however, is not himself present, or alluded to as such, by name or otherwise, within the story's text. Thus,

[1] Among others, Dorothea Krook, ***The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James,*** 1967, p. 107–109.

strictly speaking, no statement made by him regarding his intentions concerning the story, can be said to form part of its message or meaning.

It is a fundamental premise of the present analysis that the text of the story itself has primacy, in determining its meaning, over any extratextual statements made about it by its author. Indeed, such extratextual statements are, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the meaning and message of the story itself, though they may well be relevant to other sorts of questions about it, such as those concerning the author's manner of conceiving and fashioning it. These sorts of questions, however, pertain more to the realms of biography or psychology, than to that of literary criticism.

It is necessary, for the purposes of literary criticism, to distinguish between Henry James, as author of the story, and the authorial voice of its primary narrator, the person identified in its text only as "I". This primary narrator may or may not stand for Henry James, but any statements made by him, within the text itself, with regard to the reality of ghosts, may and indeed must be considered as part of the story's message or meaning. This narrator should, in turn, be distinguished from the presumed author of the manuscript which forms the central text of ***The Turn of the Screw***: a certain woman who once occupied the position of governess in an English country house called Bly. Her views on this matter are also obviously relevant.

That manuscript is read aloud to the primary narrator, among other persons, by its present owner, a man who when young knew the governess in question, and to whom she left it. This man, whose views on the existence of ghosts may also be relevant, is thus the secondary narrator. The governess herself is therefore, in terms of the narrative framework of the story, the tertiary narrator, although her manuscript of course presumably antedates both the occasion of its being read aloud by the secondary narrator, and the account of that occasion given by the primary narrator.

The primary narrator's account of that occasion, a country house party somewhere in England, provides the outer frame for the story told by the governess's manuscript. The primary narrator is thus the character, within the story, who most directly mediates it to the reader. His discernible assumptions and expectations, with regard to the question of the existence or inexistence of ghosts, are therefore far more relevant to determining the message or meaning actually communicated by the text, than any of Henry James's statements in this regard. They are not, however, decisive, at least not if taken on their own.

The secondary narrator's views on the matter in question may also be relevant because he is the only character within the story who knew the governess in question, and is thus in a position to offer an assessment of her soundness of mind, as well as of her character and motivations.

The most decisive element, however, in considering this matter, is the text of the governess's manuscript itself. If, taken on its own, this manuscript should clearly indicate the need to choose one way or another, with respect to belief or disbelief in ghosts, in order for its story to make sense, then its stated view on this matter must be taken into account, and considered as preponderant. But since neither belief nor disbelief in ghosts is universally accepted, now, or at the time of the story's publication, any such indicated choice must also be compared with any indication of preference in this regard, offered by the primary and secondary narrators.

If the primary and/or secondary narrator may be said to expect the reader to accept that ghosts do exist, and if the text of the story written by the governess makes sense in the light of that belief, then ***The Turn of the Screw*** may be read as a ghost story.

If, on the other hand, neither the primary nor the secondary narrator seems to expect the reader to accept belief in ghosts, and the governess's text makes sense on this assumption, then the story may be read as a

study of suggestion and hallucination.

If there should turn out to be a contradiction, either way, between the discernible assumptions in the governess's text, and its presentation by either of the narrators, or, conversely, any contradiction between these narrators, with respect to this question, then one would have to examine that contradiction in detail, to see how to proceed further with one's analysis.

In fact, as the present analysis reveals, there is no such contradiction. Rather, the story makes sense both ways, and seems to have been quite deliberately written in such a way as to remain ambiguous throughout, precisely in this respect.

There was critical controversy about this story even from the time of its original publication, centring on its ambiguity, though not necessarily regarding this specific point.[2] This controversy became even more lively when a psychoanalytical interpretation was offered that assumed disbelief in ghosts on the part of the author and his intended audience, and explained their presence in the story entirely as the result of the author's portrayal of the effects of suggestion and hallucination on its 'vessel of consciousness,' the very same governess who is the presumed author of the central text of ***The Turn of the Screw***, and who was, according to her manuscript, in charge of two young children, living alone with them and servants in an English country house called Bly.[3]

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[2] But rather that of its veiled suggestion of a possibly sexual, or homosexual, frame of reference. An early critic, William Lyon Phelps, remarked that "had he [James] spoken plainly the book might have been barred the mails." (Quoted by Krook, op. cit., p. 113, quoting Oscar Cargill, in ***Henry James as Freudian Pioneer,*** *Chicago Review,* x, Summer 1956, quoting the original.)

[3] Edmund Wilson, ***The Ambiguity of Henry James,*** 1938, reprinted in ***The Triple Thinkers,*** 1952.

Subsequently, several essays have been written to rebut[4] or support[5] this and related views: some emphasizing the moral,[6] some the theological,[7] others the psychical[8] aspects of the story; some assuming belief in ghosts (or at least suspension of disbelief in them) as a requisite for its proper understanding,[9] others assuming the opposite;[10] some claiming that the main focus of the story's interest lies in the relationship between the children and the ghosts,[11] others finding this focus in the governess herself.[12] Some have even denied that ambiguity is either present, or important, in this text.[13]

In this analysis, which concentrates on its final scene, several of those views will be discussed, not however in relation to the specific forms or contexts in which they are expressed by the critics cited above, or by others, but rather in terms of the text of the story itself. It is possible to demonstrate, purely on the basis of analysis of the text alone, that the story is truly and deliberately ambiguous throughout. It is not necessary, for the purposes of such demonstration, to point out, for each passage examined, the agreement or disagreement of the present analysis with the views of previous critics regarding that passage. Suffice it to say, in tribute to all previous scholarship concerning ***The Turn of the Screw***, that every word of its text has been thoroughly examined by one or other of the critics cited above, and that every passage in it has been interpreted by

[4] R. B. Heilman, ***The Freudian Reading of 'The Turn of the Screw'*** in *Modern Language Notes,* Vol. LXII, Nov. 1947

[5] H. C. Goddard, ***A Pre-Freudian Reading of 'The Turn of the Screw',*** in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* xii, 1, (June 1957), pp. 3–36.

[6] Krook.

[7] R. B. Heilman, ***'The Turn of the Screw' as Poem,*** 1948.

[8] Francis X. Roellinger, ***Psychical Research and 'The Turn of the Screw'*** in *American Literature,* xx, 1949, pp. 401–12.

[9] Krook; Heilman.

[10] Goddard.

[11] Philip Rahv, Introduction to ***The Turn of the Screw*** in ***The Great Short Novels of Henry James,*** ed. Rahv, (Dial Press, 1944).

[12] Goddard.

[13] Glen Reed, ***Another Turn on James's Turn of the Screw.***

one or other of them one way or another.

None, however, has offered precisely the reading proposed here: one that does not seek to choose between one view and another, with regard to the question of whether belief in the existence of ghosts is necessary, or not, to a proper understanding of the story; one, rather, that proposes that its author provided, quite deliberately and artfully, for the reader legitimately to be able to hold either view, and moreover, that this is the main point of the story. Rather than proposing, as do some of the critics who do accept the existence of this story's ambiguity, that it exists in the service of some ulterior, perhaps greater purpose, whether moral, theological, or psychoanalytical, the present analysis concludes that the purpose of its presence, indeed its omnipresence, in the story, is essentially artistic: in other words, that ***The Turn of the Screw*** is principally designed to delight one's aesthetic sensibility, by virtue of its ambiguity, precisely as regards this very question.

For it is possible at every point of the story to argue, from the evidence of the text of her manuscript alone, that the governess does see ghosts, and that the story is about her struggle to save the already partially corrupted children's souls from those ghosts' evil influence.

But it is equally possible to argue, from her own text, that the governess, possibly as the result of neurotic suggestion, is hallucinating when she thinks she sees ghosts, that the children are as innocent as they seem, and that if there is indeed any spirit of evil present, it is inside the governess.

She herself glimpses this possibility when she wonders, in the final scene, in reference to the little boy "...if he were innocent, what then on earth was I?"

Leaving for later, therefore, discussion of the primary and secondary nar-

rators' discernible assumptions and expectations as to how the reader should interpret the story told by the governess, let us first focus on her story itself, as told in her own words, to see if it makes sense in terms of one or another, or both, of its possible readings.

Let us first assume that we are meant to accept the existence of ghosts as a major premise of the story.

In this case, we can assume that the governess really does see the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.

But even if this is so, there is still a major ambiguity:

Even if the ghosts exist, and the governess sees them, it is only possible, but by no means certain, that the children, Miles and Flora, also see them, and are influenced by them.

The reason it is not certain, is, first, that we have only the governess's word for it: since she is the author of the manuscript, we have no independent confirmation of her observation and interpretation of the children's behaviour, that leads her to believe that they see the ghosts, and are influenced by them.

Secondly, at least one of the children, Flora, explicitly denies seeing the ghost of Miss Jessel, and it is possible to read Miles's question "Where?" in the last scene, to mean that he does not see the ghost of Peter Quint.

Of course, if the ghosts are real, and the children do see them, Flora's denial and Miles's question are lies.

But does this necessarily prove that the children are under their influence, or that the ghosts themselves are evil?

After all, it is well known that children like to keep secrets from adults, without having to be told do so by anyone, so even if they lie, it does not prove the existence of an evil ghostly influence on the children.

Also, we have only Mrs. Grose's word, as well as the governess's impression of their appearance, that the ghosts - if they are ghosts - are the spirits of evil people.

Moreover, Mrs. Grose is obviously not a trustworthy witness, for at least two reasons:

First, she is herself a servant, and although she seems to be a good woman, she is not necessarily above feeling envy and resentment towards other servants or employees, such as Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, who have been in authority above her. Thus she may make them out to be worse than they really were.

Second, she is easily influenced by the governess: it is perfectly possible that when she appears to recognize the ghost of Peter Quint in the governess's description in Chapter V, she herself is the victim of suggestion: she may be telling the governess what she thinks the governess expects to hear. This possibility applies to all her statements about Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.

Therefore her untrustworthiness as a witness applies not only to her views on the question of the existence of the ghosts in the first place, but also to their identification with Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.

Her apparent agreement with the governess's view of the matter - an agreement that she seems to shed as soon as Flora denies seeing Miss Jessel, and as quickly reassumes when she is speaking the next morning to the governess - is, in sum, worthless, and does not constitute independent confirmation of anything at all.

Since Mrs. Grose is the only would-be provider of independent confirmation of the governess's views, in the governess's own manuscript, and since Mrs. Grose is clearly not a reliable witness, we must conclude that no such independent confirmation is provided by the text.

This brings us to the other way of reading the story: suppose that we are not meant to accept belief in ghosts as an underlying assumption of the story.

In this case we could very well conclude that the governess is mad, possibly also bad, and ultimately dangerous.

By this reading, the ghosts are mere hallucinations of her neurotic mind, the apparent confirmation of the ghosts' existence and evil character by Mrs. Grose is the result of suggestion practiced on her - probably unconsciously - by the governess, and both the feverish illness of Flora, and the death of Miles, are also the result of the effect on their impressionable young minds of the governess's hysteria.

What makes the governess go mad, see nonexistent ghosts, and develop the power to persuade the ignorant, derange the sane, and kill the innocent, all by the force of her suggestion?

The answer would seem to lie, by this interpretation, in an unacknowledged sexual passion, felt by the governess for her employer, the absent master of Bly, the handsome, irresponsible young uncle of the children, living his life of careless, and possibly immoral, pleasure in London.

The governess's puritanical self -repression - she is after all a parson's daughter - and her inability to admit to her feelings of love for the master, would, by this theory, lead her to seek neurotic satisfaction elsewhere.

By this theory, therefore, it is possible that she develops a possessive infatuation for little Miles, as a substitute for his uncle, and, being subconsciously aware of the impropriety of her feelings, she projects her intimation of evil onto the wholly imaginary apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, in a classic case of paranoid-schizoid delusion.

Of course with the uncanny intuition of the mad (at least as they are conventionally depicted in fiction), she may well have hit, even if only indirectly, working from slanted information supplied by the suggestible Mrs. Grose, on the truth of a great many secrets about Bly and its master and inhabitants, independently of whether the ghosts she sees are real or not (for she could both be mad, and see real ghosts):

For instance, her delusion - if it is a delusion - that Peter Quint and Miles had, and possibly continue to have, an improper - meaning homosexual - relationship, may well - since by this reading Miles substitutes for the master - reflect a possibility regarding the relationship between Peter Quint and the master of Bly - the gay young bachelor in London, who doesn't want to be bothered at all with the problem of children, nor with Bly, so much so that he makes a virtually total lack of communication on those subjects from her a condition of the governess's taking the job.

Could this be a sign of self-disgust and a desire to distance himself from the scene of past self-degradation in an improper relationship with a servant?

For if it is true that, as Mrs. Grose says, Peter Quint took liberties with everyone, including the master, even to the extent of wearing his clothes, we might then ask what kind of laxity on the master's part led him to indulge such license in a servant.

It also raises the possibility that the master may have had something to do with the violent death of Peter Quint, or even with that of Miss Jessel.

After all, according to traditional superstition, ghosts are often the revengeful souls of the victims of murder. What more natural than for Peter Quint to wish to corrupt and kill his murderer's nephew?

But all this, like every other spectre raised by the story, is mere speculation. It can as easily be disproved as proved by the text.

Now to turn to the final scene: What happens there?

At the beginning of the last chapter, the governess tells us she saw Peter Quint outside the window. In the course of the chapter he disappears, then reappears, then finally disappears again.

Whether he is real or not, the particular circumstances and significance of Peter Quint's two separate appearances at the window need to be explained.

Likewise, if Miles also sees Peter Quint, his dissimulation to the governess has to be explained, and if he doesn't see him, we have to ask why not, since the governess claims to do so herself, and that, in general, Miles can also.

Peter Quint's first appearance at the window in the final scene occurs just after the governess asks Miles if he took from the hall table the letter she had written to the master, asking to see him.

The governess believes that the ghost of Peter Quint has come to exert his evil influence, to prevent Miles from confessing the truth to her, and thus from starting on the path to forgiveness and redemption. She sees herself as struggling with Peter Quint for Miles's soul. She is particularly concerned, therefore, that Miles should not see the ghost at the window, and takes steps to prevent this from happening.

But if Peter Quint is the governess's delusion, his appearance at that moment could be explained as the projection of her evil self, for she senses that the moment has come for a confrontation with Miles, in which the future course of their relationship will be decided: either Miles will confess, repent, and be forgiven by her, in which case her love for him will be reciprocated, or he will not, in which case Peter Quint will take his soul.

Of course there is another ambiguity here, regarding the quality of the governess's love for Miles: her love is either basically pure and maternal, seeking nothing more than to save the child from an evil influence and set him on the path of moral righteousness, or it is basically erotic, a projection of her unacknowledged and unsatisfied infatuation with his uncle, in which case, paradoxically, her desire to save Miles's soul from the evil influence of Peter Quint could spring from the governess's own unconscious desire to possess Miles.

But even if her love is pure and maternal, it is not necessarily perfect, nor what is best for Miles. For in the governess's mind, Miles's salvation comes to equal his acceptance of her love, and this acceptance requires a previous act of contrition on his part.

This means that she has put herself in something like the position of the Christian saviour vis-a-vis mankind, in her relationship with Miles. Thus even if her love for Miles is maternal, rather than erotic, it contains an incipient element of spiritual pride, which may have important consequences for our interpretation of her role in the final scene.

That being as it may, let us continue with our analysis of the sequence of events:

As soon as Miles admits to taking the letter, thereby eliciting a moan of joy from the governess, the ghost seems bewildered, and turns his face away for a moment, though he soon stares defiantly at her again.

When Miles goes on to admit he opened the letter and read it - a grave sin in a moral climate where "gentlemen [did] not read each others' correspondence" - and shows not so much repentance, as disappointment that the letter contained no direct reference to him, the ghost at the window disappears.

The governess is now convinced she is winning, and indeed has won the battle for Miles's soul. If only he will tell the whole truth and repent, he can be forgiven and saved.

With inquisitorial zeal, she questions Miles, first about what he did with the letter - he burnt it - and then about what he did to be thrown out of school.

When, after much questioning, Miles makes it clear that what he did at school was not to steal - letters or anything else - but rather that he "said things" - things we may imagine to have been obscenities such as virtually all schoolboys say to other boys they "like" - and that he was unfortunate enough to be discovered doing so by a master, who had him thrown out, the governess insists, relentlessly, on knowing precisely: "What were these things?"

At this point, Peter Quint reappears.

If Peter Quint really exists, and he is indeed the spirit of evil, why, in response to what, does he reappear precisely at this point?

It could be that he comes back at the "moment of truth" for one last attempt, expecting help from Miles's probable embarrassment at saying those "things," to prevent Miles from making a full confession, and thus receiving full forgiveness and going on to full redemption.

But it is also possible, even if he really exists, and is the spirit of evil, that he reappears, not in response to Miles's potential for evil, but to that same potential in the governess.

For the governess's inquisitorial zeal, her conviction that it is through her power that Miles is to be saved, smacks of that spiritual pride whose existence we have already suspected in her love for him, and her insistence on knowing precisely "What were these things?" seems like sexual prurience.

Whatever the case may be, the governess now loses her composure completely. She becomes hysterical, and even while pretending to shield Miles from the vision at the window, she draws his attention to it, by her shrieking and the direction of her gaze.

Miles at first thinks the governess may be indicating that she sees Miss Jessel.

This probably means that Flora told him about the scene at the lake where the governess claimed to see her dead predecessor's ghost, and that he thinks she either sees it, or imagines it, now.

The governess denies this, but without mentioning any names, tells Miles the "horror" is there, at the window.

"It's he?" Miles asks.

"Whom do you mean by 'he'?" the governess insists.

"Peter Quint - you devil!" Miles replies.

Here is an important ambiguity: does "you devil" apply to Peter Quint, or to the governess?

If it applies to Peter Quint, the word "you" would seem to indicate that Miles can see him there, and is addressing him, and, therefore, either that the ghost is real, or that Miles has succumbed to the governess's suggestion and has a hallucination of a ghost.

But it does not necessarily mean that Miles can see Peter Quint, for he could address him without seeing him, believing him to be there.

If "you devil" applies to the governess, what does it mean?

It could mean that Miles really thinks the governess is evil, and is telling her so.

Or "you devil" could simply be a childish expletive, expressing impatience or irritation with her refusal to leave any part of their mutual understanding unspoken, on account of her insistence that everything be made explicit.

Whatever "you devil" means, Miles next asks the governess: "Where?"

It is not clear from the text if Miles is looking at the window or away from it at this point.

This is another important ambiguity, because it leads to several distinct possibilities:

Either Miles looks out the window and cannot see the ghost, because there is no ghost there.

Or he does not look out the window, but only round the room, and consequently does not see the figure the governess sees standing at the window, a figure who, in this case, may either really be there, or not.

Or he sees the ghost but pretends not to, by asking: "Where?"

If Miles for whatever reason does not yet see the ghost, the possibility of his innocence - and whatever consequences his innocence might have for the governess's guilt - remains open.

If, however, he does see Peter Quint and pretends not to, then, given the moral context of the scene so far, it would seem Miles is corrupt, and the governess's stated view of the matter is correct.

"There, there!" she cries, meaning 'at the window.'

This precipitates the final catastrophe: Miles looks out the window, and drops dead.

What happens here? Why does Miles die?

The same possibilities still exist as did before, when Miles asked "Where?"

Either he sees the ghost, who is really there, or, under the influence of the governess's suggestion, he has his own hallucination of the ghost of Peter Quint, or he still sees nothing.

Even if he sees the real ghost of Peter Quint, there is still ambiguity, for we may wonder if he has ever seen it before: if he were as familiar with the ghost as the governess supposes, why would the sight of it frighten him to death?

In this case, we would have to say that the cause of death was not fright, but his inability to bear the direct confrontation between the forces of good and evil.

If he "sees" not a real ghost, but a hallucination, then of course the gov-

erness is guilty, at the very least, of frightening him to death by her power of suggestion. This reading would require Miles to have a hitherto unsuspected physical weakness, perhaps in his heart.

Her guilt in other respects, however - such as harbouring transferred erotic feelings for Miles - would still remain to be proven, since the causes of her own hallucinations could be many and varied. The "frustrated love" explanation is only a hypothesis, not a proven fact.

Finally, if Miles sees nothing at all, what does he die of?

Perhaps of overexcitement, caused by the intensity of the governess's questioning and her final hysteria. Again, if he had a weak heart, this would be a possibility.

Thus we see that it is possible to argue from the text of the governess's manuscript for at least three different readings of the final scene of ***The Turn of the Screw***. It is ultimately impossible to choose between the various interpretations on the basis of the governess's manuscript alone, for, as has been demonstrated, its text admits of all of them simultaneously.

The interesting question regarding the various possible readings of the governess's manuscript would seem not, therefore, to be 'Which of them is right?' but rather 'Why did the author make it possible for all of them to be right simultaneously?'

Perhaps it was because he wished to show that the problem of good and evil is itself full of ambiguity, that people can do good for evil reasons, or can do evil for good reasons, and that belief in the supernatural - from ghosts to God inclusive - is one way, but not the only way, nor necessarily the most effective, of attempting to solve the problem of the ambiguity of good and evil.

This is certainly a plausible and even an edifying conclusion, and one that some critics share.[14] But while it is undoubtedly true at one level, it does not exhaust the question of the ambiguity in ***The Turn of the Screw***.

For if James's purpose in this story were ultimately to demonstrate the ambiguity of good and evil - certainly one of his perennial themes - he had no need to complicate the pursuit of that purpose by introducing the supernatural into the story. The problem of good and evil is quite difficult enough to understand, let alone solve - as his great novels show - without bringing ghosts into the question.

Is there then, in this story, something other than that high moral purpose that informs James's great novels - some purpose that may help us to explain why he lavished so much craftsmanship on its ambiguity?

Before going on to attempt to answer that question, however, we should not give up hope of finding some evidence on which to base a choice of readings that would obviate the ambiguity, until we examine the introductory chapter of the story, that in which the circumstances of its being read out loud to an assembled company are related by its primary narrator.

And although, as stated at the outset of this analysis, statements made in the ***Preface*** Henry James subsequently wrote for ***The Turn of the Screw***, and his mentions of this story in his ***Notebooks*** and correspondence, do not form a part of its message or meaning, they are nevertheless relevant to answering the biographical or psychological question just raised, as to why he lavished so much craftsmanship on its ambiguity.

If in its first, framing chapter, we find no evidence to guide our choice of readings one way or another, we shall have to conclude that the ambiguity remains deliberately unresolved, for it is quite obviously very deliberately

[14] Krook

contrived. Then we shall be justified in seeking to explain that ambiguity in terms of its author's statements about this story.

In the introductory chapter of ***The Turn of the Screw***, at the very beginning, we are told about a country house party in which a story has just been told by one of the company, about the apparition of a ghost, first to a little boy, and then to his mother. A certain Mr. Douglas, one of the guests at the party, says that he knows a story in which not one, but two children are purported to have seen ghosts. If the presence of a child in a ghost story gives its effect another turn of the screw, surely two give it two turns.

The screw referred to here would seem to be either the thumbscrew of mediaeval torture, or the metaphorical screw (perhaps derived therefrom) of the phrase "to turn the screws (on someone)" meaning to apply moral pressure, or perhaps blackmail. The precise meaning of the phrase in this context would, therefore, seem to relate to the ambivalent sensation of terror and pleasure felt by the audiences of ghost stories: the more terrifying a story, the more pleasurable it is.

It is interesting to note that the very sensation implied by the title of the story should itself be an ambivalent or ambiguous one.

In this introduction, the question of belief in ghosts, and its bearing on differing interpretations of ghost stories, does not arise as such. It seems to be taken for granted that whether people believe in them or not, ghost stories are a source of that ambiguous but essentially delightful sensation the company seeks to experience, eagerly exhorting Douglas to tell them the story, which, after some delay, he does.

The delay arises out of the fact that the story is a manuscript kept locked in a drawer in London, and must be sent for. Douglas's account of its authoress, given the same night he first mentions it, reveals that she was

his sister's governess, and that because she liked him, and had already confided the story to him, she sent him the manuscript shortly before she died. It also suggests, at least to one of the ladies present, that Douglas himself was in love with the governess, though she was at that time - during Douglas's university days - ten years older than he.

Thus we see that the situation obtaining in the governess's manuscript is paralleled in the circumstances surrounding Douglas's acquisition of the manuscript: the governess stands in a roughly similar relationship to Douglas and his sister as she did earlier in her professional career to Miles and Flora. Of course Douglas as an undergraduate and - we presume - his sister as a young lady, are not quite as young as Miles and Flora were at the time of the story, and the governess is not as young and inexperienced as she was then either. But the most interesting difference between the two situations is that the love element in her relationship to Douglas, is seen as proceeding from Douglas towards the governess, rather than vice-versa, as is the case in her manuscript.

The love the governess does feel, according to Douglas's account, further developed the next evening, as the party await the arrival of the manuscript from town, is toward her employer, the master of Bly. It is clear from Douglas's account of her two meetings with the master, and from remarks he made the evening before, that he believes this love to have existed, and the primary narrator - the "I" of the introduction who may or may not represent Henry James - actively draws attention to this point.

This is important because there is no direct evidence in the governess's manuscript itself for her being in love with the master, though there is plenty of scope for such an inference to be based on the implications of her own words, and in particular on her oft expressed desire to become a perfect mistress of the situation for his sake. Thus we see that on this important point, on which much of one's interpretation of the governess's motives and behaviour must depend, and which is left ambiguous by her own

manuscript, we are given quite clear guidance by the introduction.

But we are given no such guidance there regarding the even more important question of whether or not we are to assume the real existence of ghosts.

On this vital point, the introduction is silent. It is not even clear whether Douglas, or the narrator, or any of the other guests, believe or disbelieve in ghosts in general, let alone whether they or any other sources of authority believe in those described in the governess's manuscript. All we know is that they enjoy ghost stories, and that the nature of their enjoyment of them is ambivalent, predicated as it is on the pleasurability of fear.

Surely if Henry James had intended us to make a choice between the possible alternative readings of the story in this vital respect, he would have given us some indication in the introduction as to what that choice should be, since he does not shrink from providing clarification on the equally ambiguous, though subsidiary, question of the governess's feelings for the master of Bly.

The remaining sources where we may look for such guidance are all outside the published text of the first edition, which consisted only of the introductory chapter and the governess's manuscript. The ***Preface,*** and the mentions of the work in correspondence, were written afterwards, and although the record in James's ***Notebooks*** of an anecdote heard at a country house party (from no less a person than the Archbishop of Canterbury) on which he claims the story is based, was probably written before, it does not figure in the original published text.

This is important because strictly speaking, only the text itself should be considered in attempting to resolve questions of interpretation. To admit extra-textual evidence, though possibly enlightening about the author's at-

titude and intentions, does not necessarily illumine the text, for it is entirely possible for a text to fail to bear out its author's stated intentions (possibly whilst corresponding to unstated or even unconscious ones) and equally, it is possible for an author retrospectively to claim intentions with regard to a text that were not present at its inception, or are not borne out by its words.

In the case of ***The Turn of the Screw***, it should be clear by now that there is no evidence one way or other in the text itself as to which of the alternative readings is to be preferred, and we must conclude, having observed how thoroughly and carefully the ambiguity is maintained throughout, that this lack of guidance, or to put it another way, this ambivalence, is a deliberate effect.

Thus, even if we were to find in some extra-textual source a statement to the effect that belief in ghosts, or its converse, was assumed by the author, we would be justified in asserting that the ambiguity of the text itself contradicts any such univocal assumption.

Despite these provisos, however, we can satisfy our intellectual curiosity and desire for thoroughness by examining those extra-textual sources, keeping in mind that what enlightenment they may provide will be more biographical or psychological, and related to the author, Henry James, than strictly literary, or related to the text.

In the ***Preface,*** which for some critics provides decisive evidence of James's intentions,[15] he speaks of the anecdote from which the story grew, concerning 'a couple of small children in an out-of-the-way place, to whom the spirits of certain "bad" servants, dead in the employ of the house, were believed to have appeared with the design of "getting hold" of them.' He goes on to describe his creation of the characters of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel as 'abnormal agents,' underlining their 'villainy of motive,' whose

[15] Krook, op. cit. p. 107 ff.

literary purpose would be to cause 'the situation to reek with the air of evil.'

'What, in the last analysis,' he continues, 'had I to give the sense of? Of their being, the haunting pair, capable, as the phrase is, of everything - that is of exerting, in respect to the children, the very worst action small victims so conditioned [previously corrupted] might be conceived as subject to.'

In the entry in the ***Notebooks*** regarding the original anecdote, which consists mainly of a sketch of the relationship between the children and the ghosts, he observes that 'It is all obscure and imperfect, the picture, the story, but there is a suggestion of strangely gruesome effect in it. The story to be told - tolerably obviously - by an outside spectator, observer.' This observer whose artistic necessity James perceived from the start, became the governess.

From these passages some critics have argued, first of all that at least temporary belief in ghosts is essential to a proper understanding of the story, and secondly that they place the emphasis of the narrative on the children and their relations with the ghosts, rather than on the governess, it being assumed that a story centred on the governess is more likely to lend itself to being interpreted as a study in abnormal psychology, while one whose emphasis is on the children must be more susceptible of being read as a ghost story.[16]

In fact, however, none of these conclusions is necessarily true. While it is obvious that, to understand the story and its ambiguity, we must accept that the governess, and probably Mrs. Grose as well, believe in ghosts, there is really no need for us to do so ourselves, even temporarily. It is perfectly possible for us both to understand and enjoy the story without sharing any of the beliefs of any of its characters, for at least two reasons:

[16] Krook, op. cit. p. 109 ff.

The first is that in fiction it is not necessary to share any particular belief with the characters in order vicariously to experience their emotions or sensations associated with that belief: for us, as presumably for the guests at the house party where the manuscript is read aloud, it is possible to appreciate and understand and even share the governess's terror without necessarily sharing her belief in ghosts. All that is required of us is to accept the sincerity of her belief, for us vicariously to experience her emotions and sensations, as she does, particularly as they are so masterfully described.

The second is that even if we choose to question, not so much the sincerity of her belief, as its relationship to reality, we can still read the story with enjoyment and understanding, because an alternative reading is available throughout. It is, of course, that provided by the celebrated ambiguity, which holds her to be suffering from delusions.

Thus the story seems to have been written - as it were - to please every palate: both believers in ghosts and sceptics can read it with equal interest and pleasure. The former will concentrate their attention on the relationship between the children and the ghosts, the latter on the twists and turns of the governess's mind. Both elements are there, and are equally there in the text of the story, whatever their relative importance may have been in the original anecdote, or explained as being in the ***Preface.*** Independently of extraneous considerations, the governess's manuscript would seem to conform, at the very least, to the basic minimum requirement of a story told to an invited gathering at a country house party of friends and acquaintances: that it please all or most tastes.

Might this not be, then, the ultimate reason for the story's ambiguity? It is, after all, primarily an entertainment, not a sermon or a lecture. That it is based on a deep moral insight into the ambiguity of good and evil, and that it displays an almost psychoanalytical penetration of motive and action, are both facts, but their purpose in the story is to entertain, more

than to instruct.

Thus the answer to the question, posed above, as to why Henry James lavished so much artistry on this ambiguity is answered quite simply: because of the pleasure he took, and expected his readers to share, in that artistry itself. This is a view of this story shared, albeit stated in quite other terms, and without any detailed analysis of the text, by the only commentator on it of whom it may be claimed that she is Henry James's equal, though certainly not his imitator, in terms of artistry: Virginia Woolf.[17]

By this reading, the celebrated ambiguity, which may have grown, as frequently happens in creative writing, out of purely technical considerations at the outset, was quickly perceived by James to be the most effective vehicle for carrying the story's "effect," mentioned both in the introductory chapter and the ***Notebook*** entry.

That effect is of course none other than the ambivalent mixture of terror and pleasure, depending in turn on an unresolved equivocation between belief and scepticism, alluded to in the title of the story.

Even more than the presence of two children in the story, the presence of its ambiguity, of its susceptibility of being read both as a ghost story and a study of hallucination and suggestion, allows us to enjoy yet another turn of the screw.

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[17] ***Henry James's Ghost Stories,*** 1921, reprinted in ***Granite and Rainbow,*** 1958.