Henry James and the Supernatural

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by

Susan Schroer

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ABSTRACT

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Henry James is best known for his psychological novels, in which characters spend at least as much time navigating their inner lives as their outer. His nuanced descriptions of Victorian manners, although they neglect to address broader social realities, are intricately beautiful portraits of a small subclass of people. These aesthetics notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to classify all of James’s work as serious or philosophical. Along with criticism and travel sketches, stories were among his first published works, and several of these stories feature ghosts or ghostly occurrences. Eighteen of them have been collected by Leon Edel into a volume entitled Stories of the Supernatural.

The anthology includes early examples written in the tradition of gothic romance. These are broad brushstrokes for a writer usually concerned with finer detail – at first such subjects don’t seem to fit with the rest of James’s output. How can an author to whom raw emotion is so antithetical write a convincing horror tale?

This thesis will attempt to answer that question by focusing on Henry James’s explorations into the ghostly, and on the stylistic traits which set his stories apart from other well-known pieces of American supernatural fiction. There are two halves to my thesis. First, I will show that experiences are recreated for the reader, passed on intact, unmediated, unsorted. Second, I will demonstrate that the supernatural is depicted in a positive light in many stories, and discovery is closely linked to desire. In the conclusion, the case is made that the majority of these stories embrace the supernatural rather than presenting it as something to be dreaded. This welcoming approach is what makes the stories truly unique.
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by Susan Schroer

Approved by:

____________________________________, Advisor
John Krafft

____________________________________, Reader
Timothy Melley

____________________________________, Reader
Carolyn Haynes

Accepted by:

____________________________________, Director, University Honors Program
Carolyn Haynes
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface vi

1. Chronology:
   the author develops a style 1

2. Centers of consciousness:
   the narrator as actor 10

3. Passive investigation:
   the circuitous quest for knowledge 15

4. Curiosity:
   the link between discovery and desire 20

5. Reason versus intuition:
   gendered ways of knowing 22

6. On the stage and screen:
   perspectives on “The Turn of the Screw” 25

7. A stranger in two lands:
   departures from Victorian convention 29

8. Conclusions:
   embracing the world beyond 31

References 34
PREFACE

There is a scene in the second volume of *The Ambassadors*, by Henry James, in which the main character glimpses two of his companions in an unexpected situation. As Lambert Strether sits by the water and watches a boat row past, he slowly comes to recognize its occupants, and a subtle chain of inner reactions ensues:

It had by this time none the less come much nearer--near enough for Strether to dream the lady in the stern had for some reason taken account of his being there to watch them. She had remarked on it sharply, yet her companion hadn’t turned round; it was in fact almost as if our friend had felt her bid him keep still. She had taken in something as a result of which their course had wavered, and it continued to waver while they just stood off. This little effect was sudden and rapid, so rapid that Strether’s sense of it was separate only for an instant from a sharp start of his own. He too had within the minute taken in something, taken in that he knew the lady whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point in the shining scene. It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coatless hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than Chad. (382-3)

The “little effect” described in this passage comes to represent Strether’s gradual understanding of the entire relationship between Chad and the older Madame de Vionnet, just as the passage itself has come to be emblematic of James’s general style. One shared glance is enough for Strether to puzzle over for days, and one mysterious *liaison* is enough material, in this case, for a whole book.

Henry James is best known for these psychological novels, in which characters spend at least as much time navigating their inner lives as their outer. In the words of biographer Leon Edel, “rather than accept the old tradition of the novel which told everything, James allowed his readers to know only as much as one learns in life. ...In terms of old-fashioned storytelling this resulted in a novel without action. The excitement was intellectual, the pleasure resided in the unfolding of minute detail” (537). His nuanced descriptions of Victorian manners, although they neglect to address broader social realities, are intricately beautiful portraits of a
small subclass of people. On a linguistic level, his writing is a celebration of the subtleties of
words, and sometimes gives little attention to something as large and awkward as plot.
Particularly in the later novels and stories, ambiguity is intentional, and indirectness a virtue.

These aesthetics notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to classify all of James’s work
as serious or philosophical. For that matter, not all of his writing was published in 500-page
increments. Along with criticism and travel sketches, stories were among his first published
works, submitted to journals such as *The Atlantic Monthly*. He continued to write stories
throughout his life, in a variety of styles and subjects.

Several of these stories feature ghosts or ghostly occurrences, and eighteen of them
have been collected by Leon Edel into a volume entitled *Stories of the Supernatural* (changed
from the original title, *Ghostly Tales.* ) Later inclusions like “The Turn of the Screw” and “The
Jolly Corner” are among the best known, and many of these tales are not concerned with
ghosts as much as with the powerful effects of one person’s imagination. But the anthology
also includes much earlier, much less known and much more explicit works, written in the
tradition of gothic romance. In “The Romance of Old Clothes”, for example, the heroine dies
from “ten hideous wounds from two vengeful ghostly hands.” And in “The Ghostly Rental”, a
woman impersonates her own ghost, only to be haunted by her father’s ghost in return.

These are broad brushstrokes for a writer usually concerned with finer detail - at first
such subjects don’t seem to fit with the rest of James’s output. How can an author to whom
raw emotion is so antithetical write a convincing horror tale? But an allegorical reading may
actually reveal similarities between the ghost stories and other more realistic fare. Critics
have argued that the ghosts in these tales can be seen as manifestations of the more abstract
Jamesian themes of un-lived lives and unspoken communications.

This thesis will focus on Henry James’s explorations into the ghostly, and on the
stylistic traits which set his stories apart from other well-known pieces of American
supernatural fiction. There are two halves to my thesis. First, I will show that experiences are 
(re)created for the reader, passed on intact, unmediated, unsorted. Rather than retelling the 
story from a distance, many of the narrators actively participate in the events. Chapter 1 
provides a short biographical background on the author and the stories in question. This 
section will sketch the evolution of James’s style from the earliest selection to the latest, with 
special attention to recurring themes. Chapter 2 turns to the technique of narration, 
measuring the degree to which first-person narrators participate in the story line, and testing 
the limits of consciousness of the third-person view. Although some stories are told by a first-
person narrator and others are written from a third-person perspective, the means of disclosing 
information and the boundaries of the narrator’s consciousness are significant aspects in both 
cases. Chapter 3 takes its inspiration from the genre of detective fiction, another type of tale 
that hinges on suspense. I will cite examples of investigation and interrogation from the 
stories, in order to show that the progression of events is less linear and involves the reader 
more than in a purely detective story. Whereas most detective fiction takes an extremely 
rationalistic approach, James favors emotion and intuition over reason.

The second half of my thesis is that in several of the tales, the supernatural is depicted 
in a positive light, and discovery is closely linked to desire. Chapter 4 treats investigation as a 
form of desire, at times sexually charged. Chapter 5 expands on the previous chapter by 
suggesting “male” and “female” methods of investigation, again contrasting the tools of reason 
and emotion, and suggesting that uncovering information can be a form of conquest. And in 
Chapter 6, the characteristics discussed generally are applied to specific stories, including 
“The Turn of the Screw”.

To put the previous chapters in perspective, Chapter 7 highlights the aspects of 
James’s style which stand out as distinctive from other Victorian fiction. Finally, in the
Conclusion, the case is made that the majority of these stories embrace the supernatural rather than presenting it as something to be dreaded. This welcoming approach is what makes the stories truly unique.

Henry James was not a horror writer by trade. His ambition was to produce art too fine to be appreciated by the masses - indeed, this became a source of comfort for him after the failure of his first play. Biographer Leon Edel writes that “the explanation to which he adhered above all, and which was the fundamental truth, was that his was too refined and subtle a talent to reach the ‘common man’” (427). Newspaper work, too, offended his sensibilities. During the period in his youth when he served as a Parisian correspondent to the New York Tribune, he complained that “the vulgarity and repulsiveness of the Tribune, whenever I see it, strikes me so violently that I feel tempted to stop my letter” (Edel 193). In the realm of fiction, his tastes were conservative as well. He admired Guy de Maupassant’s colorful stories, but took issue with the French author’s excess of drama, which he saw as a “failure to take sufficient account of the reflective side of man” (323).

Edel quotes the young writer’s wish to remain on the campus of Oxford University “in the happy belief the world is all an English garden and time a fine old English afternoon” (96). One suspects James could have written an entire novel about such an afternoon, and a long novel at that. For many readers, James is handicapped by his own stubborn refusal to look at the practical, political side of letters. Instead, psychology and philosophy come first, and the actual events of many tales are negligible; the physical proceedings can be as purely intellectual as a game of chess. His tales seem to have little connection to the hardships of life. In fact, attention to such things in other writers struck him as somewhat cheap: he called Dickens “the greatest of superficial novelists” (Edel 70) for his tendency to make broad characterizations.

Yet James wrote in styles removed from that of these psychological novels; he was also a successful and prolific short-story writer, producing over one hundred stories, most of which have been often anthologized. Of these, a handful involve ghosts or magical happenings. Edel’s anthology, The Supernatural Stories, is the only collection to specifically group together
those stories that focus on the supernatural. The explanation for this is partly that several of them have not stood the test of time, and are not widely read today. These stories are also few in number. If supernatural tales constitute a trend within James’s output, it is only a minor one.

Stories themselves, in fact, are overall a minor part of James’s work. The master’s most admired achievements are his novels, and among these the later ones are generally seen as the finest. Why, then, do the tales -- even earlier ones, even those which the author himself preferred to exclude when compiling his own collections -- continue to appeal to readers?

One answer relates not to the author or his time, but to a basic human need for entertainment. Stories are among the most intuitive and accessible forms of literature, and there is something very visceral in the urge to tell tales - which, after all, grow from an oral tradition. Unlike the novel, the story predates written language. Unlike the novel, the story can be performed. Stories can be enjoyed communally, and storytellers can share in the authorship. Maybe for this reason, the tales which use framing narratives are some of the most engaging. In stories such as “The Turn of the Screw” or “The Friend of the Friends”, where the main body of the story is presented as a manuscript that a secondary narrator has uncovered, the writer distances himself from the story and gives the reader greater freedom to interpret the text. This metafictional approach equalizes the relationship between author and audience, and brings the mystery to the forefront by letting the story stand for itself.

Meanwhile, a second way of looking at the tales is to see them as literary etudes - testing grounds for the longer works to follow. Despite the differences in style and genre, the basic themes - unfulfilled romance, Americans abroad, difficult ethical choices - are the same in stories and novels. Seen from this angle, the stories can be an important window into the author’s literary mind. In this opening chapter, I intend to show how James’s style changed over time by looking at both the conventional and unconventional methods he used. In particular, I want to emphasize his preference to represent rather than explain, an aesthetic
choice which will become important in later arguments. I will show that the atmosphere created in the stories has a tendency to place readers directly within the action.

The anthology edited by Leon Edel lists the stories by date of publication, which is more than an arbitrary method of organization. The collection begins with four stories written at the beginning of James’s career in a more or less conventional gothic style: “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” (1868), “De Grey: A Romance” (1868), “The Last of the Valerii” (1874), and “The Ghostly Rental” (1876). These early tales contain little that is unusual for 19th century gothic fiction. Each involves a romance between a young man and woman, frequently complicated by an obstacle like the sibling rivalry in “The Romance”. Three of them culminate in a death related in some way to a past injustice, as when the daughter in “The Ghostly Rental” dies after years of deceiving her own father. They are romanticized by being set either in the past or abroad. “The Last of the Valerii”, set in Italy, is reminiscent of European-themed tales by Hawthorne such as “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, also set among the rich architectural and botanical backdrop of southern Italy.

Next in the chronology come five stories written in a span of two years: “Sir Edmund Orme” (1891), “Nona Vincent” (1892), “The Private Life” (1892), “Sir Dominick Ferrand” (1892), and “Owen Wingrave” (1892). Written after a fifteen year hiatus from ghost stories, these tales include noticeably less melodrama and more of James’s characteristic attention to social manners. Only two of the five stories involve a death. Again, there is in each case an element of romantic attraction - but, unlike before, none of the budding relationships fully progress to a point of union, giving the stories an air of suspense and incompletion. Sometimes the obstacle to happiness is a philosophical dispute, as in “Owen Wingrave”. Sometimes the problem is age - for in these examples as in later ones, not all romantic attachments are limited to the young. One emerging theme is that of the older woman nurturing a younger man: in “Nona Vincent”, Mrs. Alsager is a charming mentor, but unattainable. The active
imagination also becomes increasingly important: in “The Private Life”, two contrasting sides of a writer’s personality literally take on lives of their own.

Between 1895 and 1899, four more stories were published: “The Altar of the Dead” (1895), “The Friends of the Friends” (1896), “The Turn of the Screw” (1898), and “The Real Right Thing” (1899). With the appearance in these stories of unreliable narrators -- especially the first-person female narrators who appear to come to paranoid conclusions, in “The Friend of the Friends” and “The Turn of the Screw” - the actual sighting of ghosts is called into question, and the psychology of the person whose experiences are being recounted is of greater interest. Morality becomes an issue, as characters are called upon to make decisions based on their faith in the supernatural. Personal conscience is as powerful as any external force, to the extent that the ghost in “The Real Right Thing” becomes synonymous with the main character’s private hesitations about his writing task. In short, ghosts come into play again, although less explicitly than in the first selections; rather, the emphasis is on characters “haunted” by memories of the past.

“The Great Good Place”, “Maud-Evelyn”, and “The Third Person”, all written in 1900, begin to branch out even further from the collection's initial gothic roots, venturing into more cheerful territory. “The Third Person”, though it does concern a ghost, is in a satirical style -- also a tale of runaway female imagination, its two old-maid protagonists are more a source of humor than horror. Focusing on two parents who refuse to acknowledge the death of their daughter, “Maud-Evelyn” is more about fixation on the past than actual haunting. And “The Great Good Place”, representing a sort of artists’ paradise, is more spiritual than supernatural.

The final two selections, “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), “The Jolly Corner” (1908) were published in the last twelve years of the author’s life, and are among the best-known of James’s stories. Both feature a male protagonist with a strong resemblance to the author himself. Both are based on aspects of James’s life - a neglected relationship, a feeling of estrangement from home - and generally lean more towards realism than the supernatural.
“The Beast in the Jungle” concerns a man who neglects to fall in love, while “The Jolly Corner” is about an expatriate who comes face to face with the man he might have been. Their inclusion in this anthology is a testament to the force of James’s psychological demons, in fiction and in real life: feelings of doubt and guilt are strong enough to be placed on the level of actual ghosts.

This brief overview in the form of a timeline will serve as a starting point for tracing other trends within the stories. While there is no reason to treat all eighteen stories as a homogenous set, in each case there are certain techniques used to signal the “ghostly” nature of the tales. Some are formulaic, but gradually others develop which are unique to James’s style, and both will be discussed here.

Horror fiction depends on a certain amount of tension, which is sometimes quite sophisticated and sometimes contrived. In James’s early supernatural stories, the suspense is laughable. In order to prolong the mystery, the stories are full of dramatic allusions to withheld information, and answers which consistently ignore the question being posed. In “De Grey: A Romance”, the two elder members of the house are conspiratorial in referring to the family curse, the details of which the reader does not yet know.

Father Herbert looked at his companion with a penetrating glance. “Nevertheless, my dear lady,” he said, “you know what I mean.”
“O yes, I know what you mean - and you, Father Herbert, know what I think.” (34)

Another source of suspense, hardly less melodramatic, is the implication of positive facts using negative statements. Rather than asserting that something is amiss, characters simply claim ignorance. In “The Ghostly Rental”, it’s clear right away that the narrator has stumbled onto a mystery because no one will answer his questions.

“That house down that side-road,” I said, “about a mile from here - the only one - can you tell me whom it belongs to?”
She stared at me a moment, and, I thought, colored a little. “Our folks never go down that road,” she said, briefly. (109)

In other stories, the circumstances themselves are so meticulously conceived that the mystery somewhat loses its effect. “The Ghostly Rental”, for instance, hinges on a “ghost” who
uses currency dated only before her death, and a father who pays regular visits to the ghost on the last day of every financial quarter. The wildness and exuberance of Edgar Allen Poe is not to be found in this New England; James’s ghosts are nothing if not well-behaved.

One characteristic of most ghostly fiction is a sense of loneliness and abandonment. The isolation in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” is typical. It is geographical, marital (Mrs. Wingrave is widowed at the tale’s beginning), and intellectual (the late Mr. Wingrave was one of few who possessed the “courage” to read Shakespeare). Meanwhile, in “De Grey” the seclusion is spiritual: at the beginning of the story, Mrs. De Grey lives alone in her communion with God, cut off from worldly concerns. Still other characters are financially and socially alone -- in “Sir Dominick Ferrand,” Mrs. Ryves has “no belongings, no relations, no friends, nothing at all” (307). But what truly creates the subtle feeling of desolation in James’s stories is that, regardless of their physical surroundings, his characters live in a psychological world inhabited only by themselves. The tales are almost entirely devoid of crowd scenes, and characters rarely describe interactions with people not directly involved in the plot.

The result of this isolation is that characters become devoted to - or at least deeply involved with - abstractions. In “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, Peter Baron becomes engrossed in the affairs of a man whose writing desk he has accidentally acquired. His imagined relationship with the late Sir Dominick develops to the point that he feels “their queer intimacy had grown as close as an embrace” (303). In “The Ghostly Rental”, Captain Diamond’s “obeisance” (131) to the daughter he believes is dead is a similar case, although in this situation the relationship is a continuation from life. Both of these stories foreshadow “The Altar of the Dead”, which presents devotion to the dead in a very religious and literal way.

The stories are also tinged with a gloomy sort of nostalgia. Present and past overlap, with the result that the events of the story have a lingering effect, especially on contemporary readers who would have been familiar with the scene. The historic settings in which the stories take place still exist at the time of writing, but in an altered state: we are told that the
De Grey residence “was demolished some years ago” (36). In another story, it is Cambridge which has “changed for the worse since those days” (105). Readers are asked to imagine these settings at a different time with different inhabitants - another subtle form of “haunting” within the tales.

Form varies with the date of composition and with the subject. In many tales, the climax is placed abruptly at the end. “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” concludes with this unsettling sentence: “Her lips were parted in entreaty, in dismay, in agony; and on her blanched brow and cheeks there glowed the marks of ten hideous wounds from two vengeful ghostly hands” (25). In others, such as “The Altar of the Dead”, the shock comes midway through the story with pages left to dissipate the energy. There are still 17 pages left when Stransom realizes that his companion at the altar was actually lover of his childhood friend, and the second half of the story chronicles his shock and their gradual parting of ways.

In “The Ghostly Rental”, the “ghostliness” is contained within four walls, in a single haunted house. This proves to be the exception rather than the rule, for in most of the tales - especially those without an actual “ghost” - the supernatural is hard to delineate. Rather, the effect is created through unseen presences. Even when it is a question of haunting, the idea of the ghost precedes its actual appearance in the story - or, in the case of “The Beast in the Jungle”, the idea actually supplants the ghost. In “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, Peter Baron associates his moral dilemma with a physical presence, so that when it is gone he feels literally unencumbered:

When ten minutes later he came back into his sitting-room, he seemed to himself oddly, unexpectedly in the presence of a bigger view. It was as if some interfering mass had been so displaced that he could see more sky and more country. (304)

It is a passage reminiscent of the writings of William James, religious philosopher and father of American psychology. Like their father, Henry’s older brother was fascinated by psychical experiences, and went so far as to incorporate séances into his research. This excerpt from his
volume, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, describes much the same phenomenon as the paragraph above.

All our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the ‘objects’ of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves. Such objects may be present to our senses, or they may be present only to our thought. In either case they elicit from us a *reaction*; and the reaction due to things of thought is notoriously in many cases as strong as that due to sensible presences. It may be even stronger. (47)

Henry James’s fiction is a vivid illustration of that very notion - in stories such as “The Friends of the Friends”, one small suspicion of infidelity is enough to destroy a marriage.

Paradoxically, though, the “seen” can also be vitally important in these stories: in some cases, images have a near-supernatural power, and facial expressions convey more than words. In “Sir Edmund Orme”, the narrator praises Mrs. Marden as a woman “whose face had so much expression... There was less than that in Shakespeare and Beethoven” (179). Consider also this ominous scene, in which Rosalind appropriates her sister’s clothes for the first time:

She had dressed herself in Perdita’s cast-off wedding veil and wreath, and on her neck she had hung the full string of pearls which the young girl had received from her husband as a wedding-gift. ...Bedizened in this unnatural garb Rosalind stood before the mirror, plunging a long look into its depths and reading heaven knows what audacious visions. (14)

When Rosalind takes up residence at Arthur’s house after his wife’s death, she promotes herself by endeavoring “to appear to the very best advantage” (20), in a very literal way. Such reverence for material things is not to be taken as mere superficiality. Appearances are vastly important, especially in “The Last of the Valerii”, where the new bride’s decorating sense is equal in importance to her spiritual goals. “She dreams of converting the Count; that’s all very well,” explains her mother. “But she dreams of refurnishing the Villa!” (72).

When his family returned to Newport, Rhode Island in 1860, a seventeen-year-old Henry went with his older brother to study painting with William Morris Hunt. His artistic career would never take shape, but the painter in James would ultimately lead him to emphasize the power of sight and the futility of words - atypical, in a way, for one known for being so verbose.
The emphasis on the visual also extends to inanimate subjects. In *The Method of Henry James*, Joseph Beach is grateful that “no one, in reading Henry James, will have to skip the descriptions of nature. They were, of all luxuries in fiction, the first intended for elimination” (109). Yet there are exceptions to this rule, and when James turns to nature he does so luxuriantly. James’s paintings are alive, as in this passage from “The Last of the Valerii”:

> The place was of small extent; but though there were many other villas more pretentious and splendid, none seemed to me more exquisitely romantic, more haunted by the ghosts of the past. There were memories in the fragrance of the untended flowers, in the hum of the insects... The trees arched and intertwined over the dusky vista in the most perfect symmetry; and as it was exposed uninterruptedly to the west, the low evening sun used to transfuse it with a sort of golden mist and play through it - over leaves and knotty boughs and mossy marbles - with a thousand crimson fingers. (75)

The combined effect of these visual techniques is that image and style become more important than narrative content. While other writers gave Americans a shared literary heritage by placing their works in an unmistakable historical context, Henry James gave the country a collection of impressions and images, often emphasizing the senses over the intellect. Although his plays were largely unsuccessful, he did make a few attempts at writing for the stage, and these efforts probably stem from an interest in the visual rather than the theatrical. When the theatre is first mentioned in “Nona Vincent”, it is referred to as “the scenic idea” (180). For James, branching out into drama was less about having words read aloud and more about the opportunity to create tableaux, to represent rather than retell. This is the aesthetic of the stories as well, and we will now see in more detail how these goals are achieved.
2. “Centers of consciousness”: the narrator as actor.

A frequent definition of “short story” is that it is a piece of fiction short enough to be read in one sitting. It seems logical to say also that a story is short enough to be told in one sitting, and this should lead us to pay special attention to the narration. Even in those stories without a clear first-person narrator, the sense of perspective is more unified in a short story than in a longer work. The novel must be put aside and taken up again by both writer and reader, meaning that the reader approaches it at many different instants in many different moods. Not so with a story: the shortness of the genre makes it more likely that there will be a single narrative voice, and that the reader’s impression may be formed at a single moment. For this reason, I would like to examine the different perspectives used in the stories, and the various effects they have on the reader.

James’s contemporaries who wrote in the horror genre were often drawn to relating one man’s experiences from his own perspective - the story is a sort of testimonial, clearly told for the benefit of an audience. Although the second version is in the form of a diary, in the first version of Maupassant’s “Le Horla”, a crazed man is brought before a panel of doctors and scientists to explain how his madness came about. And in “The Telltale Heart” by Poe, the narrator’s delusions are so unbearable that he finally reveals his crime to a silent audience.

But James rarely writes from this confessional angle; it requires an objective moral stance which he generally declined to take. Consequently, the only interpretation is from a character with a direct interest in the story. The narrator is involved in the action - or, given that these are tales of the abnormal and the morally questionable, perhaps a better word would be implicated. There is no authority in James, no one to tell us how the story really happened. The involvement of the narrator means that there is often no way to retell the story without participating in it, almost as in a play. As a result, the reader cannot retreat enough from the story to know quite what has happened or why. I have stated above that James’s taste for drama may have been related to a desire to create visual scenes. It seems likely, too,
that he appreciated the chance to strip a story to its bones by using a first-person narrator and
a finite number of characters, and forcing them to tell their own stories.

As a result of this high level of involvement, in the stories written from the first-person
viewpoint, there is often a discrepancy between the narrator’s situation and his or her own
awareness of it. An unreliable narrator in realistic fiction leads us to doubt the interpretation
of events, but not their actual occurrence. In the opening chapter of *Great Expectations*, if Pip
is too young to fully understand his surrounding, we still have no reason to doubt that there
actually was an Abel Magwitch, or a Joe, or a Mrs. Joe. But in a ghost story, when the narration
is called into question, suddenly the story itself is at stake -- and this is what communicates a
general sense of unease to the reader.

Moreover, this problem does not only occur in the first-person viewpoint. James
employed what George Smith describes as the “center of consciousness” technique, which he
identifies as developed by the painter Edouard Manet. The term refers to a limited third-
person narrator who sees the action of the story, but is never seen by the reader. Because we
are unable to objectively analyze the narrator and form our own judgments on what happened,
the stories seem to be not retold, but recreated. In certain early tales, the author-as-narrator
makes a conspicuous appearance. In “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes”, Miss Wingrave is
described as having “a very faint likeness to the Rosalind of Shakespeare’s comedy, whom I
imagine a brunette (if you will), but a slender, airy creature, full of the softest, quickest
impulses.” With the exception of two or three other interjections like this, the story is told
entirely in the third person. In later tales the author disappears altogether, and the tales
begin to speak for themselves. The early 20th century critic A. R. Orage noted that “one begins
to read him as a diversion and finds at the end of him that one has had real experiences.” In
other words, learning about past events is essentially an experience of its own.

One technique that James uses to achieve this effect is the manipulation of memory
and time. Many ghost stories are told sequentially, as a clear progression of events. One can
almost imagine “The Fall of the House of Usher” being recounted on the witness stand -- it gives time, place, and circumstance; it sets the stage without revealing the plot.

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was--but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.

True, the story conveys emotion, but it does so sequentially and – as far as possible, given the macabre subject - logically.

Early tales by James begin in much the same way. But the later tales begin in medias res, both chronologically and intellectually. Consider the opening sentence of “The Altar of the Dead”:

He had a mortal dislike, poor Stransom, to lean anniversaries, and loved them still less when they made a pretence of a figure. Celebrations and suppressions were equally painful to him, and but one of the former found a place in his life. He had kept each year in his own fashion the date of Mary Antrim’s death. It would be more to the point perhaps to say that this occasion kept him: it kept him at least effectively from doing anything else. (356)

As the story goes on, it becomes clear that the reader can only see through Stransom’s eyes. Here, time wanders backwards and forwards, which is after all how memory works. In James, experience is given to us unmediated, without having been tidied up into a story with beginning, middle, and end. Poe writes for much the same purposes - to elicit emotion and dread -- but the clear chronology means that reading his stories is like watching a painter at work. With James, the finished tableau is set before us, and we are left to absorb.

Though the overall effect is similar, different stories use different narrative approaches. The first story in this collection to use a first-person narrator directly involved in the plot is “The Last of the Valerii”. Our narrator is a painter, and his diction is more palpable and more picturesque than that of the narrators of previous stories. The “haunting” in this story is largely a function of historical and artistic imagination. His descriptions of the villa suggest that the spirits of earlier inhabitants still wander in the garden:
It was filled with disinterred fragments of sculpture - nameless statutes and noseless heads and rough-hewn sarcophagi, which made it deliciously solemn. The statues used to stand in the perpetual twilight like conscious things, brooding on their long observations. I used to linger near them, half expecting they would speak and tell me their stony secrets - whisper hoarsely the whereabouts of their mouldering fellows, still unrecovered from the soil. (75-6)

The pronoun “I” is also abundant in “The Ghostly Rental”, and with obvious parallels to the author himself, since the narrator is a solemn young student of divinity. The opening paragraph - “I was in my twenty-second year, and I had just left college. I was at liberty to choose my career, and I chose it with much promptness...” (105) - makes it clear that we will be told a story by a narrator who, if not impartial, is at least highly self-aware. In other stories, the narrative frame proves to be a wonderfully effective way of creating atmosphere and of obscuring the viewpoint. The stories which use framing narratives are still shrouded in doubt, concerning the accuracy of the text and the circumstances of its composition. “The Friends of the Friends”, for example, is based on “diaries that are less systematic than I hoped... she has given her friends neither name nor initials” (396-7). “The Turn of the Screw” is presented as a twenty-year old manuscript, which the framing narrator claims that “nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It’s quite too horrible” (436).

Not all of the tales in Edel’s collection can properly be called “ghostly”. In fact, even those in which the ghost seems fairly incontestable were actually intended to remain ambiguous. On this subject, Leon Edel writes of the author’s “horrified” reaction to a staging of “Owen Wingrave”. The original story ends with a young man found dead, apparently strangled by a vengeful ghost. But nowhere in the story is there actually a sighting of the supernatural, and when a producer went against the text by including a visible ghost, James did not take it lightly: “There is absolutely no warrant or indication for this in my text,” he wrote to the producer, “and I view any such introduction with the liveliest disapproval” (314).

The suggestion is that hard evidence only trivializes a story, and psychological haunting is a far more serious affair. The phantasms inside our heads are inescapable, unlike many external ghosts. In “The Friends of the Friends”, the narrator - whose story is passed down
through her diary - becomes convinced that her husband has been associating with the ghost of
a female friend whom he never met in life.

My obsession, as I may really call it and as I began to perceive, refused to be elbowed
away, as I had hoped, by my sense of paramount duties. If I had a great deal to think
do I had still more to think of, and the moment came when my occupations were
gravely menaced by my thoughts. I see it all now, I feel it, I live it over. (420)

In this passage it not the ghost but the narrator’s “obsession” with her that is most troubling,
even years afterward.

Narrators are often equated with authors, and not always mistakenly. Many of the
above techniques have roots in James’s personal life, for his fiction is autobiographical in spirit
if not in factual detail. The rivalry with his older brother William surfaces in the “Romance of
Old Clothes”, and his neglect of the love of his dear female friend Constance Fenimore Woolson
is the basis for “The Altar of the Dead”. Professional ambitions, too, surface in the fiction:
anxiety over writing for the theater is the subject of “Nona Vincent”. In fact, reading a journal
entries from his thirty-ninth year which declares, “I shall have been a failure unless I do
something great!” (Edel 289), one wonders whether his own life might have also been the basis
for “The Beast in the Jungle”. This semi-autobiographical format will help to explain the
deeply reflective and meditative style of inquiry to be discussed in the next chapter.

If the purpose of detective fiction is to stir up mysteries and lead them towards resolution, then these might be called anti-detective stories, which stir up mysteries and tease away at them until resolution is a lost hope. The goal seems to be to destabilize the audience by being intentionally obscure, and James admitted as much in a conversation with his physician, quoted by Leon Edel:

So long as the events are veiled the imagination will run riot and depict all sorts of horrors, but as soon as the veil is lifted, all mystery disappears and with it the sense of terror. (467)

The previous section has shown that tales are essentially about narration. But this chapter will demonstrate that the supernatural stories go against the grain of traditional narratives by confusing the order of events and excluding key information.

James’s summaries are at times conspicuous. This passage from “The Last of the Valerii” employs an unusual amount of the past perfect tense in order to set up the circumstances for a nighttime discovery:

One evening, having bidden my god-daughter good-night, I started on my usual walk to my lodgings in the Corso. Five minutes after leaving the villa-gate I discovered that I had felt my eyeglass - an object in constant use - behind me. I immediately remembered that, while painting, I had broken the string which fastened it round my neck, and had hooked in provisionally upon the twig of a flowering-almond which happened to be near me. Shortly afterwards I had gathered up my things and retired, unmindful of the glass; and now, as I needed it to read the evening paper at the Caffè Greco, there was no alternative but to retrace my steps and detach it from its twig. (94)

He also seems to intentionally deemphasize plot. This is confirmed in the “behind-the-scenes” tales about the craft of writing, in which fictional writers display many of the same tastes. “It isn’t so much what she does,” (184) says Wayworth of Nona Vincent, implying that character can be expressed through more than mere actions. Truly, it is more a matter of what people say - or, alternatively, choose not to say. For instance, “Sir Dominick Ferrand” (at 69 pages) is significantly longer than most other stories in the collection. But the bulk of the story revolves around Baron’s and Mrs. Ryves’s views of their situation; after the initial discovery of
the letters, the remaining pages are a debate over what to do. In “The Private Life”, Clare Vawdrey is ridiculed for leading his friends “into the flat country of anecdote, where stories are visible from afar like windmills and sign-posts” (215). The implication is that the value of a story lies in its disguise.

James’s tales are scenes rather than journeys, still photos rather than short films - or if there is indeed a progression of events, their main source of interest is in one character’s experience. The mix of reverie and suspicion makes them feel like detective stories in slow motion - a merging of Proust and Arthur Conan Doyle. The combination is not as improbable as it may sound - for what is a curse but anger whose intensity is measured in timespan? Nothing is sudden about these tales, and even the metaphors are steeped in history. In descriptions of the villa in “The Last of the Valerii”, the most frequently used adjective is “mouldy”. In “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes, the rivalry develops slowly over time, as the “seeds of jealousy” between the Wingrave sisters “had been sown on the day that Mr. Lloyd came into the house” (8).

Still, in the absence of fast-paced action, some sort of process must still retain the reader’s interest. One substitute for plot is the process by which information is learned and understood - that is, fully assimilated. At the core of these stories, reason is still king. Charlotte Marden teases that a man without his wits about him will never win her hand (157); her suitor in “Sir Edmund Orme” accordingly does his best to treat her mother’s situation rationally. Rather than being frightened away by her mother’s visions, he takes an almost scientific stance: “It’s tremendously interesting to encounter a case,” he exclaims at an intellectual distance.

In many investigations, dialogue is sometimes nothing more than an interrogation. The narrator plays twenty questions with Blanche Adney in “The Private Life”: “Did he make love to you on the glacier? Did he fall into a crevasse?” (225). And once the narrator of “The Ghostly
“Rental” comes upon a fountain of information in Miss Deborah, he takes full advantage: “What was the scandal... He killed her? How so?... What had she done?” (119).

But the nature of dialogue soon evolves from inquiry to flight of fancy, evoking possibilities instead of conveying information, and taking the form of a series of remarks and innuendos rather than a crossfire of questions and answers. Women especially tend to speak with a frenzied emphasis, as does Mrs. Marden in “Sir Edmund Orme”: “You’re the only person in the world,” she said; “the only person in the world” (152). But men too begin to overflow with emotion: in “Nona Vincent”, Wayworth begs Violet to “ask me - ask me: ask me everything you can think of” (191).

Of course, watching other people proves to be just as productive as talking with them. With its painter-narrator, much of “The Last of the Valerii” is relayed through observation of observation:

“She said nothing, but she wore a look of really touching perplexity. She sat at times with her eyes fixed on him with a kind of imploring curiosity, as if for the present she were too much surprised to be angry...” (87)

And perception can be quite complexly layered, as in the relationship between Wayworth and Mrs. Alsager in “Nona Vincent”:

“There was no motive for her asking him to come see her but that she liked him, which it was the more agreeable for him to perceive as he perceived at the same time that she was exquisite” (177).

Very often information comes to us second-hand, relayed through gossip or rumors. The interest is thus not only what has happened, but how it becomes known. In “Nona Vincent”, Wayworth communicates with Violet through Mrs. Alsager, and vice versa; when the former is distressed after her opening night, he uses her aunt as an “interlocutress” (204). And despite its group setting, the plot of “The Private Life” unfolds through a series of one-on-one conversations.

What sets these tales apart from ordinary detective stories is the sparseness of information: unlike a detective story, the premise of the story is so simple that there are no
distracting clues. “Nona Vincent”, for example, revolves around a fictional character so captivating that she changes the course of two women’s’ lives - so real that she is “more familiar to [Wayworth] than the women he had known best” (205) - and yet there is not a word of character description to help us understand what makes her so special. Likewise, the precise nature of the scandal at the center of “Sir Dominick Ferrand” goes unexplained. To complement the lack of information, there is frequent non-verbal communication. Lady Mellifont in “The Private Life” creates uneasiness because “she said so much and withheld so much” (217). In the same story, she suggests to the narrator “two or three ideas that were the more singular for being so unspoken” (245).

In an environment where “clues” are so few, intuition serves as a substitute for inquiry. The course of human events in James often seems to be a predetermined affair. Arthur Lloyd, for example, feels sure that he is “destined to stand up before the parson” with one of the Wingrave girls, while Rosita and Perdita each hope that “upon her the selection, the distinction might fall” (8). The hero of “Sir Edmund Orme” wonders at “the distinction conferred on me, the exception - in the way of mystic enlargement of vision - made in my favour” (160). Little wonder, then, that intuition should be so crucial, and that the narrator of “The Ghostly Rental” should feel that “induction may sometimes be near akin to divination” (108).

If characters experience fear, it is not an uneasy sense that something might happen; for they are all together in the conviction that something will happen. Charlotte Marden points out this belief in her mother in “Sir Edmund Orme”:

“She looks as if she were waiting for the doctor, dear mamma,” she said on another occasion. “Perhaps you’re the doctor; do you think you are?” (145)

(The medical metaphor is apt; Mrs. Marden later tells the narrator that she suffers from “distinct intuitions”, rather as though it were an ailment.)

Similarly, if characters experience horror, it is not because others are deluded; it is because they are, like Mrs. Marden, “hopelessly right” (147). Indeed, they long for the day
when their sentiments will be confirmed. The narrator of “Sir Edmund Orme” is so thrilled at the idea of a haunted house that he repeats the word “as if it stood for all I had ever dreamt of” (158).

Floors are inevitably carpeted in Henry James, and characters are interminably watching the rug - in “Sir Edmund Orme”, the narrator is charmed when “Charlotte addressed me, seriously and sweetly, but with her eyes fixed on the carpet” (172). This is a sign of shyness, but in James it also hints at a certain mysticism. “The Figure in the Carpet”, his story published in 1896, is not included in the *Supernatural Stories* but is especially relevant to any discussion of mystery in James’s fiction. In it, the “figure” is a metaphor for a trick of the writer which defines his work but eludes critics. The narrator, a critic himself, is frustrated to think that something which should be so essentially obvious is apparently impossible to grasp:

> For himself, beyond doubt, the thing we were all so blank about was vividly there. It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet. (586)

In this instance, Hugh Vereker dies without revealing to anyone his secret, and the narrator’s best efforts are in vain. His quest, though, is very close to those in the ghostly tales - in stories like “The Great Good Place” and the “Beast in the Jungle”, the aim is also to understand something which defies understanding. As Michael Roemer points out, they follow the “tradition of the bildungsroman” (330), but chronological maturity is replaced with spiritual maturity. The moment of understanding is one of transcendence, true consciousness.

The intention of this chapter has been to describe approaches to the process of investigation. The next chapter will focus on attitudes towards the act of discovery, suggesting that in most cases there is a strong link between curiosity and desire.
4. Curiosity: the link between discovery and desire.

In an age when few things are off-limits in literature, criticism too has grown increasingly open, and it has become common to search for latent sexual meaning in almost any author’s work. James, it is true, is one of the most popular and fertile subjects, probably because of the vital role that suggestion plays in his fiction. In much of Victorian literature, it is understood that some things are better left unspoken, and on the subject of things unspoken, the imagination inevitably runs wild.

James uses this fact to full effect. He has a way of describing business-like matters in erotic terms:

Wayworth had waked up one morning in a different bed altogether. …He had been made (as he felt) the subject of a special revelation, and he wore his hat like a man in love. An angel had taken him by the hand and guided him to the shabby door which opens, it appeared, into an interior both splendid and austere. The scenic idea was magnificent when once you had embraced it - the dramatic form had a purity which made some other look ingloriously rough. (181).

Not until the last sentence of the excerpt is it clear that we are dealing with a literary form and not another human being - and even then, the dramatic “purity” which Wayworth “embraces” is highly personified.

Nonverbal communication has already been touched on in Chapter 3, but the possibilities for sexual overtones here are virtually limitless. Eye contact is described in “The Private Life as “a mode of intercourse to which no man, for himself, could ever object” (217). In “The Beast in the Jungle”, John Marcher’s worst mistake is to miss May Bartram’s silent cues: “Her whole attitude was a virtual statement, but the perception of that only seemed called to take its place for him as one of the many things necessarily crowded out of his consciousness” (687). (Interestingly, the governess in “The Turn of the Screw” veers towards the opposite extreme, seeing a “hideous plain presence” (528) where Mrs. Grose sees only an empty river bank.) In “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, Baron and Mrs. Ryves exchange one glance which communicates volumes:
Her conscious eyes came back to his as if they were sounding them, and suddenly this instinct of keeping his discovery to himself was succeeded by a really startled inference that, with the rarest alertness, she had guessed something and that her guess (it seemed almost supernatural), had been her real motive. Some secret sympathy had made her vibrate - had touched her with the knowledge that he had brought something to light. After an instant he saw that she also divined the very reflection he was then making, and this gave him a lively desire, a grateful, happy desire, to appear to have nothing to conceal. (268)

Chapter 3 has also shown that the search for information in these stories is unique. This too opens up possibilities for innuendo as facts are, suggestively, “unveiled”. Characters often say more than they mean, and afterwards feel a sense of shame out of proportion to anything that was actually said. Again in “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, Peter Baron is carried away with emotion to the extent that he no longer recognizes himself:

“Oh, don’t go!” Baron broke out, with a sudden expressiveness which made his voice, as it fell upon his ear, strike him as the voice of another. (256).

Finally, the suspense of not knowing develops into an obsession and source of tension just as strong as romantic or sexual love. In “The Last of the Valerii”, the narrator reaches a point where “I seemed to touch the source of his trouble, and my relief was great, for my discovery made me feel like bursting into laughter” (92). But later, “I couldn't get used to my idea. Sometimes it offered itself to me with a perverse fascination which deprived me of all wish to interfere. The Count took the form of a precious psychological study...” (93)

In short, ideas take the place of people in the supernatural tales of Henry James. Sometimes they serve as an outlet for simple affection, as in “Maud-Evelyn”. In other cases, they can take on a more sexual nature. The next chapter continues this discussion in a related vein, by examining the typical behaviors of member of each gender, and in particular their styles of seeking information.
5. Reason versus intuition: gendered ways of knowing.

Next I wish to examine Henry James’s representation of gender roles -- not to impute to the author any statements about the relative rights of the sexes, but in order to show that certain norms are established within the stories so that they might later be inverted. In Victorian literature, fluctuations in social behavior can serve as a barometer for the presence of deeper philosophical issues. In this case, the contradiction of well-defined gender roles is used to indicate when something else is amiss.

Although heroines are the norm in his novels, most of the women in the ghostly tales are only minor characters, and their opportunity to act is quite limited. The familiar injunction for children not to speak unless spoken to could apply just as well to young adult women. In “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes, because it would have been improper for a “well-bred young woman” to interrupt the conversation, or to otherwise control it by phrasing a question of her own, the girls are obliged to only sit and wait. Even older women frequently lack agency. Miss Amy and Miss Susan in “The Third Person” are impossible to take seriously. James relegates them to being illustrations of “the natural history of the English old maid. She would have struck you indeed, poor Miss Frush, as so happy an instance of the type that you would perhaps scarce have been able to equip her with the dignity of the individual” (633).

There are, however, exceptions to the rule: some women are very much in control, and this makes them immediately prominent. In “The Last of the Valerii,” Martha suggests an excavation of the villa with all the industriousness of a good American Protestant girl. As for Marco, “the near prospect of discoveries seemed to act upon his nerves” (81). Conversely, certain men display what would generally be seen as feminine tendencies - beginning sentences with sighs or other exclamations. Wayworth, for instance, is perpetually blushing and begging to be reassured of his own talents. On a visit to the theater before his own rehearsals begin, he watches another play and “divined that it was the part they enjoyed rather than the actress. He had a private panic, wondering how, if they liked that form, they could possibly
like his” (189). The narrator of “The Private Life” has a same-sex respect for Clare Vawdrey that resembles a schoolgirl crush:

“How long were you there?” I asked with admiration.
“Long enough to tell him I adore him.”
“Aha that’s what I’ve never been able to tell him!” I quite wailed. (248).

There is a role reversal, too, in “Sir Dominick Ferrand”: having been “put in his place” by Mrs. Ryves, Baron feels that “there was something in his whimsical neighbour that struck him as terribly invulnerable” (299).

Women often serve to highlight the empathetic incompetence of men. In the same story, oblivious to Rosalind’s simmering ill will, Mr. Lloyd’s mind is at ease. He is oblivious until the last, telling his wife openly that he had been riding with Rosalind at the time of her delivery, unaware of the suggestive power that such a circumstance might have. Likewise, in “The Last of the Valerii”, Marco is the extreme of male simplicity. The narrator notes that his taste was a little crude, but his eye was excellent, and his measurement of the correspondence between some feature of my sketch and the object I was trying to reproduce, as trustworthy as that of a mathematical instrument. But he seemed to me to have either a strange reserve or a still stranger simplicity, to be fundamentally unfurnished with anything remotely resembling an idea. He had no beliefs nor hopes nor fears - nothing but senses, appetites, serenely luxurious tastes. (77)

In such situations, women are useful for their sensitiveness. In “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, when Baron complains that women are without honor, Mrs. Ryves replies that “at any rate they have other perceptions more delicate than those of men” (270). (If delicacy means squeamishness, her argument is hard to contest. In “The Last of the Valerii,” the sight of blood, predictably, leaves Martha in a state of “immense agitation” (99).)

There are several real-life sources for these peculiarities in relations between the sexes. James’s own biography gives several leading roles to older women, in the form of mentors and patronesses. Some, such as his mother and aunt, were blood relatives; others came with romantic potential. Edel quotes a letter written by Henry James to his mother, in which he notes that “Old women are marrying young men, by the way, all over the place. If you hear next that Mrs. Kemble, or Mrs. Procter, or Mrs. Duncan Stewart is to marry me, you
may know we have simply conformed to the fashion” (230). Each of the women mentioned was at least thirty years his senior. The possibility of such a relation is alluded to in “Sir Edmund Orme” when the narrator muses that Mrs. Marden might want him for herself, “like some unnatural mammas” (145). Even as he courts the daughter, his connection to the mother grows more intimate, until he declares that “we shall evidently each of us know things now - where the other’s concerned” (164).

The author’s sexuality has also been the subject of some controversy. He never married, and towards the end of his life he entered into intimate mentoring relationships with younger male writers such as the Irish-born Jocelyn Persse. Rather than delving into speculation about the parts of James’s personal life that did not appear in print, I would instead suggest that the truly significant details are those for which we have evidence - in particular, his representations of female characters. An acquaintance once observed that “he seemed to look at women rather as women looked at them. Women looked at women as persons; men look at them as women. The quality of sex in women, which is their first and chief attraction to most men, was not their chief attraction to James.” (Edel 234) The supernatural stories are not the strongest evidence of this unusual sensitivity - perhaps Mrs. Alsager in “Nona Vincent” is the only truly stable, insightful woman in the collection. But the fact that James knew how to portray a refined female psyche, and elected instead to use these tales to write about hysteria and fragility, should raise questions about his strategies and goals.

Thus the heroine has a special role to play in James’s tales - sometimes creative muse, sometimes damsel in distress, sometimes confidante, rarely actor. Investigation, as described in Chapter 3, becomes another way for male protagonists to rescue the damsel in distress. These general trends will serve as a backdrop for the next chapter’s examination of the twists contained in “The Turn of the Screw”.
6. On the stage and screen: perspectives on “The Turn of the Screw”.

Until this point, much of the discussion has focused on the lesser-known tales in this collection. Although not as memorable or as widely-read as some of the final tales, the early stories are a fertile source of patterns and techniques that James later used to greater effect. In this chapter, I want to turn the focus to “The Turn of the Screw”, perhaps the most heavily studied story in the anthology. When the two terms, supernatural and James, appear in one phrase, this is almost certainly the title that comes to mind. Rather than treating the story fully, as has already been extensively done in other sources, my intent is to bring out the aspects of this tale which pertain specifically to my thesis.

“The Turn of the Screw” is hybrid in form - twice as long as the average story in Edel’s collection, and closer really to a novella. The story is set around 1860 or 70, in rural southern England. A young woman responds to an advertisement for a governess, and goes to meet her potential employer in London. She is the youngest daughter of a country parson, and has never lived outside her father’s house; her employer, on the other hand, is an urbanite and a gentleman. She is, in her own words, “carried away” by his sophistication - so much that she accepts the post along with its one bizarre condition. After arriving at Bly to take charge of his young niece and nephew, she is never to contact their uncle again, happen what may.

The supernatural comes into play when the governess begins to realize that the two small children, Miles and Flora, are possessed by the ghosts of their former governess and her lover. The story centers on her internal struggle over how to make the situation right. The whole affair is retold using a framing narrative: the governess, long deceased, has written down her own version of the events, and many years later her story becomes an evening’s entertainment for several friends gathered round the fire.

The forced isolation and framing narrative are familiar elements by now. An added twist this time is the anonymity - neither the governess nor the uncle has a name, as though their identities had been protected after the fact. And despite the first-person narrator, there
is more room for doubt here than in any other story. The testimonials of secondary characters - Miles, Flora, Mrs. Grose - discredit the governess’s firm belief that the children are possessed, forcing the reader to take a side.

But the most intriguing aspects of “The Turn of the Screw”, for the purposes of this paper, are the ways in which the governess oversteps the bounds of gender, age, and class. She has been placed in an unusual position of power - the uncle has given her, as the story puts it, “supreme authority” at Bly (441). The only other tales in the collection with female first-person narrators are “The Friend of the Friends” and “Maud-Evelyn”, and both of these are essentially tales of moneyed courtship and marriage. But the governess, however taken she may be with the children’s uncle, has a nobler task. Initially she feels that “to watch, teach, “form” little Flora would too evidently be the making of a happy and useful life” (445). And in the final moments of the tale, her mission has taken on a darker tinge: to save the children from corruption, even at the ultimate cost of one of their lives.

The 1996 stage adaptation of “The Turn of the Screw” by Jeffrey Hatcher does a good job of recreating the atmosphere of the original. Rather than casting all of the characters separately, Hatcher chooses to cast only two actors - “the woman”, who plays the governess, and “the man”, who plays the uncle, the housekeeper, and the two small children. Thus even before eerie things start happening, even before the ghosts appear, the governess is living in a world where the only characters are “I” and “The Other”.

More than that, Hatcher makes definite choices about each character’s personality - a necessary move, since a play with more than one actor must be told in more than one voice. In this excerpt from the script, the governess approaches Miles with extreme delicacy, to find out why he has been expelled from school. Miles, for his part, is concerned only with leaving Bly, and finding a way for his uncle to visit.
MILES: You’d like my uncle to come down here, wouldn’t you?
GOVERNESS: (Taken aback.) What I desire has nothing to do with -
MILES: But you’re not allowed to trouble him, are you? Well, what if we could get uncle
to come down... without your having to do it? If we could do that... then would you
help me to leave Bly? (Long pause)
GOVERNESS: (Trying to cover her interest.) How... would we do this?
MILES: Something could happen. (Pause.) Where’s Flora?
GOVERNESS: (Wary.) Miles -
MILES: Have you seen little Flora?
GOVERNESS: She’s up ahead with Mrs. Grose. Miles, what do you mean “something
could happen”?
MILES: (A finger to his lips.) Shhh. I’ll - take care - of everything. (Miles starts off.)
GOVERNESS: Miles! (Miles turns to her.)
MILES: Miss?
GOVERNESS: Miles, I - I’ve been wrestling with a question, Miles, one that’s been
vexing me of late, and you’re so... clever, Miles. It’s a riddle. “What comes between a
man and a woman, but allows everything?”
MILES: (A slightly surprised look.) Why, miss, that’s easy. A touch. (Miles kisses the
Governess on the lips. Their kiss holds for a long moment. The Governess’s hands rise,
tense, then flare out. Miles pulls away, smiles, and goes off into the darkness.
Silence.)

Some of the differences between this and James’s text are subtle - for example, in the
story Miles refers to his governess as “my dear”, while in the play he simply calls her “miss”.

Other changes are more significant, such as the monologues written for the Governess. The
speech Hatcher writes for her following the exchange above is a chance to voice insecurities -
“I am no heroine! I am alone and unable and untouched!” - only hinted at in the story. But
most importantly, in Hatcher’s play, the possibility remains that Miles is simply a clever but
naughty 10-year-old boy, and his governess an overly pious young lady.

In the 1961 film version starring Deborah Kerr, however, it’s obvious that Miles’s
behavior is preternaturally adult - or, as the governess would argue, supernaturally. In the
screenplay by William Archibald and Truman Capote, Miles is given lines to deliver and poems
to recite that make him appear twice as worldly and confident as the governess. Indeed, his
self-assurance becomes a marked threat. In one scene, he wraps his arms round her neck from
behind; the gesture is ostensibly in play, but lasts for a fraction of a second too long to be truly
just in fun. The film also takes care to emphasize how much of the action depends on pure
abstractions: although the governess insists that she loves children, “more than anything!”, it is
made quite clear that she has no experience in teaching - nor, as the youngest daughter in the household, in the care of children.

The challenge of making Henry James into a play or movie is that new dialogue and stage directions will inevitably have to be written, and so much in these stories depends on the unspoken. The text can’t be confined; it pulls us in by placing us in the position of the narrator and forcing us to make decisions in a way that theater and film cannot. In this case, the audience can choose among several possible explanations:

1 - The governess could be hysterical, and the ghosts a figment of her imagination.
2 - The children could be possessed, and the ghosts a real phenomenon for all present.
3 - The governess could be possessed, and the ghosts real, but only from her perspective.

While some explanations have a sounder basis than others, none can be conclusively disproved.

My goal in giving special attention to two visual interpretations of this story has been to show that ambiguity is a key element of James’s fiction which can never be fully replicated by another medium. The next section will elaborate on the reasons for this ambiguity, and the contrast that it strikes with other fiction of the period.
7. A stranger in two lands: departures from Victorian convention.

As readers, we are generally drawn to texts with which we personally identify. Reading Henry James, on the contrary, can be an alienating experience. After a novel like The Ambassadors, or a tale like “The Turn of the Screw”, one always feels that there remains something more to be said – that the words on the page represent only a fraction of the story being told. He has a penchant for making mysteries of everyday situations, and for using language to complicate rather than communicate. This chapter will support the argument that James was unusual among 19th century writers in this regard. The vague sense of uncertainty and uneasiness in Henry James anticipates the works of a later era – if not in content, then certainly in Form and Style, which after all were always his greatest concerns.

As a young man, James observed that “there comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another; and then I suppose it may be said of you that you have become a cosmopolite.” (Edel 121) James spent his entire life in limbo between two cultures (Europe and America), never fully associating himself with either. In addition, he grew up in a family whose thoughts on spirituality were unusually intense and introspective. Henry James, Sr. was a noted writer on spiritual subjects, and a colleague of figures such as Emerson and Thoreau. These factors, combined with a naturally shy disposition and the choice of a solitary profession, made the younger Henry feel like an outsider in his own life, and this sensation is recreated for readers of his fiction.

An outsider is in a position to observe, but not to pass judgment. Thus, whereas observation in Hawthorne is morally charged, observation in James is by comparison uninvolved. “You’re a searcher of hearts,” says Blanche Adney to her writer friend, “that frivolous thing an observer” (224) - the implication being that writers collect feelings with no more concern than if they were butterflies. The tales are “moral” in the sense that ethics are involved, but not in the sense that the story’s purpose is to teach a lesson. More than on universal ethics, the emphasis is on the narrow subset of ethics called social decorum.
Economy of words and use of parallel narratives are two more techniques in which James was ahead of his time. Every word is precious: never does the author waste time by going back to explain. Instead he remains resolutely in the present, and uses the technique of “compression, in which the experience of a whole lifetime has been rendered in a short, simple tale” (Vaid 41). In order to create a rich symbolic context without straying too far from the particular psychology of his characters, James also alludes to other literary works. The young narrator of “The Ghostly Rental”, for example, understands his experience through references to childhood stories - Hoffmann, Blue Beard, and Arabian Nights.

Finally, the absence of authority is conspicuous in these tales. As chapter 2 has shown, James avoids using an omniscient narrator, having what Beach calls “a great scorn for this slovenly way of telling a story” (56). When a first person narrator is used, this character is rarely the prime authority, and the audience is only rarely directly addressed. In a more abstract way, there is a lack of empirical authority in that the solutions to many of the mysteries are not to be found. James’s characters intuitively understand that reason will only take them so far, and for the rest they rely on instinct. The female narrator of “The Friends of the Friends” is so convinced of the case for her suspicions that she comes to extrapolate a great deal from very little information:

When six years later, in solitude and silence, I heard of his death I hailed it as a direct contribution to my theory. It was sudden, it was never properly accounted for, it was surrounded by circumstances in which - for oh I took them to pieces! - I distinctively read an intention, the mark of his own hidden hand. (424)

Yet even though the grimness of stories like this one makes them seem ghastly rather than ghostly at times, they take almost without exception a positive view of the supernatural. The final chapter will show how such suspicions and doubts can actually be a source of comfort, a reassurance that everything in life is in fact connected and has a greater meaning lying somewhere beneath.
8. Conclusions: embracing the world beyond.

“Truly, we know where our lives begin,” muses the narrator in “De Grey: A Romance”, “but who shall say where they end?” (38). Beyond the scope of each individual life lies the domain of Henry James’s fiction, and the author approaches his subject with eager curiosity rather than dread. In this conclusion, the themes from previous chapters will be revisited in order to show that the supernatural in these stories is something to be welcomed, not feared.

It has been established that details of plot and motive are not always clear. What should be obvious, however, is that the tales are set in a world of ideals. One would almost say that James’s men and women live in a constant state of disappointment, except that they don’t necessarily expect their marvelous dreams to come true. Resignation is perhaps a better word: hope and reality coexist, and characters are rarely desperate about their situation, but are often deeply unhappy. In “Nona Vincent”, the actress Violet Gray is crushed, unable to play her dream role to satisfaction. Blanche Adney, by contrast, languishes in “The Private Life” because “none of the things she had done was the thing she had dreamed of” (220). Neither are men immune to the longing for something greater. In “Sir Dominick Ferrand”, as the boats depart at Dover, Peter Baron

watched enviously the preparation, the agitation of foreign travel. It was for some minutes a foretaste of adventure; but, ah, when was he to have the very draught? (282)

The most evocative description of this “something beyond” is at the heart of “The Great Good Place”. The story is supernatural not because of any haunting, but because its premise is very nearly divine. George Dane is a writer overwhelmed by his professional duties, and suffocating in his own identity. When a young admirer visits one morning, he allows the young man to sit at his desk and have at the stack of papers, while Dane himself reclines on the sofa. His next awareness is described in the following paragraph:

He might have been a week in the place - the scene of his new consciousness - before he spoke at all. The occasion of it then was that one of the quiet figures he had been idly watching drew at last nearer and showed to him a face that was the highest expression - to his pleased but as yet slightly confused perception - of the general
charm. What was the general charm? He couldn’t, for that matter, easily have phrased it; it was such an abyss of negatives, such an absence of positives and of everything. (576)

Far from being desolate, this Great Good Place is a sort of paradise for Dane. The essential element is that in this land, everything is unified: all citizens are brothers, all days are beautiful and alike. Such unity is not always pleasant in ghostly fiction. Describing “The Fall of the House of Usher”, Manuel Aguirre suggests that Poe’s horror can be traced to “the ultimate unity of the universe - but a wholeness and unity which are dreaded and therefore presented in negative terms” (127). Conversely, in James’s fiction, wholeness is craved - characters long for a glimpse of something beyond the natural world to give extra dimension to their material lives. In “The Third Person”, this longing is absurd, as Miss Susan and Miss Amy feel comforted by their ghostly visitor because he “removed them from that category of the manless in which no lady really lapses till every issue is closed” (650). But in “Maud-Evelyn” it is more bittersweet: Mr. and Mrs. Dedrick continue to talk about their late daughter as though she had lived into adulthood, going so far as to choose a husband for her.

The critical point is that the supernatural occurrence in James is not always a troubling excess; quite often it is welcomed as the final puzzle piece. To return to that passage in *The Ambassadors*:

It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. (383)

Two senses of “wanted” are suggested here: both *missing*, and *desired*. As much turmoil as the scene ultimately causes Strether, on some subconscious level he had already been waiting for it to occur.

One final analogy will conclude this attempt to situate James as a writer. Joseph Beach writes that “the background is in the stories of Henry James as dominant in the final effect as the harmonic background in a song of Debussy” (168-9). Although both artists shared an impressionistic aesthetic, I would argue that the metaphor itself is slightly flawed.
Debussy’s music easily converts into background noise, while James demands our undivided attention. His writing may be smooth and pleasant, but it requires our full presence at every moment of the reading. To be sure, Beach also understood perfectly well the deepness of these texts. He writes that “what one finds in life are intimations, fragments, momentary and fleeting sensitiveness and points of view, that remind one of the world of James” (121), and this is perhaps the highest compliment that can be paid to Henry James as an author: after we’ve read his stories, life itself seems to be only an imitation.

On this note I would like to close, adding only that if James’s goal was art that would endure, it should be clear that his texts are in no danger of disappearing. Today the men and women who give us literature are mostly referred to as writers, but there is a certain connotation to the more old-fashioned word “author” that gives it a weightier air. While the first refers only to process - anyone who takes pen to paper can call himself a writer - the second implies some sort of lasting significance. One writes a manuscript, but one authors a deed. I believe that Henry James felt strongly this distinction, and aimed to place himself into the latter category. The subject matter and style of his “supernatural” stories is evidence that he saw writing as more than entertainment; for James, fiction was an avenue to a state of heightened consciousness and experience - a chance to become one of those on whom nothing is lost.
REFERENCES


