

The Turn of the Screw

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This is supposed to be the best ghost story ever written. Admittedly the genre does not present much of a competition, but even as such, one is dubious about such exalted claims for the story. I suspect that I once read the story some thirty odd years ago, and if so it must not have made any lasting impression. Returning to it now, means also returning to James after a more than thirty years hiatus, and with the hopes of appreciating him more keenly, than I was able to do as a teenager, being then too innocent of life to savour its more refined aspects, and dismissing him as 'blood-less', after an initial interest probably based on nothing more substantial than snobbery.

In fact one is as a mature reader struck by the authors obsession with the finer points of intrapersonal relations, as well as being impressed by the haunting and sinister mood he is able to evoke by being so unspecific. On the other hand the very presence of ghosts put rather unusual demands on the readers suspension of judgement, although such suspensions were no doubt part of the conventions of the genre. Anyway serious critics have thus been reduced to interpret the ghosts as hallucinations of the narrator, who is thus perceived as mad and the very source of the the horror she is confronting. Against such an interpretation counts the precise information she is able to give and to which she supposedly has never been privy. The effectiveness of the story hinges upon the innocence of the children and the dark hint that it might hide something not quite so innocent. Also the nature of the relationship between the children and the departed couple consisting of a servant and a governess never being made explicit suggest it is a of sexually abusive kind. The end of the story turns out to be an anti-climax. The sudden death of the boy (whatever happened to the girl?) was no doubt part of the convention of the classical ghost story and as such predictable (unlike the death of the child in Goethes poem about der Erlknig, which thus is far more effective). One feels cheated, having read on with the sole intent of being offered some kind of resolution as to the dark mystery.

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