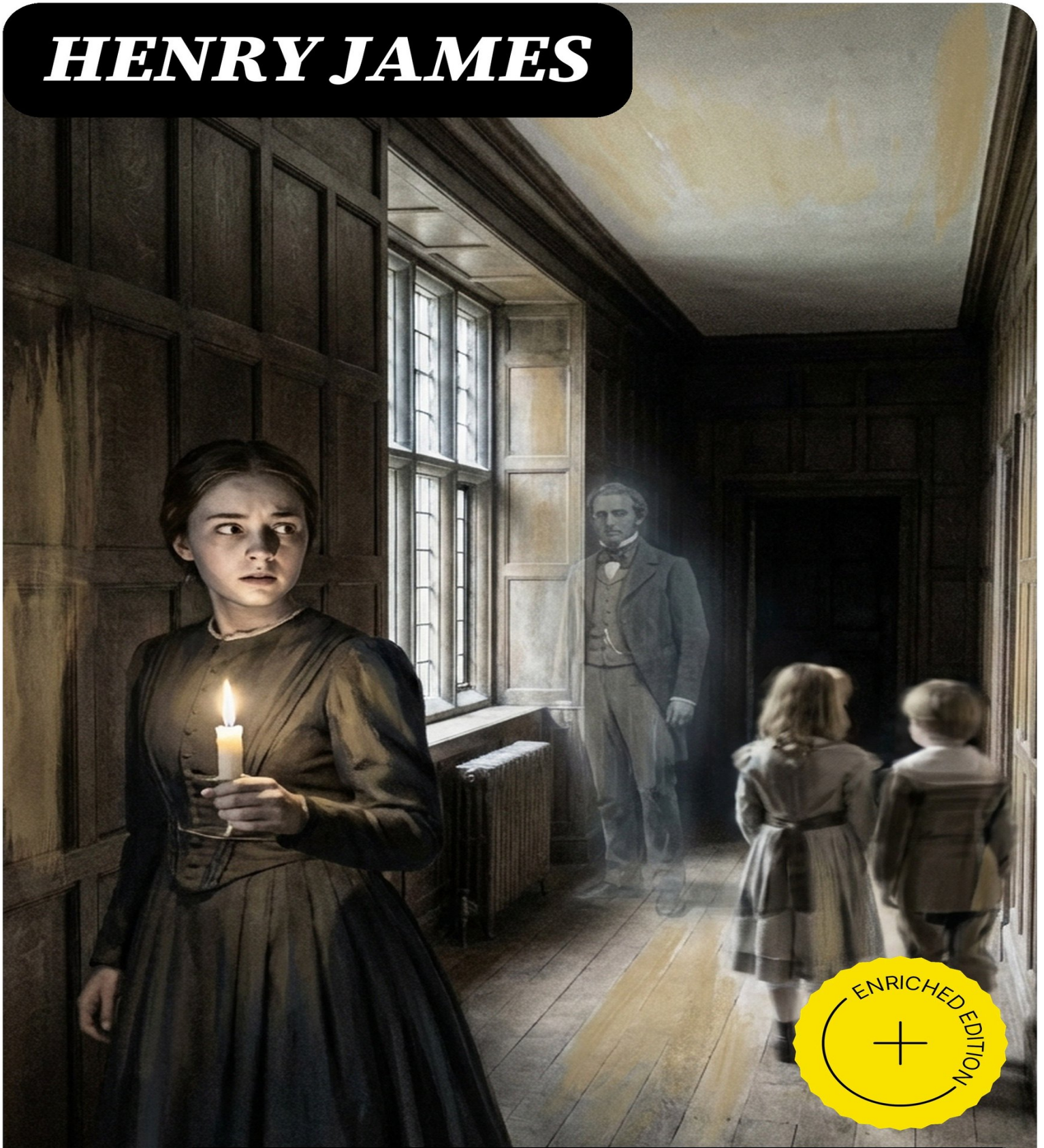


***HENRY JAMES***



***THE TURN  
OF THE SCREW***

**Henry James**

# **The Turn of the Screw**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Kendall Pierce*

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# Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Historical Context](#)

[Author Biography](#)

## **[The Turn of the Screw](#)**

[Analysis](#)

[Reflection](#)

[Memorable Quotes](#)

[Notes](#)

# Introduction

## [Table of Contents](#)

At a secluded country estate, the boundary between protection and possession thins as a young governess faces apparitions that may be spirits—or the mirrored shapes of her own dread.

*The Turn of the Screw*, first published in 1898, is Henry James's most famous ghost story and one of the most debated works in English-language fiction. Composed in the closing years of the nineteenth century, it appeared first in serial form and was collected soon after in the volume *The Two Magics*. Its brevity, structural daring, and psychological acuity helped secure James's reputation as a master of narrative perspective. Balanced between Gothic atmosphere and rigorous observation of consciousness, the novella demonstrates how terror can arise not from spectacle but from uncertainty, from what the mind perceives—and from what it refuses to know.

At its core is a simple setup with inexhaustible implications. A young, inexperienced governess is engaged to care for two exceptional children at a remote country house called Bly, while their guardian remains absent. She arrives eager to prove her worth and quickly becomes devoted to her charges. Then unusual sights and unsettling impressions begin to gather, pressing her to read the situation as a matter of urgent moral responsibility. Determined to protect the children from a threat she believes is real, she moves from watchfulness to action, even as the grounds for her certainty remain as fogbound as the estate itself.

James frames this tale as a story within a story, presented to readers through the filter of a manuscript recounted to a small audience before it reaches us. The layered structure increases both immediacy and distance: we are close to the governess's voice yet never forget that her testimony is mediated, copied, and retold. That artful arrangement underscores the central tension between experience and report, presence and recollection. The narrative perspective is strictly limited, yet supple, allowing feeling, inference, and observation to interpenetrate. Such control of viewpoint makes the text a landmark in the evolution of modern fiction's self-conscious techniques.

Themes of innocence and knowledge spiral through each chapter, joined by questions of authority, duty, and desire. The novella is animated by a sustained inquiry into perception: whether seeing is believing, or believing teaches us what to see. It contemplates what adults owe to children, and how care can tilt toward zeal, even coercion, when fear takes hold. Silence and secrecy hum beneath the surface, as do the social constraints of class and gender that shape who may speak and who must be trusted. The result is a study of moral urgency complicated by the limits and perils of interpretation.

The Turn of the Screw holds classic status because it transformed the ghost story from a vehicle of shocks into a crucible for ambiguity. Earlier Gothic tales often anchored the supernatural in melodrama; James concentrates instead on ambiguity sustained to the final page. That refinement of terror profoundly influenced the twentieth century's psychological horror and modernist experimentation with point of view. The book's compactness invites close reading, while its open questions invite rereading. Each generation finds a different emphasis in its meticulously staged

uncertainties, proving that the work's durability lies in its refusal to resolve the very conflicts it ignites.

Critical responses have been as varied as the apparitions themselves. Some readers regard the phenomena as external and malign; others read them as projections of a distressed or overzealous mind. The debates have fueled interpretive schools across decades, from psychoanalytic and rhetorical approaches to historicist, feminist, and queer inquiries, each discovering new contours in the text's suggestive gaps. Far from narrowing the book's meaning, this ongoing conversation has become part of its identity, a testament to James's ability to harness ambiguity as an engine of thought. Few short works have generated a comparable range and longevity of scholarly engagement.

The novella's influence extends well beyond the study and the seminar. It has been adapted repeatedly for stage and screen, inspiring works that highlight its eerie atmosphere and psychological intensity. Benjamin Britten's chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw* reshaped the tale for music, and the film *The Innocents* brought its charged imagery to cinema with enduring impact. Contemporary storytellers continue to return to Bly as a site of reinvention, testifying to the story's pliable architecture and archetypal power. These adaptations differ in emphasis yet share the source's central fascination: the uneasy border where the supernatural meets subjective conviction.

James's prose animates this fascination with extraordinary finesse. Sentences curve and delay, drawing readers into the rhythms of thought, while exact sensory details keep us tethered to rooms, corridors, windows, and the landscape beyond. The setting functions as more than backdrop; it is an interpretive instrument, its vistas and thresholds staging the drama of watching and being

watched. Repetition, echo, and carefully placed omissions foster a pressure that mounts without spectacle. The writer's control of pacing—glimpses, returns, recapitulations—produces a distinctive form of dread that seems to arise from ordinary attentiveness itself, as if terror were the clarifying glare of perception.

Placed within its historical moment, the book registers the fin-de-siècle's unsettled energies. Questions of social position define the governess, a figure situated awkwardly between classes, responsible for the household's moral life yet excluded from its privileges. Education, religious sensibility, and propriety press upon her decisions, while the era's anxieties about secrecy, transgression, and reputation shape every exchange. James, a cosmopolitan observer of Anglo-American society, brings to this microcosm his fascination with manners and motive. The ghost story thus becomes an instrument for probing cultural thresholds, where public ideals and private impulses conflict, and where the maintenance of order masks deep unease.

Reading *The Turn of the Screw* is an exercise in disciplined attention. The narrative urges us to weigh evidence, to consider the possibility of error, to recognize how certainty can be produced by the very stories we tell ourselves. Its craft rewards patience: images recur with altered meaning, and seemingly minor details acquire unsettling consequence. Yet the book remains accessible in its pleasures—eerie scenes, charged conversations, and a steadily tightening coil of suspense. James invites us to inhabit both curiosity and doubt, reminding us that the most consequential dramas may unfold not in action, but in interpretation and belief.

Today, the novella's concerns prove strikingly contemporary. In an age alert to unreliable testimony and to

the ethics of care, it asks what we owe the vulnerable, what authority entails, and how fear can distort our obligations. Its meditation on interpretation anticipates modern debates about evidence, expertise, and the stories institutions tell to secure trust. At the same time, its portrayal of haunted spaces—domestic, psychological, cultural—continues to startle. That is why *The Turn of the Screw* endures as a classic: it binds atmosphere to inquiry, suspense to moral reflection, offering readers a tale as inexhaustible as the doubts it dramatizes.

# Synopsis

## Table of Contents

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) opens with a frame narrative set at a winter gathering, where listeners share ghost stories. An unnamed outer narrator records how a man named Douglas produces a manuscript written years earlier by a governess he once knew. The document promises a chilling account involving two children and an isolated country house. Douglas supplies minimal background about the governess and then reads her first-person narrative. This framing emphasizes mediation and memory, preparing readers for a tale whose authority rests on a single testimony, and establishing the work's blend of intimacy, suspense, and interpretive uncertainty.

Within the manuscript, a young, inexperienced governess is engaged by a wealthy bachelor to oversee his orphaned niece and nephew at a rural estate called Bly. He insists she manage everything without troubling him, a condition she accepts in admiration and anxiety. On arrival she meets the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, and the younger child, Flora, who appears affectionate and well-behaved. The house is stately yet remote, surrounded by gardens and water, a place of beauty that also suggests isolation. Awaiting the older child, Miles, who is away at school, the governess begins her duties, alert to the gravity of her charge.

Before Miles returns for the holidays, a letter arrives from his school reporting that he will not be received back. The notice gives no clear reason, merely stating that he has been dismissed. Disturbed by the vagueness and reluctant to inform the distant guardian, the governess confides in Mrs. Grose, who has little insight into the matter. When

Miles reaches Bly, he is charming, articulate, and preternaturally poised, disarming the governess's fears even as the enigma of his expulsion lingers. The children's outward perfection heightens the governess's vigilance, and she resolves to protect them and preserve the household's calm.

One evening, walking the grounds, the governess perceives a man standing on a tower of the house, staring intently. Later she sees the same figure again at a window, as if surveying the interior. Disturbed, she describes the stranger to Mrs. Grose, who identifies him as Peter Quint, the former valet to the children's absent guardian. Quint, she explains, is dead, and he once exercised undue familiarity within the household. Concluding that the figure is the man's apparition, the governess believes Bly itself has become permeated by a dangerous presence, and that the children may be within its reach.

Not long after, the governess sees a woman seated by the lake and later at the bottom of the staircase, a figure marked by grief and defiance. Mrs. Grose understands the description as that of Miss Jessel, the children's previous governess, also deceased. The new governess interprets these appearances as attempts to reassert influence over the children. She suspects that Flora and Miles perceive more than they admit, but the children maintain a bright innocence that makes certainty elusive. The uneasy interplay between secrecy and candor intensifies: smiles, glances, and small evasions take on ominous significance in the governess's interpretation.

Confronted with what she deems a hidden contest for the children's souls, the governess pledges to keep them safe without summoning their guardian. She and Mrs. Grose debate what to reveal and when, yet they take no decisive

step beyond heightened watchfulness. Miles speaks of wanting to return to school, and his charm alternates with moments of strangeness that the governess cannot comfortably explain. At night she experiences unsettling encounters that seem to confirm the apparitions' persistence. Her strategy becomes one of constant proximity, testing whether mere attention and presence can interrupt whatever influence she believes is gathering strength.

As weeks pass, the governess's observations accumulate: glimpses at windows, sudden silences, and episodes in which she feels the children communicate through hints rather than admissions. At times she believes the figures appear even within Bly's domestic spaces, shrinking the distance between danger and refuge. The surrounding community offers little help, as the estate's routines keep visitors peripheral. Tensions crest around the lake with Flora, where an incident convinces the governess that confrontation is necessary. The children's dazzling politeness becomes another battleground, each exchange freighted with insinuation. The narrative's atmosphere tightens, with dread arising from both what is seen and what is inferred.

Seeking resolution, the governess contemplates appealing to the guardian but hesitates, fearing blame for failure. She eventually drafts a letter, only to find its fate uncertain. She grows convinced that Miles hides knowledge related to his dismissal and possibly the strange events at Bly. Conversations circle the unspoken, and loyalties within the household shift under mounting pressure. The story advances toward a final night in which the governess, alone with Miles, determines to end ambiguity through direct engagement. What follows is presented entirely through her

perspective, and the manuscript withholds external confirmation, preserving the tale's unsettling balance between perception and reality.

James's novella endures because it refuses easy classification as either a ghost story or a psychological case study. Its careful layering of a frame narrative, a single testimonial voice, and suggestive detail invites competing readings about innocence and corruption, authority and responsibility, seeing and believing. The work examines the burdens of guardianship and the risks of interpreting others, especially children, through fear or desire for control. By sustaining ambiguity rather than resolving it, the book prompts ongoing debate about the nature of evil and the reliability of narrators. Its spare setting, concentrated action, and interpretive openness continue to reward close attention.

# Historical Context

## Table of Contents

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is set in late Victorian England, largely within a secluded country estate that reflects the period's entrenched class hierarchy and domestic order. The household is structured around servants, a housekeeper, and a governess charged with the care and moral supervision of children. The Anglican Church remained culturally dominant, though religious authority coexisted uneasily with a growing secular outlook. London functioned as the social and economic center, while rural estates symbolized continuity and respectability. In this world, propriety, reputation, and deference regulated behavior, and the education and protection of children were treated as moral obligations intertwined with class privilege and domestic routine.

The novella appeared in 1898, a moment often described as the British *fin de siècle*, marked by worries about cultural decadence, social change, and uncertain moral boundaries. James serialized the story in *Collier's Weekly*, an American magazine, and it was issued in book form the same year in Britain and the United States. This transatlantic publication underscores the international reach of late nineteenth-century print culture and James's stature on both sides of the Atlantic. The dating situates the tale alongside contemporaneous debates about psychological realism, the evolving ghost story, and anxieties about authority, sexuality, and the reliability of perception.

James frames the tale within a winter gathering for ghost stories, drawing on a distinctly Victorian tradition. Nineteenth-century periodicals often published supernatural

tales in winter numbers, and fireside storytelling at Christmas had been popularized earlier by Charles Dickens. Such frames invited readers to consider the act of narration itself: who tells the story, how it is transmitted, and how listeners might be influenced. *The Turn of the Screw* uses this cultural habit to emphasize mediation and doubt, inviting audiences familiar with magazine fiction and seasonal ghost tales to question the trustworthiness of the speaker and the limits of testimony.

Central to the book's social world is the governess, a distinctly Victorian figure positioned precariously between classes. Many governesses were educated daughters of clergymen or professionals who needed paid work but did not belong to the servant class. Conduct and household manuals, such as Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861), codified expectations for decorum, duties, and boundaries. The governess's authority over children was moral and instructional, yet her social position depended on the employer's goodwill and references. This complicated status—authority without full power, intimacy without belonging—provides a historical lens for understanding the tensions that animate the narrative.

Domestic service was the largest single employment for women in late Victorian Britain. Country houses were organized into strict hierarchies with housekeepers, butlers, lady's maids, footmen, and nursery staff, each with defined spaces and routines. "Below stairs" labor supported the privacy and elegance of "above stairs" life, reinforcing social distance. Housekeepers, often senior and long-serving, exercised considerable practical authority and institutional memory within the household. The interpersonal dynamics between a governess and a housekeeper like Mrs. Grose would have been shaped by custom, etiquette, and the tacit

knowledge that kept estates running smoothly and reputations intact.

Victorian educational reforms reshaped childhood. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 established a framework for mass schooling in England and Wales; subsequent measures in the 1880s and 1890s made attendance more widely compulsory and reduced fees. At elite levels, boarding schools cultivated discipline, sportsmanship, and a gentlemanly ethos, while children in affluent households were prepared by governesses and tutors before entering such institutions. Nurseries and schoolrooms were spatially separated to maintain order and supervision. The novella's references to schooling, dismissal, and the handling of children echo a system that saw education as both social sorting and moral formation.

The period also elevated the ideal of childhood innocence. Late nineteenth-century Britain developed a strong "cult of the child" in art and literature and expanded legal protections. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 raised the age of consent, reflecting alarm at exploitation. Organizations to prevent cruelty to children coalesced in the 1880s, with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children gaining broader national status and a royal charter in the 1890s. This climate made the moral guardianship of children intensely scrutinized. The novella's unease about influence, exposure, and secrecy resonates with these protective—and anxious—Victorian impulses.

Gender norms shaped the risks and possibilities available to young women like James's governess. Ideals of female respectability emphasized modesty, duty, and restraint, while debates about the "New Woman" in the 1890s exposed anxieties over female autonomy, work, and sexuality. Paid positions for educated women were

expanding but limited, and a compromised reputation could destroy livelihoods. Letters of reference, living arrangements, and the propriety of interactions with men were governed by exacting standards. The heroine's resolve to take responsibility reflects a period when women could act decisively in domestic spheres yet remained vulnerable to suspicion and social censure.

Male guardianship and bachelor culture formed another recognizable Victorian pattern. Affluent men often delegated domestic oversight to servants and governesses while maintaining urban social lives centered on clubs, offices, and cultural pursuits. The bachelor figure, long conventional, acquired new scrutiny in the 1890s amid scandals and debates about masculinity and propriety, notably following the highly publicized trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895. Without asserting a direct commentary, the novella's distant, urbane guardian sits within a milieu that prized gentlemanly detachment while leaving moral and emotional labor to dependents and employees in the household.

Late Victorian medicine and psychology offered competing languages for unusual experience. The era saw interest in hysteria, suggestion, and hypnosis through continental clinicians like Jean-Martin Charcot, alongside growing Anglophone psychological inquiry. William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), by Henry James's brother, helped popularize attention to consciousness, habit, and perception. Though distinct from clinical writing, Henry James's fiction absorbed this climate of introspection and mental nuance. The novella's focus on attention, interpretation, and the strain of watchfulness echoes a culture attempting to distinguish between pathological states, heightened sensitivity, and credible testimony.

Spiritualism and psychical research were also prominent. Séances, mediums, and claims of spirit photography fascinated the public from the mid-nineteenth century onward, provoking scientific investigation and skepticism. The Society for Psychical Research, founded in Britain in 1882, collected testimonies and studied apparitions, telepathy, and haunted locales with quasi-scientific methods. Newspapers reported exposés of fraud alongside earnest debates about evidence and belief. *The Turn of the Screw* draws energy from this contested zone, where witness accounts could be meticulously recorded yet perpetually doubted, and where the border between psychological explanation and supernatural inference remained unresolved.

The Gothic tradition had evolved by the 1890s into new forms that combined sensation with psychology. Works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) dramatized doubling, degeneracy, and modern fears. Sheridan Le Fanu's earlier tales supplied models of spectral ambiguity, while, soon after, M. R. James would refine the antiquarian ghost story. Henry James's novella fits a fin de siècle turn inward: the emphasis falls less on external monsters than on the unstable interplay of memory, suggestion, and the ethics of seeing and telling.

The British Empire's global reach formed the background to domestic stability. Wealth from industry, finance, and imperial trade underwrote many country houses, even as agricultural depression and shifts in landholding strained traditional estates. By the late 1890s, conflicts such as the approaching Second Boer War (1899–1902) signaled geopolitical tensions. While *The Turn of the Screw* is local

and enclosed, its insularity reflects a society invested in preserving calm interiors despite external change. The idea of a carefully ordered home, buffered by servants and routine, captures the confidence—and fragility—of late Victorian class security.

Technological and infrastructural changes reshaped daily life. Railways connected cities to remote estates, the postal service enabled rapid correspondence, and telegraphy accelerated news across Britain and the Atlantic. Gas lighting remained common in country houses, though electric installations were spreading in urban and affluent settings. Mass-circulation magazines thrived on new printing technologies and distribution networks. James's choice to serialize the story in *Collier's Weekly* situates it in a brisk transatlantic market where fiction met readers quickly, encouraging episodic suspense and discussion that mirrored the period's fascination with serialized mysteries and domestic unease.

Publishing gatekeepers and moral conventions influenced how authors handled sensitive themes. Circulating libraries such as Mudie's had long shaped Victorian reading by favoring works that met standards of propriety, and their influence persisted into the 1890s. Obscenity laws and review culture rewarded indirection. James's style—elliptical, suggestive, attentive to implication—fits a literary environment that demanded decorum while engaging topics like desire, authority, and coercion. The novella's reticence can thus be read as historically embedded: it speaks to an audience trained to decipher innuendo and to debate the limits of what could be explicitly narrated in respectable fiction.

Henry James's own position sharpened the work's historical resonance. An American expatriate who settled in

England in the 1870s, he cultivated a transatlantic readership and relationships with British publishers. The 1891 U.S. International Copyright Act improved protections for foreign authors, facilitating more secure American editions of works first serialized or published abroad. By the late 1890s James was living in Rye, East Sussex, and deeply engaged with English society and letters. The novella's idiom, setting, and social codes reflect this immersion, while its publication history underscores the increasingly integrated Anglo-American literary marketplace.

Cultural debates about degeneration, expertise, and authority converge in the book's atmosphere. Late Victorian Britain balanced pride in scientific progress with unease about moral decline and the reliability of experts—whether doctors, investigators, or guardians. The story's attention to observation and interpretation echoes contemporary controversies about evidence in medicine, psychology, and psychical research. Simultaneously, it probes the boundaries of domestic power: who is entitled to act, who must defer, and how far responsibility extends within a strict hierarchy. These were not abstract questions but everyday negotiations in households, schools, and institutions across the 1890s landscape of reform and restraint.

# Author Biography

## [Table of Contents](#)

Henry James (1843–1916) was an American-born writer who became a central figure in transatlantic literary culture and a major architect of psychological realism. Living and working across the United States and Europe, he explored the encounter between New World and Old World manners, values, and art—the “international theme” that shaped much of his fiction. His body of work spans novels, novellas, short stories, travel writing, criticism, and memoir. Renowned for his nuanced interiority, subtle irony, and sophisticated narrative techniques, James helped redefine what the novel could accomplish. Late in life he settled permanently in England and, during the First World War, became a naturalized British subject.

James received a wide, peripatetic education that exposed him early to European languages, museums, and theaters, complemented by studies in the United States, including a brief period at Harvard Law School. From the outset he read intensively in French, Russian, and English traditions. He admired Honoré de Balzac’s social panoramas, Ivan Turgenev’s restraint, Gustave Flaubert’s precision, and the moral imagination of Nathaniel Hawthorne and George Eliot. These influences, together with his own cosmopolitan experience, oriented him toward literary realism and an exacting attention to point of view. His essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884) articulated his belief in artistic freedom and the novel’s seriousness as an art.

Beginning as a reviewer and essayist for prominent American and British periodicals, James developed a steady craft before turning decisively to fiction. The American