



Henry James, charcoal sketch by **John Singer Sargent** (1911)



1854 portrait of Henry James Sr. & Henry James Jr.



James at sixteen years old.

# Henry James

(1843-1916)

An outstanding personality in the world of fiction, and a critic as well as a novelist, Henry James was born in New York on 15 April, 1843. He started his education under the supervision of his father, an eclectic philosopher, whose vivid sense of words and psychological insight he inherited. Though his schooling was informal, James read widely and developed a strong critical sense, which was to help him in his literary career.

The James family had frequent sojourns in Europe, and Henry attended schools in London, Paris and Geneva.

In 1858 they took a house in Newport, Rhode Island, and there Henry formed two very important friendships: Thomas Sergeant Perry, an avid reader who was to become his closest friend, and John LaFarge, the painter, who encouraged him to **read modern French novelists**, like Honoré de Balzac, and to begin writing.

In 1861, while trying to put out a fire, Henry James strained his back, and this injury influenced his health throughout the rest of his life.

After attending Harvard law school for a short time, he decided to devote himself entirely to writing, and his short stories made him famous when he was only 25.

In 1869 James came to Europe; he visited England, where **he met George Eliot**, and went to France and Italy, the background of so many of his works. During his stay in Europe his cousin Minnie Temple died. She was the only woman for whom he had a strong attachment, and James later portrayed her in two of his major novels, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Wings of the Dove*.

James spent the years 1870-72 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, writing book reviews and stories, and from 1872 to 1874 he was again in Europe; the result of this tour was *Roderick Hudson*, a novel about an American sculptor, faced with the problem of the choice between working in America or moving to sophisticated but corrupt Europe.

In 1875 James returned to Europe and settled in Paris, where he met the leading writers of the time, like Zola, Maupassant, Daudet, Flaubert, and the Russian Turgenev. From the latter he learnt that it is **not so much story but character that matters in fiction**.

In 1876 he settled in London, where he produced some of his major works: *The American* (1877), *Daisy Miller* (1879) which won him an international reputation, and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), with which he became an important figure in the world of literature. These novels are considered international in that they present two worlds, or societies - the American and the European- in contrast with each other. *Washington Square* (1881) and *The Bostonians* (1886) are distinguished from the rest of his works because they present exclusively American life.

After a short visit to America in 1881, James spent the rest of his life in Europe, mainly in England, in contact with writers, critics and painters. In particular, he was on friendly terms with R.L. Stevenson, E. Gosse, and later J. Conrad, H.G. Wells and R. Kipling. The second phase of his literary career was marked by such works as *The Tragic Muse* (1889) on art and the stage, *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Awkward Age* (1899), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1899), a ghost story.

*The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) marked a return to the international theme.

In 1904-1905 James made a visit to the USA and in 1907 wrote *The American Scene*, a volume of impressions showing his concern over the increasing materialistic component of American culture. He spent the following years revising his works, which consisted of 24 volumes published between 1907 and 1909; he also wrote critical works dealing with fiction as an art.

In the years between 1910 and 1914 he wrote two volumes of his autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others*, and *Notes of a Son and Brother*. James also wrote travel books and essays. World War I aroused in James a strong feeling of love for England, prompting him **to take British citizenship in 1915**. He received the Order of Merit from the King in the same year.

He died in 1916 and his ashes were taken to the United States and buried in the family plot.



A film adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady* directed by Jane Campion in 1996.

**ottoman:** sofa without back or arms.

**to oblige:** to do something as a favour.

**unfathomable:** so deep that the bottom cannot be reached; (here) difficult to understand, inscrutable.

**victoria:** light vehicle with four wheels.  
**wearily:** in a tired way.

## The Portrait of a Lady

Isabel Archer, a beautiful and intelligent American girl, goes to England to visit a rich aunt, Mrs Touchett.

An English nobleman, Lord Warburton, proposes to her, but she refuses him in the vague conviction that something better awaits her.

Her cousin Ralph Touchett understands and admires the girl, and finally persuades his father to leave her a large sum of money. Now Isabel is very rich. She comes to Italy where she meets two fascinating people, M.me Merle and Gilbert Osmond. They are both American by origin, but have been in Europe for many years. The two had a love affair in the past, and a daughter, Pansy, was born to them. Pansy lives in the charge of her father while M.me Merle, her mother, keeps her true identity secret and plays the role of the family friend.

### PRELIMINARY TASK

In the following extract M.me Merle and Gilbert Osmond are talking about Isabel. They have a scheme which involves her. Read the text and find what their scheme is:

- getting a rich companion for a trip around Europe
- convincing her to marry Osmond
- borrowing money from her
- being introduced into high society

### TEXT A

After she had left Florence, Gilbert Osmond met Madame Merle at the Countess Gemini's. There were other people present; the Countess's drawing-room was usually well filled, and the talk had been general, but after a while Osmond left his place and came and sat on an ottoman half-behind, half-besides Madame Merle's chair. 'She wants me to go to Rome with her', he remarked in a low voice.

'To go with her?'

'To be there while she's there. She proposed it.'

'I suppose you mean that you proposed it and she assented.'

'Of course I gave her a chance. But she's encouraging - she's very encouraging.'

'I rejoice to hear it - but don't cry victory too soon. Of course you'll go to Rome.'

'Ah', said Osmond, 'it makes one work, this idea of yours!'

'Don't pretend you don't enjoy it - you're very ungrateful. You've not been so well occupied these many years.'

'The way you take it's beautiful', said Osmond. 'I ought to be grateful for that.'

'Not too much so, however', Madame Merle answered. She talked with her usual smile, leaning back in her chair and looking round the room. 'You've made a very good impression, and I've seen for myself that you've received one. You've not come to Mrs Touchett's seven times to oblige me'.

'The girl's not disagreeable', Osmond quietly conceded.

Madame Merle dropped her eye on him a moment, during which her lips closed with a certain firmness. 'Is that all you can find to say about that fine creature?'

'All? Isn't it enough? Of how many people have you heard me say more?'

She made no answer to this, but still presented her talkative grace to the room. 'You're unfathomable', she murmured at last. 'I'm frightened at the abyss into which I shall have cast her'.

He took it almost gaily. 'You can't draw back - you've gone too far'.

'Very good; but you must do the rest yourself.'

'I shall do it', said Gilbert Osmond.

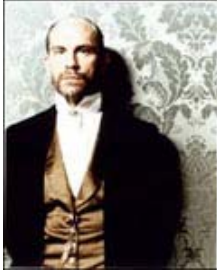
Madame Merle remained silent and he changed his place again; but when she rose to go he also took leave. Mrs Touchett's victoria was awaiting her guest in the court, and after he had helped his friend into it he stood there detaining her. 'You're very indiscreet', she said rather wearily 'you shouldn't have moved when I did'.

He had taken off his hat; he passed his hand over his forehead. 'I always forget I'm out of the habit'.

'You're quite unfathomable', she repeated, glancing up at the windows of the house, a modern structure in the new part of the town.

heed: attention.

into the bargain: in addition, also.



John Malkovich as Gilbert Osmond in Jane Campion's adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady*.



He paid no heed to this remark, but spoke in his own sense. 'She's really very charming. I've scarcely known anyone more graceful'.

'It does me good to hear you say that. The better you like her the better for me'.

'I like her very much. She's all you described her, and into the bargain capable, I feel, of great devotion. She has only one fault'.

'What's that?'

'Too many ideas'.

'I warned you she was clever'.

'Fortunately they're very bad ones', said Osmond.

'Why is that fortunate?'

'*Dame*, if they must be sacrificed!'

Madame Merle leaned back, looking straight before her; the she spoke to the coachman. But her friend again detained her. 'If I go to Rome what shall I do with Pansy?'

'I'll go and see her', said Madame Merle.

(from Chapter 26)

### TASKS

**1.** During the conversation, Osmond says: 'The way you take it's beautiful'.

What is the referent for 'it'?

What does he mean with this expression?

it:

meaning:

**2.** Consider the introduction to the novel and the text, and decide how M.me Merle and G. Osmond will benefit from the realization of their scheme.

Find the expressions used by each of them when describing Isabel, and write them down below.

<i>M.me Merle's opinion of Isabel</i>	<i>Gilbert Osmond's opinion of Isabel</i>

**3.** Underline the adjectives and expressions with which M.me Merle defines Osmond. At a certain point she says: 'I'm frightened at the abyss into which I shall have cast her'. Associate 'abyss' with the adjective 'unfathomable', and discuss what M.me Merle means to say. Write one or two sentences in your own words.



Mme Merle and Gilbert Osmond around Isabel Archer in Jane Campion's film.



**4.** Now define the personality of M.me Merle and Gilbert Osmond.

M.me Merle	Gilbert Osmond
<i>elegant, refined,...</i>	<i>Cynical,...</i>

Can you detect a positive side in the personality of M.me Merle?

How does the narrator manage to describe the thoughts and feelings of the two characters?

As we see, narrative comment –here authorial voice- is woven into the characters' dialogue. Consider the various types of narrator that have been examined, and define this example (see also the dossier "The Novel").

**5.** Focus on the environment and the people described. What social class is referred to? (Support your view with evidence in the text)

*Isabel is in the gallery of the Capitol, in Rome.*

**TEXT B**

They shook hands, and he left her alone in the glorious room, among the shining antique marbles. She sat down in the centre of the circle of these presences, regarding them vaguely, resting her eyes on their beautiful blank faces; listening, as it were, to their eternal silence. It is impossible, in Rome at least, to look long at a great company of great sculptures without feeling the effect of their noble quietude; which, as with a high door closed for the ceremony, slowly drops on the spirit the large white mantle of peace. I say in Rome especially, because the Roman air is an exquisite medium for such impressions. The golden sunshine mingles with them, the deep stillness of the past, so vivid yet, though it is nothing but a void full of names, seems to throw a solemn spell upon them. The blinds were partly closed in the windows of the Capitol, and a clear, warm shadow rested on the figures and made them more mildly human. Isabel sat there a long time, under the charm of their motionless grace, wondering to what, of their experience, their absent eyes were open, and how, to our ears, their alien lips would sound. The dark red walls of the room threw them into relief; the polished marble floor reflected their beauty. She had seen them all before, but her enjoyment repeated itself, and it was all the greater because she was glad again, for the time, to be alone. At last, however, her attention lapsed, drawn off by a deep tide of life. An occasional tourist came in, stopped and stared a moment at the Dying Gladiator, and then passed out of the other door, creaking over the smooth pavement. At the end of half an hour Gilbert Osmond reappeared, apparently in advance of his companions. He strolled towards her slowly, With his hands behind him and his usual inquiring, yet not quite appealing smile. 'I'm surprised to find you alone, I thought you had company'.

'So I have –the best'. And she glanced at the Antinous and the Faun.  
(from Chapter 28)



Nicole Kidman as *Isabel Archer* in Jane Campion's film adaption.

**TASKS**

Read the passage and write down all the details related to the place she is in, and the expressions referred to the statues.

Details of Gallery	Statues
<i>partly closed blinds</i>	<i>shining antique marbles</i> <i>their noble quietude</i>

*the statues are called:*

*they are associated with:*

**The general atmosphere that the place and the statues create is one of...**

**2.** G.Osmond says: '... I thought you had company' and Isabel answers: 'So I have - the best'.

Write down what each of them means by 'company'.

*Osmond:*

*Isabel:*

**3.** Describe Isabel's mood in such an environment.





**4.** At a certain point the narrator uses the expression ‘...a deeper tide of life’. Discuss what meaning this metaphor might convey.

**5.** This passage contains one part in the present tense, while the rest –except for the brief dialogue- is in the past. Mark the text so as to distinguish the parts clearly, and explain what each tense indicates.

*present:*

*past:*

In one of these parts the narrator directly refers to himself; where do you expect this to happen? In the ‘present’ or in the ‘past’ section?

Find this reference and write down below the number of the line and the words used.

line n.: .....

words:

What effect is thus achieved?

**6.** Consider what has emerged so far; what is the writer trying to communicate through this description?

**7.** The gallery contains Greek sculptures. Consider the writer’s aim in the description, and write in a few words his attitude to classical art.

**8.** In this passage James values one aspect of Europe: state what it is, and its negative implication.

aspect of Europe:

negative implication:

**This contrasts with American culture. State why.**

This is how the story develops.

*Isabel marries Gilbert Osmond; he soon reveals his true nature and she realizes that she has made a fatal mistake.*

*At the end of the book, she meets Caspar Goodwood, a rich American businessman who has followed her to Europe because he loves her. Isabel refuses him –thus rejecting happiness and love- in the firm resolution to accept her fate with dignity.*

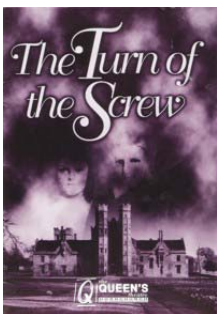






In 1961 Jack Clayton directed *The Innocents*, a superb adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw*

**lingered:** remained, continued.  
**threshold:** doorway.  
**the articles I wanted:** a pair of gloves that she had forgotten in the dining room.  
**a forward stride:** a step forward.  
**intercourse:** (here)dealings, relations.  
**former:** previous.  
**but:** only.  
**on the spot:** at once.



## *The Turn of the Screw*

The story is about a young girl, “the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson”, who is employed as a governess to two orphan children by their rich uncle. The man is described as “a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire village”.

The “young, untried, nervous girl” is immediately conquered by him. He offers a very generous salary but on one condition: she must never trouble him nor complain nor write about anything. She accepts, and when he “held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded”.

The two children, Flora and Miles, are absolutely charming, and the young governess is delighted with them, but soon she learn that little Miles has been expelled from school for mysterious reasons, which are not mentioned.

She likes walking in the grounds, and during her solitary walks she indulges in romantic fantasies about the man who has impressed her so much and is always in her thoughts. One day, while she is fancying how charming it would be if he appeared at the turn of a path and smiled at her, she sees a man at the very top on one of the two towers of the house. Her emotion is one of shock, and for a moment she thinks that her fantasy has become reality. Then she realizes that the man is not the children’s fascinating uncle; on the same instant there is a strange change in nature: the sounds are hushed, as if everything “was stricken with death”.

After some time, there is a second apparition.

### TEXT C

The day was grey enough, but the afternoon light still lingered, and it enabled me, on crossing the threshold, not only to recognise, on a chair near the wide window, then close, the articles I wanted, but to become aware of a person on the other side of the window and looking straight in. One step into the room had suffice’ my vision was instantaneous; it was all there. The person looking straight in was the person who had already appeared to me. He appeared thus again with I won’t say greater distinctness, for that was impossible, but with a nearness that represented a forward stride in our intercourse and made me, as I met him, catch my breath and turn cold. He was the same -he was the same, and seen, this time, as he had seen before, from the waist up, the window, though the dining-room was on the ground-floor, not going down to the terrace on which he stood. His face was close to the glass, yet the effect of this better view was, strangely, just to show me how intense the former had been. He remained but a few seconds -long enough to convince me he also saw and recognised; but it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always. Something, however, happened this time that had not happened before; his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room, was as deep and hard as then, but it quitted me for a moment during which I could still watch it, see it fix successively several other things. On the spot there came to me the added shock of a certitude that it was not for me he had come. He had come for some one else.

### TASKS

1. Work in fours. One pair -A- will defend the governess, i.e. support the apparitions; the other -B- will support the view that the apparitions are only the fruit of her imagination. The pairs will list their arguments and discuss them. Do the same with all the passages.
2. Find evidence that the man is the same person who has already appeared the first time.
3. What new awareness does the second apparition give to the young woman? She uses the word “certitude”. Do you think it is appropriate in this circumstance?

**lawn:** area of grass  
**shrubberies:** areas planted with shrubs, small bushes.  
**concealed:** hid.  
**pane:** one of the pieces of glass in the window.  
**Mrs. Grose:** the housekeeper, and the confidant of the governess.  
**pulled up short:** stopped abruptly and suddenly.  
**on my lines:** as much as I had retreated.  
**scared:** frightened.



In 1954 British composer Benjamin Britten composed an opera based on the novel.

**dismay:** alarm, apprehension.  
**touch of picture:** hint to identify the person.  
**whiskers:** beard on the side of his face.

**one:** an actor (Mrs Grose was unable to act, i.e. to hide her emotion).

*The governess runs outside and goes to the spot of the apparition, but...*

The terrace and the whole place, the lawn and the garden behind it, all I could see of the park, were empty with a great emptiness. There were shrubberies and big trees, but I remember the clear assurance I felt that none of them concealed him. He was there or was not there: not there if I didn't see him. I got hold of this; then, instinctively, instead of returning as I had come, went to the window. It was confusedly present to me that I ought to place myself where he had stood. I did so: I applied my face to the pane and looked, as he had looked, into the room. As if, at this moment, to show me exactly what his range had been, Mrs. Grose, as I had done for himself just before, came in from the hall. With this I had the full image of a repetition of what had already occurred. She saw me as I had seen my own visitant; she pulled up short as I had done; I gave her something of the shock that I had received. She turned white, and this made me ask myself if I had blanched as much. She stared, in short, and retreated just on my lines, and I knew she had then passed out and come round to me and that I should presently meet her. I remained where I was, and while I waited I thought of more things than one. But there's only one I take space to mention. I wondered why *she* should be scared.  
*(from Chapter 4).*

**4.** Compare this text and the previous one, and state what is common and what is different.

common:

different:

**5.** Here are three interpretations for the evident panic of Mrs Grose. Choose the one you find more convincing, and discuss what light it throws on the facts narrated.

- Mrs Grose, influenced by the behaviour of the governess, has the impression of seeing an apparition.
- The features of the governess are altered by her intense emotion, and she must have looked dreadful staring in through the window.
- Mrs Grose already knows that strange things happen in the place, and now must admit what she knows.

**6.** The governess decides to tell Mrs Grose about the two apparitions she has seen. She adds that the man is nobody from the village: "Nobody - nobody. I didn't tell you, but I made sure". In your opinion, what does this statement imply?

*Mrs Grose wants to know more, and the governess describes the man.*

"What's he like?"  
 "I've been dying to tell you. But he's like nobody".  
 "Nobody?" she echoed.  
 "He has no hat". Then seeing in her face that she already, in this, with a deeper dismay, found a touch of picture, I quickly added stroke to stroke. "He has red hair, very red, close-curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight, good features and little, rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair. His eyebrows are somehow darker; they look particularly arched and as if they might move a good deal. His eyes are sharp, strange - awfully; but I only know clearly that they're rather small and very fixed. His mouth's wide and his lips are thin, and except for his little whiskers he's quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor".  
 "An actor!" It was impossible to resemble one less, at least, than Mrs. Grose at that moment.  
 "I've never seen one, but so I suppose them. He's tall, active, erect", I continued, "but never- no, never!- a gentleman".



**gaped:** opened with astonishment.

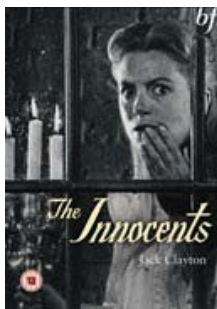
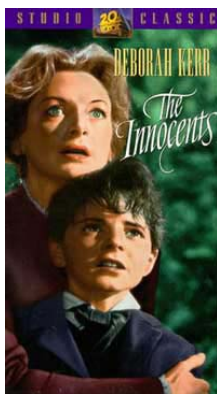
**to hold herself:** to control herself.  
**faltered:** hesitated.

**pieced it all together:** assembled the pieces.

**In charge:** responsible (for us).

**hung fire:** delayed in answering.

**to square herself:** to adjust herself.



My companion's face had blanched as I went on; her round eyes started and her mild mouth gaped. "A gentleman?" she gasped, confounded, stupefied: "a gentleman *he*?"

"You know him then?"

She visibly tried to hold herself. "But he *is* handsome?"

I saw the way to help her. "Remarkably".

"And dressed -?"

"In somebody's clothes. They're smart, but they're not his own".

She broke into a breathless affirmative groan. "They're the master's".

I caught it up. "You do know him?"

She faltered but a second. "Quint!" she cried.

"Quint?"

"Peter Quint - his own man, his valet, when he was here!"

"When the master was?"

Gaping still, but meeting me, she pieced it all together. "He never wore his hat, but he did wear - well, there were waistcoats missed! They were both here - last year. Then the master went, and Quint was alone".

I followed, but halting a little. "Alone?"

"Alone with *us*". Then as from a deeper depth, "In charge", she added.

"And what became of him?"

She hung fire so long that I was still more mystified. "He went too", she brought out at last.

"Went where?"

Her expression, at this, became extraordinary. "God knows where! He died".

"Died?" I almost shrieked.

She seemed fairly to square herself, plant herself more firmly to express the wonder of it. "Yes, Mr. Quint's dead".

(from Chapter 5)

## 7. Point out the details of the physical description of the man.

*height:*

*hair:*

*face:*

*eyebrows:*

*eyes:*

*mouth:*

*lips:*

*noticeable features:*

*overall impression:*

## 8. Underline the expressions describing the reaction of Mrs Grose.

Focus on the conclusion she reaches and discuss if she is guided to recognize Peter Quint by the governess, or if she follows her own line of thought.

## 9. A sensational revelation comes out in the end. Point it out, and state what effect it creates in the governess and what special light it casts on the apparition.



**dashed into ice:**  
became like ice (i.e. cold and extremely controlled).

**to challenge him:** to provoke the boy to confess.

**launched at the beast:** threw (these words) against the ghost.

**jerked straight round:** made a sharp round movement.

**stared:** looked fixely.

**glared:** looked angrily.

**stroke of the loss...**

**of:** struck by the loss of which I was so proud.

**hurled:** thrown.

**10.** Refer to task 1. Some additional elements are provided to pairs A and B for their task.

- wealth of details
- possibility of noticing so many details when both apparitions have taken place when it was almost dark
- the governess may have heard villagers talk of Peter Quint and have adjusted the vision to what she had already in mind
- she may have juxtaposed the children's uncle and the vision again
- other: ...

**How can they be interpreted?**

Later on, while the governess is on the edge of the lake with Flora, she sees the apparition of Miss Jessel – the children's previous governess – who is also dead. This time the sun is still high, and the governess begins "to take in with certitude and yet without direct vision the presence, a good way off, of a third person".

**Again, the young woman speaks of 'certitude'. Is this word consistent, or does it contrast with the extreme subjectivity of the woman's convictions?**

With "wonder and terror" she awaits for Flora's reaction, but the child gives no sign of alarm and continues to play peacefully. The governess is certain that Flora has seen the apparition but pretends she has not. She relates this episode to Mrs Grose, but now the housekeeper begins to doubt her reliability.

More apparitions and strange events follow – not noticed by the others – and the governess becomes convinced that the ghosts want to get hold of the children's souls. She feels sure that, if she gets Flora and Miles to confess that they are in contact with the ghosts, they will be saved. But the children continue to deny this, and little Flora has a nervous breakdown.

The governess does not surrender. If she cannot obtain any admission from Flora, she tries to get Miles to confess why he was turned out from school, and the little boy admits having "said things". The woman presses her questions more and more sternly, and the cross-examination becomes a psychological torture for the boy. It is at this dramatic moment that she again sees Peter Quint: the governess engages in a tremendous fight with the evil spirit to free the soul of Miles.

#### TEXT D

I was so determined to have all my proof that I dashed into ice to challenge him. "Whom do you mean by 'he'?"

"Peter Quint – you devil!" His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. "Where?"

They are in my ears still, his supreme surrender of the name and his tribute to my devotion. "What does he matter now, my own? – what will he *ever* matter? I have you", I launched at the beast, "but he has lost you for ever!" Then, for the demonstration of my work, "There, there!" I said to Miles.

But he had already  jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day. With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him – it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.

(from Chapter 24)

This intense and poignant scene concludes the story.



*Suspense was the unimaginative title given to Clayton's film in Spain.*

## TASKS

**1.** How do you interpret this scene? Does it offer grounds to support your own interpretation, or is it open to more than one conclusion?  
 Why does the little boy die?  
 What symbolic meaning does his death acquire?



**2.** Like the whole story, this scene deliberately poses several questions, none of which finds a definite answer in the text. Which ambiguities can you point out in this final part?

Does the governess really see the ghost, or...

Does she save the boy, or...

Is she really a victim of terrible circumstances, or ...

Does she ask Miles all the questions because she earnestly wants to help him, or...

Who is "you devil" referred to?

Who is 'innocent', and who 'corrupts'?

Is it possible that, being in love with the children's uncle, the governess unconsciously constructs all these incidents seeking a pretext to contact him?

**3.** Pairs A and B gather all that has emerged, comment on the behaviour of the governess, and draw their own conclusions.





**4.** Many of the apparitions that the governess sees - or thinks she sees - take place at a window or near the water. Consider that the glass of a window and the water of a lake act as a mirror, and discuss what implications derive from this circumstance. Then complete the text below with the words in the box.

ghosts "evil" an effect created double uncle dualism  
 austere and respectable intuitive the reflection of her own image  
 sexually repressed imagining things

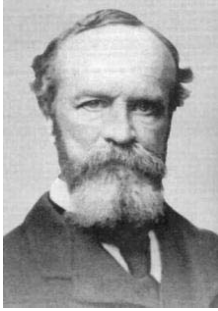
This circumstance supports the idea that the woman is only or interpreting \_\_\_\_\_ by the glass and the surface of the water. The apparitions could also be \_\_\_\_\_, thus conveying the idea of the \_\_\_\_\_, of the \_\_\_\_\_ in human nature. The reflection could represent her other self, the \_\_\_\_\_ part, repressed and hidden behind the \_\_\_\_\_ appearance. Her subconscious shows the real self of the governess: a neurotic, \_\_\_\_\_ woman, infatuated by the children's \_\_\_\_\_. This interpretation contrasts with the view of the governess as an \_\_\_\_\_ and perceptive woman, who realizes that the \_\_\_\_\_ pervade the life of the children with evil, and totally commits herself to save their innocence.

**5.** Henry James described this story as a piece of "cold artistic calculation", aimed at catching "those not easily caught", i.e. a sort of literary virtuosity carefully built so as to puzzle the most experienced reader. Do you think he reached his aim?

**6.** Refer to the Critical notes and read carefully the description of the narrative structure of *The Turn of the Screw*. How does it contribute to the ambiguity of this tale?

**7.** The expression 'turn of the screw' means 'increase of agony', or 'what makes a situation worse'. Discuss its relevance in this work. You may have notice that, whatever conclusion you appear to reach, some element in the story contradicts it, to be in its turn disproved by something else, and so on infinitely. In this respect, and focusing on the feature of being twisted round and round, typical of a screw, how can the title also be read?





\* **William James** (1842-1910) greatly influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century novelists, and his expression "stream of thought" gave the hint for the definition of the "stream of consciousness technique".

## CRITICAL NOTES

The brother of a famous psychologist\*, Henry James **pioneered the modern psychological novel introducing a new complexity into the analysis of states of mind**, and influenced writers like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. In his novels the events are often presented through the consciousness of a single character – even if the narration is in the third person, thus discarding the role of the traditional omniscient narrator (see **The Novel**, 'point of view'). In other words, he tended to use a narrator with a limited point of view (**unreliable narrator**), and hardly ever gave a solution, so that no interpretation of James is definitive or final.

During his life the **short story was becoming increasingly popular**, and in his long career James wrote some eight of them. However, he found the "**novella**" more congenial, because it is a form longer than a short story but not long enough to be a novel, and it allowed him to develop his analyses within the limits of selectivity. *The Turn of the Screw* and *Daisy Miller* are the most famous of his novellas.

Two themes are dominant in James: the "international subject", i.e. the **relationship between American and European culture**, and the **contrast innocence-experience, integrity-corruption**. The two themes come together in novels like *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of a Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is considered by some critics his best novel. It presents some American characters transplanted into a European environment. Isabel Archer possesses rare qualities of personality, and regards the world as "a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action". When she travels to England she has already refused a rich American businessman who loves her, even if she is poor. In England she meets an English aristocrat at his best, an admirable man who falls in love with her, and again refuses him because she feels she must find her own place in the world.

Her cousin Ralph, who secretly loves her, persuades his father to leave her a fortune: "I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination".

But Isabel's idealism and innocence make her an easy victim. Captivated by Gilbert Osmond's apparent love of art and independent spirit, she marries him, only to find that he is in fact a devious and heartless snob who only wants her money. James sees his heroine clearly, and hints that she is mainly to blame for her misfortune: her inordinate demands on life are the cause of her ruin. The study of her character is carried out with great mastery, and we watch her gradual self-understanding, refinement and moral growth, which culminates in her final choice which, regardless of personal happiness, accords with her sense of honour.

The interplay between American and European culture is another interesting feature of the novel. Even if James never expressed a definite preference for either culture, it is a fact that the characters who are entirely American are 'innocent', steadfast and incorrupted, while Osmond and Madame Merle, refined and fascinating as they are, seem to have also been contaminated by European decadence.

The second theme, in particular the corruption of innocence and the dramatization of the conflict between good and evil, is a strong component of **his most popular novella, *The Turn of the Screw***.

It may be interesting to note that James's father experienced a sort of spiritual attack and was suddenly seized by a strange sense of terror, apparently deriving from "some damned shape squatting invisible" in the room. The writer's brother also had a similar attack and after that suffered hallucinations.

This complex work can be read as a ghost story, as a psychological study, or as a thriller of horror fiction in the Gothic tradition, where the terror is entirely built on the workings of the mind. It does not present a definite, objective reality, but suggests an infinity of realities starting the exploration of the inner.

All the work revolves around the subtle analysis of the heroine's mind, and poses a question that is not answered: is she reliable, or not? Does she really see the apparitions, or are they just the fruit of her deranged mind?

To add to this complexity, **the narrative structure is particularly complex**, and the events are filtered several times: the first narrator hears hints at a very strange story from the second narrator, Douglas, who is one of the guests assembled in an old house one winter evening. After a series of anticipations, hesitations and apparent reticence, Douglas consents to read to the little group the whole story as it was written by the woman who was protagonist of the events (main narrator). She was his sister's governess, and sent him the manuscript before dying.

Douglas briefly introduces the characters of the story and some of the facts, creating great expectation with clever touches. From something he says the others become aware that he profoundly admired this woman, and perhaps loved her.

Douglas finally reads the famous manuscript "with immense effect", and this is how the first narrator is acquainted with the strange and disquieting story. Much later Douglas will send him the same manuscript before dying, and the first narrator makes "an exact transcript" of his own, which is the one presented to the reader.

There are two main trends in the interpretation of this work: it could present the normal reactions of normal people to supernatural evil. This view is supported by the very precise, detailed descriptions of the ghost given by the governess who has never seen the two former servants. On the other hand, there is no evidence of the apparitions; the governess is the only one who sees them, and the events are narrated by herself and anticipated by a man -Douglas- very much in her favour. She, and nobody else, is the one who frightens the children; their attitude to her turns from trustful and affectionate to open dislike. Is it because they are dominated by evil spirits, or because she is neurotic and her behaviour unbalanced?

**It is this ambiguity that makes *The Turn of the Screw* so intriguing.** The reader is faced with mysterious facts and sinister apparitions, but is divided between taking them for true and the doubt that they are nothing but the fantasy of a hysterical woman, frustrated in her hopeless love for the children's uncle.

**The great innovation that James brought into fiction is the change of perspective:** the 19<sup>th</sup> century omniscient narrator disappears, and the attention shifts **from the objective reality into the analysis of states of mind.** This demands a **complex, allusive style**, meticulously careful about exact expression and eloquent imagery. The story is not extremely important in his works; he goes deeply inside the minds of his main character so as to see people and events through his/her eyes.

What gives the greatest significance is the point of view, and it is this **heightening of character**, together with the **depth and intensity of psychological insight**, that places James in line with the great literature of the 20th century.



#### CONCLUDING TASKS

- 1.** James is one of the novelists who gave a fundamental contribution to fiction in terms of stylistic development. What are the outstanding aspects of his innovations?
- 2.** He is one of the writers who can be defined 'citizens of the world'. What was the effect of this wide experience on his artistic vision?



**3.** Which do you consider his main theme, on the basis of the texts that you have read?

**4.** Which trends or motives are recognizable in the passages from *The Turn of the Screw*? Refer to single writers and works.

**5.** Which branch of science, powerfully emerging in his time, influenced him?

