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Teaching *The Turn of the Screw* Metatextually

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Diane Long Hoeveler

The methods of cultural studies have been influencing teachers of literature for more than thirty years, and teachers of James, luckily, have a rich storehouse of materials from which to select in planning their course. Adeline R. Tintner's *Henry James's Legacy: The Afterlife of His Figure and Fiction* (1998) provides a treasure trove of ideas for pairing and juxtaposing James's works against a variety of literary works by other artists who were compelled to rewrite him from a number of different angles. Tintner suggests that *The Turn of the Screw* can be usefully read in conjunction with Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), Rumer Godden's *The Peacock Spring* (1975), Elizabeth Taylor's "Poor Girl" (1951), Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* (1979), Hilary Bailey's *Miles and Flora* (1997), and Joyce Carol Oates's "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" (1992). This essay focuses on only the last story, although teachers should be encouraged to plan a course that groups all these works in a metatextual dialogue that studies James's work as the urtext of one particular genre: the class-based ghost story.

Students who read James's classic gothic conundrum, *The Turn of the Screw*, have been asking themselves essentially the same questions since the tale appeared in 1898. That is, the central puzzle has been to understand the psyche of the governess. If she is insane, as the reader increasingly suspects, then how does one read a text that is quite possibly occluded, implicated in her self-serving strategies of deception and paranoia? Certainly critical opinion inside the classroom and out of it has focused on the governess, or the children, or Douglas and the narrator—the living, in other words—in order to comprehend the meaning and significance of the events in the story. But focusing on the living alone has led these same instructors to the proverbial dead end of interpretation: how can one interpret a text that is riddled with suppressed hysteria, perhaps insanity so profound that it appears as a manifestation of normative behavior? How does one understand a narrative voice that is so clear that it is actually impenetrable? And so we are back at the beginning; we cannot understand what happens in this story if we attend only to the living. There is an entire layer of meaning to the tale that is buried in the dead lives whose ghostly presence continues to motivate the actions of the living. Students are able to understand this layer by reading Joyce Carol Oates's rewrite of the story alongside James.

In 1992, Oates published a rewrite of *The Turn of the Screw* from the point of view of its dead, "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly." This story attempts to answer the questions that have plagued critics for generations: Is the governess insane and imagining the ghosts? What happened between the children and their dead governess and valet? What force is so strong that it can draw the dead back to the living? What haunts the living and the dead?

My essay places the James text and the Oates text in a metatextual juxtaposition that mimics the strategy I take in the classroom when teaching a course on the gothic. By using the Oates story, I force students to adapt another point of view, one that they usually do not see in reading James's text.

As any instructor knows, James's tale is notoriously subtle on one level, hopelessly transparent on another. That is, the governess is either insane or not. The only major character who is unnamed in the story, she is either hysterical, sexually perverse and repressed in her attraction to the uncle and the children, or not. The ghosts must be manifestations of her madness, her sexuality writ large for only her to see, because there are no such things as ghosts—no one else sees them, after all. But she has written her story and given it to a family friend, Douglas, who in turn regales a group of men and women with the events as a Christmastime fireside chat. Unlike most people who insist that they have seen ghosts or who are believed to be responsible for the death of a child in their care, she has lived out her life in respectability and credibility. If the governess is indeed mad, then somehow the patriarchal system that has propped her up and placed her in charge of innocent lives is also perverse and corrupt. Somehow that aloof "master," living in splendid isolation in London and untouched by the tragedies occurring in his family, stands finally as a representative of empire; or a clockmaker God; or, most damning of all, the omniscient author who sees all but fails to intervene with a moral or a lesson.

If the governess is not mad, if ghosts have appeared to her, then what exactly is the story about? Are the ghosts evil and seeking to claim the children? Or are they themselves victims and doomed for some reason to haunt the environs of their crimes? And what exactly were those crimes? In other words, whose story is it? These questions are the starting point for Oates's rewrite of the story, for Oates provides answers to what James's reader cannot resolve. Her answers are not comfortable or pleasant, but she is deeply honest about the dark and unspoken urges in James's text. I speak about pedophilia and the kind of frustrated, infinite erotic suffering, the kind of loss and pain that is so intense, it exists even after we die, the kind of insatiable longing that would constitute hell should there be such a place.

I lead students through the two texts simultaneously by focusing our discussion first on three major sightings of the ghosts that occur in James's text. Each sighting is carefully recrafted—turned over and over again in Oates's hands—and finally and slyly commented on by Oates. The first sighting happens only a few weeks after the governess's arrival at Bly to take up her duties to two orphaned siblings, the eight-year-old Flora and the ten-year-old Miles. The Jamesian reader recognizes that the smugness and the self-deception of this young woman will be her undoing, but the reader also participates in the story on more than this first level, that of character critique. The postmodern position that Oates provides us in her story places the governess in a fictitious universe of literary intertextuality that is implicit in James, explicit in Oates.

In the ironic and twisting perversion of a young governess's fantasies, both James and Oates reveal the persistent power of Victorian master narratives to turn our heads not simply once, in the initial reading of them, but twice, in our futile attempts to apply those fantasies to our own lives.

Students immersed in the other gothic texts we have read in class recognize quickly the self-referentiality of the governess fantasy operating in James, for the governess is in the grip of the *Jane Eyre* narrative of the well-meaning, scrupulously diligent, oh-so-good and deserving young woman who wins the master (and his estate and income) away from the evil and dark woman (read: mother substitute). The root of the fantasy is oedipal, and the power and persistence of the narrative bespeak its hold over the female imagination. On one of her meditative nocturnal rambles, Jane encounters Rochester, the master, and the unexpected sight of her throws him from his horse. James rewrites Charlotte Brontë's novel much more darkly: the male figure who suddenly appears to the governess is not the longed-for master but the ghost of his servant, Quint, a randy and promiscuous valet who chooses as the locale for his first haunting the towers of the old house.

Oates's postmodern spin on this scene is revealing for the explanatory context given. In her more cynical rendering, the first and doomed governess is a woman who allowed her head to be fatally turned by the governess fantasy. Succumbing to it, Miss Jessel became easy pickings for Quint, who was merely a poor substitute for his master. Jessel expected, according to the structure of her well-studied narrative, the sudden appearance of the master, his love, marriage, and an instant family of children that she would not have to soil her body to bear. Instead, she was easily seduced and impregnated by the master's valet, Quint, and destroyed. According to Oates, the fantasy of marrying the master leads not to the happy ending that Brontë provided but to a much more ordinary and typical narrative closure, the suicide of the pregnant and disgraced young woman.

The second appearance of Quint to the governess occurs with the medium of glass between them, as in the biblical sense: we see through a glass darkly now. The mirrored intensities of both James's and Oates's tales lie not simply in the three ghostly appearances but in the way these performances are also manifestations of the frustrated and diverted erotic impulse of the dead. In James's version of this second haunting, the governess comes upon Quint one late Sunday afternoon; he is staring at her from outside the dining-room window. The description of him again focuses on his body, but this time in an even more displaced manner:

He was the same—he was the same, and seen, this time, as he had been seen before, from the waist up, . . . 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. (44)

How, we might ask, could the governess have known the man "always"? The standard critical explanation is that the man in the window is a manifestation of her oedipal fixation on her whimsical curate father (shades of Brontë's father). She sees, that is, her frustrated oedipal longings diverted first from her father, then from the master, then Quint, then fixed murderously on Miles as the final substitute. This interpretation has led many critics to see the hauntings as a form of self-haunting, a descent into insanity. But the face in the window can also be read as an image of one form that narcissism can take. In her construction of Quint the governess sees herself, because she reads in him her own interest in the children. Experiencing this interest as unnatural, she projects onto Quint her anxious evasions and fear of perversion. Despite her best efforts, however, some instructors and students sense in the unnamed governess a perverse sexual interest in the children, in their activities, in their secrets.

But Oates brings us face-to-face with the dark and hidden acts that bind Jessel and Quint to the children: group sex. We are confronted with this scene not directly but filtered as a particularly delicious memory of Quint. It is sex, the need to touch and fondle both children's bodies as the two adults engaged in sex themselves, that holds Jessel and Quint to the children. While Quint amuses himself with his startling appearances to the new governess, Jessel is revealing herself to Flora across the lake, compelled to make herself known to the little girl: the girl is, she says, "my soul, I will not give her up" ("Accursed Inhabitants" 258). In James this incident is muted, with the governess only vaguely aware that there is "a third person" present in her dyadic rambles with Flora (54). Later the governess tells Mrs. Grose that the woman appeared to them as "a figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful—with such an air also, and such a face!" (56).

In Oates, Jessel's face is explained by her desperation to get at Flora, and equally explicit is Flora's longing to be reunited with her dead governess: "Jessel appears to little Flora in emboldened daylight, daring to 'materialize' on the farther shore of the placid Sea of Azof. . . . Is not little Flora in her innocence, as in her need, necessary to the vision?" (275). For Oates, Flora and Jessel feed each other in their excessive and mutual need for each other, just as Miles and Quint do. But where does that leave the governess? She is the third wheel in every configuration, the screen onto which both frustrated pairs project their longings. As the term that signifies excess as well as lack, the governess must be eliminated for the two pairs to reunite, and yet she will not go quietly. She refuses to erase herself, because in James's text, at least, this story is hers.

In both tales, by now Quint recognizes that he is connected with Miles in

the same intense manner. In Oates's story, he remembers Miles as a "child starved for affection," a child who hugged and kissed Quint, "seiz[ing] him around the hips, burrowing his flushed little face into the elder man as a kitten or puppy might, blindly seeking its mother's teats" (262). It is her mother that Flora seeks in her infatuation with Jessel: "Flora must have seen, yes, here was her lost young mother restored to her, at last!" (259). The visual dimensions of seeing and being seen form the dominant motif in both tales, but in Oates the visual is blatantly intertwined with the question of sex and power.

It has to be made clear to students that in both tales there are two levels of ghosts haunting: Jessel and Quint are substitute love objects as well as substitutes for the parents, who were abruptly swept away by disease in India two years before the story begins. The originating wound for the children is the death of their parents, but they are traumatized again by the sudden and violent deaths of their parent substitutes. The unnamed governess steps into a morass of unresolved mourning, of grief so intense that it swerves away from thanatos to eros in a desperate bid to deny the power and existence of death.

Voyeurism, exhibitionism, as well as oedipal desire and mourning are operating in both tales, but Oates spells out what James implies, whispers: the narcissistic basis of all human affection. We love in others what we project onto them—hence the heavy use in the stories of glass, mirrors, eyes, lake surfaces, and polished wood, in which we see only ourselves. When Oates's Miss Jessel says that Flora is her "soul," that she cannot live without possession of the girl, she is actually saying that she sees in Flora her younger, pure self. She loves herself as an unspoiled beautiful girl, hence her love for Flora is simply a manifestation of her narcissism. The same can be said of Quint's attraction to Miles, in his eyes ultimately a younger and innocent version of himself. So when Jessel and Quint involve the two children in their sexual acts, they are not so much seducing others as making love to split-off manifestations of themselves. That they had easy access to these orphaned and unprotected children constitutes the horror of their crime, a perversion of the trust that was placed in them by the uninvolved master.

Students see that in James's tale they are being teased, as it were, with hints and innuendos. When the governess tells Mrs. Grose that she is certain the apparition came with the purpose of finding Miles, she is told by Mrs. Grose that yes, the two were "great friends": "It was Quint's own fancy. To play with him, I mean—to spoil him. . . . Quint was much too free" (51). The governess does not need to hear any more; sufficiently disgusted, she is determined at that moment to function as a "screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would" (53). So while appearing to position herself as a sacrifice, the one who will take the suffering on herself in lieu of the children, she actually positions herself at the keyhole, peeping, peering, blocking the views of others so that she can see it all. A visual mania, a scopophilia possesses this woman, who ultimately represents every reader who

has wanted to see the unseeable, who has wanted to invade the primal scene of textuality/sexuality.

We move to this scene in Oates's version of the tale, the scene that we have been forming vaguely, fearfully, perversely in our minds. What we are afraid to put into words even mentally, Oates presents in stark terms:

It had been Miles's habit, charming, and touching, perhaps a bit pitiful, to seek out the lovers Quint and Miss Jessel in just such trysting places, if he could find them; then, silky hair disheveled and eyes dilated as with an opiate, he would hug, burrow, twist, groan with yearning and delight—who could resist him, who could send him away? And little Flora, too. (273)

We learn from this description that the children are active participants with their parent substitutes in sexual acts. They do not simply fantasize the primal scene, they live it. Eyes enlarged and reflecting their desire, they "burrow" into the adults, as if to return to the womb. The description is sad as well as horrible, yet the reader of Oates who has also read James's cryptic story now has the sensation that, yes, the crime has finally been uncovered. There surely could be nothing worse. What the unnamed governess wanted so much to uncover and have confessed is here, in these acts of desperate erotic grief.

As the memories of shared intimacies increase and actually haunt the dead, Jessel is ever more anxious to claim Flora, who she sees now as not simply her soul but as "her own little girl, the babe cruelly drowned in her womb, hers and Quint's, in this very pond" (275). As she silently communes with Flora, drawing her closer and into the world of death, the new governess, called "St. Ottery" in mockery by Jessel and Quint, suddenly leaps up and saves Flora, snatching her from the imploring arms of what she sees as a ghoul: "My God, what a—horror! Hide your eyes, child! Shield yourself! . . . Don't look at her, Flora! The horrid, obscene thing! You're safe now" (276). Death and insatiable longing have turned Jessel into a craven thing with "hard-shelled beetles" infesting her pubic hair. Salvation for her can arrive only through her capture of Flora, because in seducing the child and gaining her love, Jessel redeems herself, returns symbolically to her "virginal" and pure self, and her flower of femininity is restored to what it was before she was deflowered by Quint (276).

The love Jessel has for Flora has held her to the catacombs of the dead that encircle the house of Bly. Jessel cannot claim Flora as her own because of the vigilant and obsessive surveillance of St. Ottery, a "terrier" of a woman (276), as dogged in her pursuit of the ghosts as the ghosts are determined in their pursuit of the children. One is tempted to label this contest a life-or-death struggle; someone has to lose. Unfortunately, it is the weakest who cracks "when a bubble bursts at last in Flora's brain" (278). Driven by St.

Ottery to confess about the ghostly appearances of the woman at the lake, Flora disintegrates and is removed to London. According to Oates, she is accompanied there by Jessel, who no longer needs to haunt the house of Bly. Jessel's disappearance allows Quint to come to terms with his prey, Miles. The story of Quint and Miles is not shrouded in any soothing mother-daughter imagery. Nor is it presented as the quest of one soul for another. The tie between the two is much more sexual and physical, making it especially dangerous for Miles.

The connection between Quint and Miles is the core of both James's and Oates's texts. We have in this relationship the association between an older servant and a young, upper-class boy who is desperate for a father, whose love and acceptance are crucial for the boy's identity. In James we learn that "for a period of several months Quint and the boy had been perpetually together" (61). Hints are dropped in James about the exact relationship between Quint and Miles, but in Oates we are given the full spectacle, the evidence that Quint has engaged with the boy in oral sex and that Miles has bragged about the acts to his closest friends at school, hence his immediate and disgraced expulsion. In Oates, the final scene, the struggle for Miles, is a confrontation that neither side can avoid. St. Ottery has been called "Fate" by Jessel (275), and, to capture the moral ambiguity of the situation, Oates places us inside Quint's mind, not the governess's:

Quint, with trembling fingers, readies himself for the final confrontation. He perceives himself as a figure in a drama, or it may be an equation, there is Good, there is Evil, there is deception, there must be deception, for otherwise there would be no direction in which to move. Squinting at his sallow reflection in a shard of mirror, plucking at his graying beard to restore, or to suggest, its old virility; recalling with a swoon in the loins, poor Miles hugging him about the knees, mashing his heated face against him. How is it evil, to give, as to receive, love's comforts?
(279–80)

Why, I ask students, is the word "deception" used twice? All the moral categories we construct in order to explain our lives' events are for Oates necessarily built on self-deception. No one, in other words, thinks that he or she is evil. We are all capable of vast amounts of rationalization, of deception, without which we would not be able to function. For Oates, it is not evil to give or receive any of love's comforts; it is only human. All the inhabitants of Bly—living and dead—are accursed by their longings and their persistent need for "love's comforts" (280). In the catacombs of the dead, where Jessel and Quint rattle around, plucking beetles from their bodies and preening before shards of broken mirrors, the same emotions play out. They are just as jealous, needy, narcissistic, and perverse as are the living. There is, in other

words, no peace in death, only a continuation in a higher key of the same psychology, the same deceptive emotions.

In Oates's tale the climatic scene and third sighting occurs in the family library, where Miles has curled up one evening to read a particularly appropriate volume, the *Directorium Inquisitorum*, an inventory in Latin of sins that are unforgivable in the eyes of the church. St. Ottery confronts him, demanding a confession, and Miles denies all. St. Ottery goes so far as to point to Quint, who is pressing his "yearning face" against the glass, but Miles claims that he cannot see Quint. "There, I say—*there!*" In a fury, the governess taps against the glass, as if to break it. Quint shrinks away." As Miles flees the room, St. Ottery and Quint are left to "regard each other through the window, passionless now, spent as lovers who have been tortured to ecstasy in each other's arms" (282).

Oates concludes her tale by suggesting that Miles commits suicide in the lake and with the eerie rationalization: "We must have imagined that, if Evil could be made to exist, Good might exist as rightfully" (282). The postmodern morality of Oates positions both the living and the dead as victims. Her conclusion—a variation on the just-world ideology—goes something like this: in James's moral universe, the unnamed governess needed to believe that those who had died were evil, so she created manifestations of evil to convince herself that she inhabited a wholly different world, the world of the living that was by nature just and good. A tremendous anxiety about death motivates James's work, as well as an almost pathological fear of sex in any of its forms. Oates makes plain the forces driving *The Turn of the Screw*, and she puts forward an alternative morality: there is no sharp demarcation between good and evil. They exist, if they exist at all, on a continuum where we will all at some time in our lives find ourselves. Oates does not mystify, nor does she coddle her readers. She slaps us in the face with the realization that at some point we all may be prey to obsession, to an erotic mania and nostalgia so intense and irrational in their choice of object that we will wish ourselves dead.

James's tale has famously persisted to enthrall and puzzle. Students are drawn to its glossy surface and its unspoken depths. Oates begins her story in those depths. She forces her readers to confront the polymorphous perversity that is implicit in human relationships, and she portrays a world that has no neat boundaries either in morality or mortality. In an essay that attempts to define the short story, Oates observes that years earlier she "believed that art was rational, at bottom, that it could be seen to 'make sense,' that it had a definite relationship with philosophical inquiry, though its aim was not necessarily to resolve philosophical doubt." But now she thinks otherwise:

The short story is a dream verbalized, arranged in space and presented to the world, imagined as a sympathetic audience . . . the dream is said

to be some kind of manifestation of desire, so the short story must also represent a desire, perhaps only partly expressed, but the most interesting thing about it is its mystery. ("Short Story" 214)

As an instructor who believes in pushing the envelope in the classroom, I would claim that students who come to accept and appreciate fiction as the "dream verbalized" are the better for the experience.