

Henry James and Joyce Carol Oates: "The Turn of the Screw" Times Two

By Monica Loeb

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Joyce Carol Oates has been known to use plots from already existing works of literature. *Agamemnon* inspired her novel *Angel of Light* (1981) and *Great Expectations* provided the basic plot for *Do With Me What You Will* (1973). In a similar fashion she has written a whole series of short stories which she calls "reimaginings of famous stories" that are "testaments of my love and extreme devotion to these other writers; I imagine a kind of spiritual 'marriage' between myself and them, or let's say our 'daimons' in the Yeatsian sense ..." ¹ These short stories, inspired by such various authors as Tchekhov, Kafka, Thoreau, Calvino, and Joyce, have been collected in a volume of short stories appropriately entitled *Marriages and Infidelities*. ² One such short story that Oates has adapted to her own style and whose title she has retained is Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw." ³ My aim with this article is twofold. First of all, to make a comparison of the two stories, and second, to see exactly which elements from the original story have inspired the contemporary writer to create a "marriage" or an "infidelity?" "The Turn of the Screw" originally appeared in 1897 and quickly became one of Henry James' most popular stories, although he himself tended to call it "a piece of mere ingenuity, cold artistic scheming, an 'amulette' ... essentially a pot-boiler and a *jeu d'esprit*." ⁴

Edward Beson, Archbishop of Canterbury, had once told James a ghost story that set his fantasy to work. Consequently, when "The Turn of the Screw" opens, there is a group of listeners gathered in an old English country house all bent on dreadful ghostly tales. Douglas, the narrator, then proceeds to tell them a story written by a woman, his own sister's governess. As the story unfolds we learn that this woman has been offered

a position as governess for a "handsome and bold and pleasant, off-hand and gay and kind ... gallant and splendid" bachelor whose orphaned niece and nephew live on his estate in Essex (J., p. 9). She accepts the job and proceeds to tell the story in the first person. Upon arrival in Essex she is impressed by the place and especially by her little charge, Flora. Her first shock is when she finds out that the little boy, Miles, has been dismissed from school. Gradually the happy, enthusiastic mood at the outset is transformed into mystery, fear, and finally, terror. The governess is visited by visions of either a man or a woman. The latter turns out to be her predecessor, Miss Jessel. The man is Peter Quint, also a former employee at the house who had had an affair with Miss Jessel. Her unexplained death appears to be linked with Quint. In the end, the governess believes the children are possessed by these haunting spirits and she decides to fight for her charges. Little Flora is sent away with the housekeeper, while Miles is kept under her own vigilant eye. In a final visitation, the eighth one, Peter Quint appears and has obviously won the battle, since the boy's "little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (J., p. 160).

At first there seems to be little in common between Henry James' story and the one written by Joyce Carol Oates some 80 years later. It is true that her story is set in England as well, but here the similarities seem to stop at first glance. We are presented with two stories running parallel, that is, each page is divided into two columns in the form of diary entries by two different men. One of the stories is about a young American who is travelling with his aging uncle. Weary of his uncle, he wishes death, on the old man, while simultaneously fearing solitude. One day he meets a little girl on the beach. This meeting is observed by someone who starts to write anonymous letters to him. He begins to feel observed wherever he goes and he also feels haunted by these letters. We get an insight into the thoughts, qualms and fears of this "Dutiful nephew to a sick man," as he calls himself (O., p. 374).

The other, parallel story is told by an elderly man, in fact, the very person who is spying on the young American. He is from London and has spent a month and a half at a sea resort, "Dying by the sea," as he states by the third paragraph (O., p. 363). "Dark-ringed about the eyes with failure" (O., p. 363), "Sleepless. Preoccupied. Idle..." he feels his entire life is "something to be flung down, forgotten" (O., p. 367). He is immediately attracted to the red-haired young American: "My senses stung at the sight of him —" (O., p. 364). He witnesses the meeting between the twelve or thirteen-year-old girl and the man of thirty in the thickets on the beach. The girl becomes aware of the observer and tears away.

The old man is entirely filled with thoughts of the young one. He sees the other's face mirrored in his own reflection (O., p. 366). At night, he is sleepless. Finally, he obtains relief, "Feverish and very happy" (O., p. 373), having written some unsigned letters to Patrick Quarles II. When catching a glimpse of the Quarles' suite of rooms, he is psychedelically elated at "his strange heedless presence everywhere ..." (O., p. 369). His ultimate moment of bliss is experienced when the young man turns around on the beach and simply looks up at his balcony. He then suddenly feels alive through the other man: "I am alive in him and dead, dead in myself" (O., p. 378).

Are these two stories really related by any other means than merely the title? Indeed, they seem quite different at first: two distraught men at a sea resort, and a governess and two children seeing ghosts on a country estate. However, upon closer examination we will find that there are many parallels in date, setting, theme, subject, character, mood, treatment of point of view, and style of writing. James' story was published in 1897. Oates dates her story indirectly by making references to Victoria's Jubilee (1887). Both are set in southern England, one in Essex and the other at Bournemouth. As for subject matter, ghosts and hauntedness appear in both short stories. In the modern version, the young American feels watched and finally haunted by the anonymous letters he receives. After the third letter he asks: "Are there spirits, ghosts?" (O., p. 377). Having opened the fourth one, he strolls on the beach thinking: "A voice has spoken. I know there are ghosts. I understand them. I feel them in this medieval town, on all sides of me, harsh and innocent with their cold piercing eyes and their victories..." (O., p. 378-79). The specters in James have been exchanged for anonymous letters in Oates.

I believe Joyce Carol Oates has rather chosen to emphasize her characters' inner fears of being haunted. James' governess does see real specters, but even in her experiences there is an inner horror, although merely implied, perhaps caused by what Edmund Wilson terms "one of James's familiar themes: the frustrated Anglo-Saxon spinster..." According to his Freudian theory the governess is simply having hallucinations due to sexual repression and unreciprocated love from her handsome employer.⁵ Oates seems to have retained James' original idea of a haunting presence, to a limited extent, in the actions of the elderly man. Even so, being alive, he hardly qualifies as a ghost. Oates, however, focuses her attention on the inner specters of her two male characters, both haunted by various memories and fears. The old man, for instance, is possessed by his fears of death, failure and madness.

The memories of his father's fits of madness haunt him. Will he also succumb to such madness? This fear is constantly preying upon him:

At the bottom of my soul it squats, like that dwarf of a demon: the fear that I am mad, evil, reckless, sick, corrupting, contaminating, loosed, formless, sucking like the waves here upon the packed sand, desolate, inexhaustible, damned ... (O., p. 372)

As for his fear of oncoming age, he wants to cry out to the young man: "'Must I grow old? Must I die?'" (O., p. 377). He feels his life is running out, spiritually he is already dead.

Joyce Carol Oates may have been inspired by James' own life in regard to this apprehension of inherited madness. It is a known fact that there had been some visitations and signs of psychological instability in the James family. The novelist's father had experienced a frightening visitation, a "vastation," as he was to call it in Swedenborgian terminology, which took him two years to get over. James' elder brother, William, while studying at Harvard, entered into a deep depression during which he experienced a visitation. He was filled with such fears of being alone and of darkness that he awoke every morning to terror. Their sister Alice also had a nervous breakdown in the 1860's. All three instances of family "madness" were recorded either as a disguised case history as in William's case, or in a diary by Alice, or in autobiographical writings by the father.⁶ There is no doubt that Henry James was familiar with and interested in the subject of visitations as well as their psychological implications. The theme, then, that the two authors share is the fears within us all. The old master illustrates this in more concrete terms, while the younger author, although choosing to retain some tangible signs of being haunted, places major emphasis on the inner fears dominating her characters. Then, in addition, it may very well have been James' own life, as an elderly, single writer who felt his creative powers waning, as well as the heavy impact of his family history, that inspired Oates' portrait of the old man. It is curious to note in this connection that Joyce Carol Oates has chosen to use the rare word "vastation" to illustrate the old man's feelings of devastation, not only all around him, but also within himself (O., p. 377). This is an eerie echo of the elder James' Swedenborgianism.

Yet another central subject in both stories is the relationship of the main characters to the opposite sex. The governess' romanticized view of her employer has already been noted. Miss Jessel's death is never explained by James, only alluded to. We cannot help but wonder whether it was related to her scandalous affair with Peter Quint. There is a peculiar parallel of names in these two stories, since Peter Quint's

initials are repeated in those of Patrick Quarles, who, in addition, attaches "II" to his name. The two PQ's do not only share initials, but also a problematic fascination with women.

Oates' young man appears to have obviously mixed and conflicting feelings towards the opposite sex. Whereas the governess embraces a very distant and romantic vision of her employer, the young Patrick does have an encounter with a girl on the beach. We get a detailed description of her and his own reaction to her in a disjointed style characterized by short phrases, alliteration, repetitions, colons and dots: "Stinging film over my eyes ... my heart is pounding violently ... Around us on the beach: no one. Empty. Heart pounding, temples pounding, a dense dewlike moisture on every part of my body, cold and slick as fog, my insides in pain..." (O., p. 365). Nothing much happens, the girl runs away having seen their observer. What would have happened if they had not been noticed? Had he intended to rape her there on the deserted beach? His worked-up condition and many sexual references to her body point to that. Afterwards he is reeking with sweat. He knows he has made a mistake. "Uncle would abandon me, like the rest, if he had seen ... (O., p. 366). There is a suggestion that he has committed a sexual offence earlier. When he thinks of his cousin Madeline, he recalls her "tears and red-rimmed eyes" (O., p. 369). We do not know the reasons for either tears or accusations, but the author has certainly planted a few seeds of suspicion, all pointing in the same direction. On the subject of women in general, he feels: "Women. Foul and sluggish in their evil" (O., p. 373). James is less explicit when it comes to explaining Quint's sexual relationship with Miss Jessel, as well as his part in her death.

The two PQ's dubious relations to the opposite sex are shared by the old unmarried man who, once, makes a reflection on women when the chambermaid looks askance at his rapture in the Quarles' suite: "The forbidden rises to one's face in the presence of such women, they positively draw guilt out, expose everything..." (O., p. 375). "The forbidden" or his guilt must here refer to his attraction to the young American, including his empty hotel room! In fact, he is so completely taken in by the man, in a way possessed by him, that it is suggestive of falling in love. In his final moment of bliss, he feels reinvigorated, filled with *Lebenslust* once again: "I will work through him ... He has understood my message. My love. I will live through him and he through me: born again in my writing, in something I will, must write, something I will begin soon in honor of his youth..." (O., p. 379). On the one hand, this exultant display of feelings might be interpreted as homosexual

tendencies. On the other hand, it might simply be seen as a deep, unilateral "communion," a personal recharge. This situation, in fact, resembles the holy marriage described in Oates' "The Sacred Marriage," in which a character gains strength to live on through spiritual communion with a deceased poet, physically and mystically relayed through the latter's widow.⁷ In a similar fashion Joyce Carol Oates uses other authors for inspiration, as her "The Turn of the Screw" and her entire series of reimagined short stories testify.

Due to subject matter and dominating theme, the central mood is naturally one of fear, mystery, and terror in both stories. However, the two authors have constructed their respective stories quite differently, hence a difference in atmosphere. Henry James, for his part, has written a long story, some 160 pages, that naturally permits him a lengthy build-up of a certain mood. He starts out with taut expectations among the group congregated in the old house. Then we enter the world of the excited governess and follow her through fears and doubts to the end, which is the death of little Miles in her arms.

Oates, on the other hand, perhaps due to her story's scant length, a mere 17 pages, employs more of a head-on technique. We are immediately thrust into the troubled worlds of the two diarists. The old man's first word is "Alone". Other words in his first paragraph include "sick at heart," "horrible numerosity," "oppression," "evil light," "mock." He goes on to talk of his idleness, how he is dying and his sense of failure, thus quickly creating a mood of despondency. It is not till the very end, however, that the reader finds out that he is a writer (O., p. 379), or that he may be an American living in England ("We [the uncle and the Londoner] chatter wonderfully, two Americans..." (O., p. 370); two facts that undoubtedly remind us, once again, of Henry James' life. The young man's first paragraph on Tuesday, July 6, starts out in a descriptive fashion: "A wide stony beach, Pebbles big as hands" (O., p. 363). But it does not take long before we are presented with his greatest problem in life, his ailing uncle. By sentence five we know that he has been up all night listening to his uncle's ghastly cough. By sentence seven we are introduced to his fantasy of seeing the old man dead: "I imagine the earth splitting to draw the old man down, his body tumbling into the crater, into Hell..." (O., p. 363). After such an awful night, he had experienced "sleep like death" and had hastened out and away in the morning.

We are thus quickly thrown into the mood of the Oates story, while Henry James gently and gradually introduces us to the world of his story. Having already set the mood on the first page, Oates proceeds to

action on the second page where the young man encounters the girl on the beach. The anonymous letters make him feel haunted. They obviously strike a familiar note, "as if a secret Self" or "my own Self" were writing to him. At times he believes it is a "future Self" observing him. In other words, he is beset by a weird feeling that he nevertheless succeeds in turning into something positive. While the old man experiences his epiphany, the young one also feels something passing into him, "like a breath" (O., p. 378). The red-headed American's story ends in a series of questions. His inner struggle remains centered on the wish to get rid of his uncle and his wish to outlive him (see italicized sections p. 379).

The generational differences between the two protagonists are ironically juxtaposed in the fact that the younger man is wishing death on his uncle, as well as on all others of that same generation, while he himself acts as a life-giver to an old man. Whereas James ends his story at the moment of death, when the forces of evil or fear have won, Oates terminates her story in bliss for one protagonist and queries for the other.

James merely places his protagonist in a new social situation, traces her growing awareness of that situation, and restricts his point of view to the limited insight of that protagonist. Then he leaves it up to the reader to make his own interpretations and associations. This invitation to the reader to participate in the story has been called the "process of adumbration" by James himself.⁸ Oates, on the other hand, has latched on to this technique of possible ambiguity and, in fact, develops it into two parallel points of view: the haunter's as well as the haunted's. Since it is impossible to read both accounts simultaneously, one tends to vacillate between reading them as two complete entities; person by person, page by page or day by day. Whichever way Oates' "The Turn of the Screw" is read, one experiences an event from two viewpoints. Take the letter, for instance, which urges the young American to be cautious. The letter writer refers to the scene he has witnessed on the beach, but the receiver, at his end, interprets the contents of the letter in the light of his own thoughts of wishing death on his uncle (O., p. 372). Consequently, Oates has *physically* realized the ambiguity inherent in James' story by presenting her story simultaneously from two points of view, both told in the first person.

Typographically, Oates' style of writing is naturally distinguished by her use of a double point of view concretized in two columns on each page. James' version is characterized by a clear and distinct prose, perhaps due to its greater length, whereas Oates' story moves quickly