A Modern Reader Response to Peter Quint in Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*

Reader response criticism is one of the newer forms of literary criticism that has entered into literary discussions. This theory privileges the experience the reader has while reading a work as an important way of analyzing a text. Wolfgang Iser is an important voice in the ongoing discussion about reader response and he points out that,

> Even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage,

if only for the fact that no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism.

Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected direction, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections - for filling in the gaps left by the text itself. (216)

Although reader response criticism was not such an accepted form of criticism when Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* readers cannot help notice that he must have been aware of the average reader’s response to his story when he wrote it. This awareness of the readers experience is what allowed him to walk the line between whether the ghosts in his story are real or just imagined so effectively. Not only does he use the ambiguous nature of the ghosts to keep readers interested there are also many other elements of the story left up to the readers imagination. For example it is never explicitly stated how Quint corrupted Miles, what trouble Miles was getting into at school, or even why the children’s uncle is so aloof throughout the
story. James is able to keep readers questioning what is going to happen by not sharing all of the details about what is really happening in his story. Reader response theory helps readers understand how James uses the gaps he leaves in his work just as effectively as the parts he fills in for the reader.

James leaves much of his story up to the reader’s interpretation to let them fill in the missing parts with whatever terrors they can imagine. He begins his story with several listeners waiting for the narrator to begin his ghost story. In the article, “Talking Horrors: James, Euphemism, and the Specter of Wilde” Neill Matheson explains how it seems James was anticipating the response of his readers long before reader response became a theory for criticism when he writes that, “In this passage James seems to stage an imagined scene of reading for his ‘little book,’ playfully anticipating its reception by interpelling a readership whose respectability fails to mask the cruelty of its desires, desires fully as perverse as any that circulate within the story” (708). James seems aware of the effect his teasing details about the upcoming story will have on his readers. By skirting around the facts of the story readers are left to imagine the horrors to come, and as Matheson suggest they probably come up with more graphic details than the late 19th century writer could have gotten away with.

Reader response criticism can help explain why James’s use of ambiguity is so effective at making a novel that can sustain interest even after decades of analysis. By leaving gaps in the story James allows readers to come up with innumerable different interpretations about what is really going on in the story. Iser explains how this technique works writing, “One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled”
If readers were to believe that James was completely unaware of the effects his story would have on readers it would seem like a failed novel. James never made it clear whether the governess was sane not because *The Turn of the Screw* is a failed, incomplete story, but because he anticipated the various reactions it would receive.

James was so effective at knowing where to leave gaps in his story that it has probably been interpreted in ways he had never even thought of. I know I for one had a very different interpretation of the corruption of Miles when I first read the story than any of the interpretations I have found evidence for. When I first read the passage in which the governess and Mrs. Gross discuss Quint saying, “‘Oh it wasn’t HIM!’ Mrs. Gross with emphasis declared. ‘It was Quint’s own fancy. To play with him, I mean – to spoil him.’ She paused a moment; then she added: “Quint was much too free.” (25) I thought the story was referring to molestation. This may have been too much of a modern spin to put on a novel that came out at the turn of the 20th century but nonetheless this was my first interpretation of the corruption. Even though there is not really enough evidence to clearly back up reading the story in this way, it shows how James was able to utilize limiting reader’s information to allow for various interpretations. Just by keeping readers in the dark about what Quint really did to Miles, readers are left to come up with the most shocking scenarios they can think of. Even if a certain reading may not capture exactly what James intended, it still serves as an excellent way of making Quint a disrespectful figure.

*The Turn of the Screw* is able to remain an interesting and polarizing novel because the gaps in it make it seem relevant even when some of the issues may not be. Looking back at the passage previously mentioned most critics agree that there is something sexual about the relation between Quint and Miles. Whether it is just that Quint told him about sex or if it was something more devious is left up to debate. Matheson points out how sexuality is treated in the story
saying, “If I have emphasized the perverseness of this scene, it is to call attention to the highly
euphemistic quality of the story’s language, which draws heavily on the tropes of Gothic
discourse, so that sexuality is recurrently cast in the mode of fear and horror” (710). Sexuality in
the novel is treated as a very private thing and any time it is brought out into the open is meant to
horrify people. As a reader growing up in the millennial generation this type of horror about
sexuality seems strange and outdated. After all if Miles, being ten, was educated in our current
system he would probably be getting lessons on sexual education soon. Even though sexuality is
not such a worrisome topic anymore, James story is able to keep readers interested by allowing
them to fill in the gaps. As Wolfgang Iser points out, the gaps in a text “not only draw the reader
into the action but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by a given situation, so
they take on a reality of their own” (Act of Reading, 268). In this way the gaps allow modern
readers to recreate the novel in a way that makes sense in our current society. A modern reader
may have a more scandalizing reading of what happened between Quint and Miles, but the
effects are still the same. Readers worry about Miles and feel disgust for Quint. By focusing
more on shaping a readers reaction than on laying out a concrete story for readers James was
able to create a story that will go down in history as one of the greatest ghost stories ever told.

Reader response criticism can also be very useful in looking at how a reader reacts to a
piece of literature. I began with the assumption that Quint was characterized as a bad character
because he molested Miles. Only after reading various interpretations of The Turn of the Screw,
did I come to the conclusion that it was probably a less serious offense that Quint committed.
However since James intentionally left the gaps in the novel to be filled there is no saying
whether on interpretation is really more correct than another. In fact if readers take the new
critical approach to reading, where it is only the text itself and no outside information that is
analyzed, one would assume they would have to update the way the gaps are filled in. Only by taking a new historical approach and including information on when the story was written and what was going on at the time can readers start eliminating possibilities. Reader response is helpful in showing why it is not necessarily only the evidence found in a story that can be used to make claims. A reader response interpretation can look at the various ways the texts works on a reader and analyze this response, rather than the concrete evidence in the story. Especially in a novel like *The Turn of the Screw*, where the effectiveness of the story relies on the reactions of the readers, this type of interpretation can be very useful.

Even though reader response critics like Wolfgang Iser were not around when Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* it is surprising how well their theories apply to it. Even though there may not have been a formalized school of thought to explain what James was doing it is clear that he had the response of his readers in mind while writing this story. Only by being aware of the various ways readers may respond to his work is he able to create such a chilling tale with minimal details.

**Works Cited:**


Neill Matheson. "Talking Horrors: James, Euphemism, and the Specter of Wilde."