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 interpellating a readership whose
respectability fails to mask the cruelty of it 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 disreputable 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."
Free Essay: Henry James’ novella The Turn of the Screw is a highly ambiguous piece of fiction. Set in Edwardian England, a very naïve woman is left in charge... When she first sights the ghost of Peter Quint on top of the house she is able to describe his position with amazing precision in note of the fact she was some distance from him and her sighting was quite brief. She comments she stood at an angle, tall and erect; he fixed me with a hard gaze and when yet again she confides in Mrs Grouse she gives a very elaborate description commenting on his tight red curls, pale face, long in shape, small tiny whiskers, darker arched eyebrows and the fact that he had no hat. The Turn of the Screw is an 1898 horror novella by Henry James which first appeared in serial format in Collier’s Weekly (January 27 – April 16, 1898). In October 1898, it was collected in The Two Magics, published by Macmillan in New York City and Heinemann in London. The novella follows a governess who, caring for two children at a remote estate, becomes convinced that the grounds are haunted. The Turn of the Screw is considered a work of both Gothic and horror fiction, shocking for contemporary readers; and thirdly and most importantly because James himself is perhaps unable to face the implications of his story. I also want to explore the way leaving an implied story unclear leaves it particularly open to ambiguity and hence variety of interpretation. Either way, the implication is that Miles had been ‘corrupted’ by Quint, either by homosexual seduction or by being involved in some way in the affair between Quint and Miss Jessel (as a witness? as a sexual participant?). This then is the essence of the matter. The reader’s imagination is to be prompted by hints and suggestions towards the very worst actions small victims so conditioned might be conceived as subject to. What are these? Well, to every reader their own horror. Yes, I know Henry James’s language is dense; I’ve read several of his novels and I promise you that is not the issue with this “edition”. I cannot imagine what transpired to result in this bizarre mutilation. Amazon/Kindle, I am a most unhappy customer, and I would like my money returned! Shameful. The subject matter had some good material to work with, but modern day readers are too sensible to accept this at face value. We are so numb to intense hauntings and movies, that the scare value on this book wouldn’t even register a blip on any scare meter scale. But if we remember how long ago this book was written, it sets a decent stage for those that were to come later. The only really bad part was the choppy manner of haunted sightings, and the blunt ending attached to it. However, reader-response criticism can take a number of different approaches. A critic deploying reader-response theory can use a psychoanalytic lens, a feminist lens, or even a structuralist lens. What these different lenses have in common when using a reader-response approach is they maintain “...that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does” (Tyson 154). Tyson explains that “...reader-response theorists share two beliefs: 1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and 2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning p