

their readings with old-fashioned arguments and evidence drawn from a lovingly close reading of *The Turn of the Screw*?

To put the matter more specifically, are scholars beginning to insist that not all possible readings of Miles's death are equally valid, and that one of our jobs as readers is to *decide*, to argue on clear grounds and in clear language which is best?

THE DEATH OF MILES

In what remains of this essay I present a series of critical comments about Miles's death. I present them without comment of my own, thinking that perhaps students will want to test their own readings of the closing pages of the story against those of other readers. It is impossible, in any case, for readers *not* to pay some attention to Miles's death. Whether we see the ghosts as real or imaginary, whether we see the governess as insane or sane, whether we see the children as corrupt or innocent, whether we think the story resolves *any* questions, Miles's heart stops for us all — well almost all — in the last line of the story, and that stopping cries out to be explained. Explaining Miles's death has always been frustrating. Robert W. Hill puts it this way: "The narrative recording Miles's death is designed to be as uncooperative to a clear understanding as anything in literature can be" (69). In the following paragraphs I give a chronological medley of comments about Miles's death. To be fully understood, they should be read in the context of the books and articles from which they are taken. See the Works Cited for bibliographic details for each citation.

Wilson, 1934: "She has literally frightened him to death." (94)

Fagin, 1941: "Little Miles is dead . . . exhausted by the ordeal . . . too corrupted to live without evil." (201)

Liddell, 1947: "Miles's soul is purged by confession. . . . He dies, worn out by the struggle between good and evil, in the moment of triumph." (141)

Heilman, 1948: "His face gives a 'convulsive supplication' — that is, actually a prayer, for and to Quint, the demon who has become his total deity. But the god isn't there, and Miles despairs and dies." (285)

Hoffman, 1953: "Miles's death is caused by the governess's insistence on his confession; the confession is wrested from him, but he dies from the shock. . . . Miles is saved, Peter Quint has lost.

But the experience — the fright, the horror, the recognition of evil — is too much for Miles.” (104–05)

Firebaugh, 1957: “Small wonder that Miles dies; he has been forced to see the only source of knowledge he has known in his brief life, Quint, as an embodiment of evil, and himself as a victim of Original Sin.” (62)

Lydenberg, 1957: “Recall again the last long scene of Miles’ death — or murder. She will make him confess, by whatever third-degree methods prove necessary; she will find a way to demonstrate that all actions, all explanations prove his guilt. He will not escape like Flora. She will hold him tight and keep him all for herself, even though she can possess him as she wishes only in death.” (55)

Feuerlicht, 1959: “The death of a healthy child from mere mental shock seems . . . almost as unbelievable as the existence of evil ghosts. Miles’s ‘little heart,’ as the governess says, — this, by the way, is the moving style of a loving and lovable person, not of a lunatic or a sadist — has stopped because it has been ‘dispossessed’ . . . exorcised.” (74)

Katan, 1962: “The boy had a homosexual dependency upon Peter Quint. This power of Peter Quint’s extends even after the valet’s death. Yet this relation with Peter Quint protects him against the dangerous attachment to a mother figure. When the governess destroys Peter Quint’s influence, she turns the clock back. The warded-off exciting oedipal relationship comes again to the fore. Out of necessity the boy has to die, for James had no other solution left. It was this dramatic ending through which James hoped to prevent the reader from having any discharge of the castration anxiety that James intended to arouse.” (489)

Rubin, 1964: “What I am suggesting, of course, is . . . that Douglas *is* Miles, and that the story Douglas reads, supposedly about another little boy and the governess, is in fact about *him*. If this were so, then the scarcely-disguised erotic implications of the narrative are of direct importance. They would mean that . . . Miles [did] not die at all at the close.” (318)

West, 1964: “The governess indulges in an exuberant debauch of violence that contributes to the sudden death of the little Miles — or she dreams that she did.” (288)

Clair, 1965: “In a burst of fear and terror . . . he dies of shock.” (54)

Cranfill and Clark, 1965: "The children suffer prolonged, helpless, lethally dangerous exposure to the mad governess. . . . Their exposure ends only when Flora lies delirious and Miles lies dead in the governess' arms, both victims of her endless harassment and of mortal terror." (169)

Aldrich, 1967: "*The Turn of the Screw* is . . . a tragedy about an evil older woman [Mrs. Grose] who drove an unstable younger woman completely out of her mind, and whose jealousy was the indirect cause of a little boy's death." (176-77)

Eli Siegel, 1968: "The reason Miles dies is because he can't decide. 'Extinction through indecision' would be the aesthetic coroner's statement about him. . . . Because of this indecision, Miles gets what can be called a quiet tantrum. It is a little bit like what happens when babies turn blue with indecision: frantic indecision." (135, 148)

Sheppard, 1974: "She kills Miles on the spot, with mingled excitement, fright, rage, and despair." (210)

Hill, 1981: "It is he, Miles, whom she has been intent upon destroying all along. . . . Certainly 'his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped' — dispossessed not of Quint's influence as the governess had always supposed, but of a murderous plot against others which had recoiled upon its maker." (70)

Milne, 1981: "The governess sees Quint again at the window and desperately attempts to force Miles to enter her hallucination. When the moment is over, Quint has vanished and Miles lies dead in the governess' smothering grasp. Ironically, her attempt to escape her 'small smothered life' has smothered the life out of Miles." (298-99)

Schrero, 1981: "To deprive a person of sexuality is to deprive him of life; for, on an unconscious level, it may well seem that the loss of erotic freedom is what kills little Miles at the end of the tale." (274)

Crowe, 1982: "She is the evil force, or at least its vehicle. Miles . . . is dead, dispossessed, not of ghosts he never sees, but of the governess. For she, a bit like Hawthorne's Dr. Chillingworth, has presumed to invade the human heart; she has wanted to possess the very soul of another." (42)

Matheson, 1982: "There are many indications throughout the concluding scenes which point to Miles having been smothered by

the frantic, raving governess, that his death is the result of asphyxiation rather than strain, fright, or ‘dispossession.’” (173)

Scott, 1983: “Miles collapses into the governess’s arms, dead of a terror-induced heart-stoppage. . . . He has finally seen what he had caused the governess to see seven times . . . and since he is exhausted from a summer’s sleeplessness, the shock of that single appearance proves fatal.” (128)

Haggerty, 1989: “She seems to know that in liberating Miles from Quint she has lost him as well. She catches him and holds him for a minute before she realizes that Miles has succumbed to his own liberation. And his death leaves us ever to wander in the darkness of our own confusion.” (157)

Heller, 1989: “Miles becomes angry in the end because he believes he has failed to expel Jessel; the governess possesses or is possessed by her, and he is helpless. His fear of the consequences, added to the other stresses of the situation, prove too much for his sensitive frame.” (112)

Kaplan, 1992: “The insidious sexual element in the story — which combines Henry senior’s fear of corruption and his role as a corrupting force, Miles’s homoerotic sexual adventures, for which he has been expelled from school, and death by shock . . . — resonates as an artistic rendering of homosexual panic.” (414)

Oates, 1994: “Miles gives an anguished cry. His face has gone dead-white, he appears on the verge of a collapse, yet, when [the governess] tries to secure him in her arms, he shoves her away. ‘Don’t touch me, leave me alone!’ he shouts. ‘*I hate you.*’ . . . Into the balmy-humid night the child Miles runs, runs for his life, damp hair sticking to his forehead, and his heart, that slithery fish, thumping against his ribs. Though guessing it is futile, for the madwoman was pointing at nothing, Miles cries, in a hopeful, dreading voice, ‘Quint? — *Quint?*’” (282)

That last quotation, of course, is different from the rest. It was written by Joyce Carol Oates in a recent imaginative retelling of *The Turn of the Screw*, this time mostly from the points of view of the dead Jessel and Quint. In her story, entitled “Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly,” Miles does not die at the end. Rather, as Oates herself put it in response to a reviewer’s remarks on the story, he “escapes his oppressors, and lives” (31). Fiction, criticism, and now fiction once again con-

tinue to struggle with what *really* happened — or ought to have happened, or might have happened — at Bly.

What is the governess *really* like? Are the ghosts *really* real? Is Flora *really* corrupt? How does Miles *really* die? It is evident that there are almost as many readings of *The Turn of the Screw* as there are readers. What do we make of what Wayne Booth has called “the appalling chaos of critical opinions” (286)? Do we praise the readers for their marvelous ingenuity? Do we blame the readers for not reading more carefully? Do we praise James for the wonderful and all-encompassing ambiguity of his story? Do we blame James for this chaos, wishing that he had made his meaning clearer? Or do we dispense with all praise and blame and take on the stance of one kind of reader-response scholar and say that virtually any reading is legitimized by the very fact that some reader, somewhere, has offered it?

In the essays that follow we have five different ways of reading *The Turn of the Screw* — and its ending. In view of the multiplicity of readings possible, it makes most sense to begin with an account of what reader-response criticism is all about and with a reader-response interpretation written by Wayne Booth for this volume.

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