How does Henry James achieve this ambiguity? I wondered and that led me to read the book. It is a short novel, only 155 pages in the mass paperback copy I read. The copy had been on my library shelf for thirty years and its acid-based pages were deeply yellowed with age and hard to read — which seemed to befit the tenor of the text itself which seemed colored from another age, dense with archaic language forms, and difficult to read. The governess's rambling thoughts go on for many pages at times without a single break for conversation. Even when she has a conversation, it is more of a monologue, as neither the housekeeper nor her two charges have much to say. I found no problem with James' language usage in The Spoils of Poynton — so perhaps it was striving for this subtle ambiguity which befuddled readers for some twenty-five years before Wilson deciphered his text and offered an alternative to the ghost story interpretation. In case, it could be said that until Wilson's essay, no one seriously questioned it being a ghost story(1). It had all the classic signs of a ghost story. Two deceased servants, the valet Quint and the previous governess Jessel, kept appearing through the windows, across the lake, on the steps, etc, of Bly, the home where the governess attempted to protect her two young charges, Miles and Flora, as best she could from these horrid specters. The housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, even identifies the ghosts as Quint and Jessel, but only from accounts by the governess.

One of the ways James achieves the ambiguity is how he introduces the story. Douglas reads aloud the diary of his sister’s governess, from whom he got it when she died. The theme of governess in love with young Miles unfolds within the first-person story of the diary. One might imagine that Douglas’s governess had been earlier a governess to Miles before she was governess to Douglas’s sister.

Douglas tells us of the main condition of the guardian of the two children who were to be raised in Bly by the governess without his presence or involvement.

[page 10] "That she should never trouble him — but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone. She promised to do this,
and she mentioned to me that when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded."

By page 11 of the text, Douglas disappears as a character and turns the story entirely over to the first-person narrative of the governess who arrives to take charge of Miles and Flora. She asks Mrs. Grose about Miles after she has been introduced to Flora and impressed by her beauty and "sweet serenity."

[page 15] "And the little boy — does he look like her? Is he too so very remarkable?"

One wouldn't, it was already conveyed between us, too grossly flatter a child. "Oh, Miss, most remarkable. If you think well of this one!" -- and she stood there with a plate in her hand, beaming at our companion, who looked from one of us to the other with placid heavenly eyes that contained nothing to check us.

"Yes; if I do — ?"

"You will be carried away by the little gentleman!"

"Well, that, I think, is what I came for — to be carried away. I'm afraid, however," I remember feeling the impulse to add, "I'm rather easily carried away. I was carried away in London!"

Early on we get an idea of the likely influence the governess will have on her two charges when she receives a report that Miles has been asked not to return to his boarding school. She asks Mrs. Grose for the letter from the school, and Mrs. Grose asks her what it says, being unable to read it herself. "They go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him," she says, and that is a statement of fact, but her next two statements swerve sharply from fact into illusion. "That can have only one meaning. That's he's an injury to the others." Lacking any evidence to support such a claim, we can only suppose that the governess is herself in some way an injury to others. Why else would she make such a guess about the headmaster's intention? People, I have noticed, have only themselves to talk about, and convey their personal image of themselves in the process of talking about others. Not being a woman, most of whom, I suspect, must know this by the time they reach maturity and engage in gossip in earnest — it took me a much longer time to come by this understanding. It is the process of projection in action.

Later the governess thinks about Miles this way:

[page 23] He was incredibly beautiful, and Mrs. Grose had put her finger on it:

everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence.

What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child — his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love.

These thoughts made it admittedly difficult for the governess to reconcile her thoughts of Miles having been an injury to others or having been bad in any way. Yet she does not report this to her boss, does not write to the headmaster for an explanation, and does not ask Miles what happened. Until the very end, she seems mysteriously content to have such overweening goodness and badness exist in her impression of Miles.

Add to that a thought she shares with us when she had Miles and Flora in their bed for an hour one afternoon and was out on her stroll.

[page 27] One of the thoughts that, as I don't in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that — I only asked that he should know; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it in his handsome face.

It should come to no one's surprise that is exactly what happened to her when the first ghost, a man,
appears!

... I stopped short on emerging from one of the plantations and coming into view of the house. What arrested me on the spot — and with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for — was the sense that imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there! — but high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower to which, on that first morning, little Flora had conducted me.

Even though she had seen a vision, an illusion of her own mind, she rejected it as such and was convinced of the veracity of the man she saw. She, it seemed, could not be content with the mere illusion of a man; he had to be real. The vision must be a vagrant trespasser through Bly.

That was that, repeatedly, I dipped into my room and locked the door to say to myself. We had been, collectively, subject to an intrusion; some unscrupulous traveler, curious in old homes, had made his way in unobserved, enjoyed the prospect from the best point of view and then stolen out as he came. If he had given me such a bold hard stare, that was but a part of his indiscretion. The good thing, after all, was that we should surely see no more of him.

When she finally reveals her encounters with this man to the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose decides on very little evidence that he is Quint, the master's former valet who was now dead. This active creation of an identity of the man with the dead valet ratifies and promotes the governess's illusions to the status of a ghost. This may be considered the second "turn of the screw." The first one was when the governess wished for some man to appear to her and look at her directly; the second was when Mrs. Grose identifies the man as a deceased person. But Flora has an actual turn of the screw to perform herself.

The event would be of little consequence were it not for the title of the story and that the governess had just seen the apparition across the lake as Flora sat at the edge of the lake and was playing with a couple of pieces of wood. The governess, sure of the reality of the man standing over there, waited breathlessly for Flora to cry out.

Of the positive identity of the apparition I would assure myself as soon as the small clock. My courage should have ticked out the right second; meanwhile, with an effort that was already sharp enough, I transferred my eyes straight to little Flora, who, at the moment, was about ten yards away. My heart had stood still for an instant with the wonder and terror of the question whether she too would see; and I held my breath while I waited for what a cry from her, what some sudden innocent sign either of interest or of alarm, would tell me. I waited, but nothing came; then in the first place — and there is something more dire in this, I feel, than in anything I have to relate — I was determined by a sense that within a minute all spontaneous sounds from her had dropped; and in the second by the circumstance that also within the minute she had, in her play, turned her back to the water. This was her attitude when I at last looked at her — looked with the confirmed conviction that we were still, together, under direct personal notice. She had picked up a small flat piece of wood which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat. This second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place. My apprehension of what she was doing sustained me so that after some seconds I felt I was ready for more. Then I again shifted my eyes — I faced what I had to face.

By Flora's "tightening in place" of the mast instead of screaming in fright, the governess felt that Flora was "turning the screw" on her! She runs directly to Mrs. Grose to reveal her conclusion, "They know — it's too monstrous: they know, they know!" And she reveals that Flora saw the apparition and gave no notice of it! Mrs. Grose, who has never read words in a letter or a book, can only accept the governess's word as
an accurate reading of what she saw.

[page 81] She offered her mind to my disclosures as, had I wished to mix a witch's broth and proposed it with assurance, she would have held out a large clean saucepan.

Mrs. Grose is only a tad skeptical when the governess identifies the apparition of a woman as Miss Jessel, the governess's predecessor. She asks the governess how she can know it is a woman that she has never seen, and the governess says, "Ask Flora — she's sure!" But neither woman will ask Flora — it's seems so unnecessary. Like a house of cards in a dead still room, the identity of the two apparitions and the harm they intend the two children is constructed and not even a small breeze can arise to topple the fanciful construction.

The governess convinces Mrs. Grose that the ghosts are there to suggest danger to the children and that the Master must take them away to prevent danger to the children. This conversation between her and Mrs. Grose indicates the Catch-22 of her actually sending the letter. Thus, while the governess will write the letter, she will allow it to be waylaid on the way to the Master and not arrive.

[page 87, 88] Standing there before me while I kept my seat, she [Mrs. Grose] visibly turning things over. "Their uncle [the Master] must do the preventing. He must take them away."

"And who's to make him?"
She had been scanning the distance, but she now dropped on me a foolish face.
"You, Miss."
"By writing to him that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad?"
"But if they are, Miss?"
"And if I am myself, you meant? That's charming news to be sent him by a person enjoying his confidence and whose prime understanding was to give him no worry."

It goes on and on this way to resolve, until the very end. — Until the snap, as she calls it when Miles insists that he will get his Uncle to come down if she will not. Then she walks away from Miles at the church and wanders back to the house when she sinks down at the foot of the stairs and sinks into a tormented despair. Which she amazingly recalls was the very place she had seen a specter of a woman earlier sitting one day! It was as though she had seen the very image of herself from the future breaking in on her. And who knows but what that is exactly what happened to her? We are left with this self-indictment of herself as the story winds to its horrific conclusion shortly after she recalls the vision on the staircase.

[page 103, 104] My quickness would have to be remarkable, however, and the question of a conveyance was the great one to settle. Tormented, in the hall, with difficulties and obstacles, I remember sinking down at the foot of the staircase — suddenly collapsing there on the lowest step and then, with a revulsion, recalling that it was exactly where, more than a month before, in the darkness of night and just so bowed with evil things, I had seen the specter of the most horrible of women.

This is a story which can be read on many levels and all of them taken together must somehow infuse the meaning of the story. A ghost story, two scheming children, or a young woman's twisted infatuation with a young boy gone awry. The choice is yours, dear Reader — a gift of a masterful writer.

--------------------------- Footnotes ---------------------------

Footnote 1. Two authors, Kenton and Goddard, had separately offered other explanations earlier, but Wilson's essay had a much bigger impact.

Return to text directly before Footnote 1.