



**THE OTHER
HOUSE**
HENRY JAMES

INTRODUCTION BY
LOUIS BEGLEY

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THE OUTCRY

HENRY JAMES (1843–1916), the younger brother of the psychologist William James and one of the greatest of American writers, was born in New York but lived for most of his life in England. Among the best known of his many stories and novels are *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Wings of the Dove*.

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T H E O T H E R H O U S E

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THE OTHER HOUSE

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

IN THE HAPPIEST of large families there is sometimes an ugly duckling, the child who is quite simply different from the others. Its talents and good character overlooked, it seems doomed to suffer forever from the comparison with its more fortunate siblings. Something similar happens, not infrequently, to certain works of a great master. A particular novel may attract the dislike of an influential critic for reasons—of technique, perhaps, or of style or subject—that in the end would appear to come down to little more than its being different. Henry James's *The Other House*, serialized in the *Illustrated London News* and then published in book form in 1896, is such a work.

In the opinion of James's great biographer, Leon Edel,

The Other House "is one of his most unpleasant novels . . . an outburst of primitive rage that seems irrational and uncontrolled . . ." I disagree with that judgment in all respects but one. Written in the immediate aftermath of two personal catastrophes, *The Other House* may indeed be an "outburst." In 1894, Constance Fenimore Woolson, with whom James had maintained a complex and intimate relationship, committed suicide. He was left with a sense of guilt that one imagines was as acute and unresolvable as John Marcher's in "The Beast in the Jungle." And a year later, James's play, *Guy Domville*, failed so dismally that this ceremonious, preternaturally sensitive man was subjected to fifteen minutes of boos and catcalls when he appeared on the stage at the close of the opening performance. But *The Other House* is also something of a *coup d'essai*, marking both James's return to the novel, after five years devoted to playwriting, as well as the start of a new series of great works (from *What Maisie Knew* [1897] to the summits of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* [1902–1904]) Perhaps for these reasons, it is quite true that James plays his cards rapidly here, almost impatiently. Jamesian "dominant unspeakable"—matters otherwise obscured behind a veil of allusion and periphrasis—becomes at times directly visible, like crystals appearing at the bottom of a murky solution after the proper catalyst has been added. It is downright wrong,

however, to attribute to “primitive rage” the more-direct-than-usual treatment in this novel of the Master’s perennial theme—the unprevented slaughter of innocents—or to characterize as “irrational” or “uncontrolled” a novel that is in fact immaculately plotted. In this respect, *The Other House*, which began as a scenario, benefited from James’s theatrical apprenticeship.

The ugly duckling anomaly, the signal point of difference, is that the innocent in *The Other House*—orphaned four-year-old Effie Bream—is murdered in the absolute physical sense. Rose Armiger, a demonic precursor of Kate Croy of *The Wings of the Dove* and Charlotte Stant of *The Golden Bowl*, is the “bad heroine” (in James’s phrase), and she drowns the child in the stream that separates the two houses hinted at by the novel’s title. The family physician, Dr. Ramage, who discovers the body, reconstitutes the act as follows:

The child was taken into the boat and it was tilted: that was enough—the trick was played. . . . She was immersed—she was held under water—she was made sure of. Oh, I grant you it took a hand—and it took a spirit! But they were there.

Of course *The Wings of the Dove* is also a murder story: Kate Croy, Morton Densher, and Lord Mark all have a

hand in the death of the innocent and vulnerable Milly Theale. But the assault on her is moral, not physical, as is the thwarted assault on Maggie in *The Golden Bowl*. As a consequence, the strain on the nerves of some readers may be less acute, the impression of horror less “primitive.”

Why does Rose do such a thing? Out of infatuation with Tony Bream, and to vault over an obstacle erected in her way at the beginning of the novel. Julia, the child’s mother, on her deathbed, extracts from Tony the promise not to marry again so long as the child lives. Rose knows why Julia makes this request, having been brought up with her, as though they were sisters, and having shared in her abominable mistreatment by her stepmother; she understands that the dying woman’s desire to prevent Tony’s remarriage is rooted only in the fear of Effie’s falling into the hands of a similarly evil stepmother. Thus it is Rose who suggests to Tony that there be a temporal limitation on his promise. One feels that immediately the new necessity takes form in her mind: the promise being what it is, in order to replace Julia she has to get rid of the child.

There is also, as always, the financial aspect. Rose is a Victorian type: one of those exceptional young women with an excess of *élan vital* who is held back by poverty that is more sordid than genteel. Her income is but two

hundred pounds a year; she has no clear place to live. And of course Tony is rich, and the owner of a fine place, although "new":

He had on his marriage, at a vast expense, made it quite violently so. His wife and his child were new; new also in a marked degree was the young woman [Rose] who had lately taken up her abode with him and who had the air of intending to remain till she should lose that quality.

Rose is something of a female desperado, but it is clear that her attachment to Tony, and its fatal consequences, go beyond questions of interest.

And yet the wonder of it is that Rose is drawn to Tony in the first place. This is how James judges Tony:

To look at him was immediately to see that he was a collection of gifts, which presented themselves as such precisely by having in each case slightly overflowed the measure. He could do things—this was all he knew about them; and he was ready-made, as it were—he had not had to put himself together. His dress was just too fine, his colour just too high, his moustache just too long, his fine voice just too loud, his smile just too

gay. . . . His being a very handsome, happy, clever active, ambitiously local young man was in short just too obvious.

It is a mystery to match the attraction of Morton Den-
sher, that other lightweight who proves so utterly irre-
sistible to both the good and the bad heroines of *The
Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale and Kate Croy. Tony's
being rich is hardly sufficient to explain his appeal. The
good heroine of *The Other House*, Jean Martle, is no fool,
and she certainly is not fooled when it comes to Tony's
house: she "was so constituted that she also knew, more
dimly but at the end of five minutes, that the elegance at
Mr. Bream's was slightly provincial." Yet she too falls in
love with him—practically at first sight—and remains in
love, unshaken by his failings and the apparent hopeless-
ness of her situation. How can he marry her since the
little Effie lives and she, Jean, would protect her with her
own life?

One also knows that money as a motive is peripheral
to this hair-raising tale because its other male principals,
as drawn to Rose as she and Jean are to Tony, have plenty
of it. One of them, Denis Vidal, is "a short, meager young
man, with a smooth face and a dark blue double-breasted
jacket" who is just back from China, where he has made
a fortune. And Paul Beever, promising "to become mas-

sive early in life and even to attain a remarkable girth," an young man whose "great tastes were for cigarettes and silence," is the son of Mrs. Beever, the owner of the book's other house: he is destined to be equal partners with Tony in the rock-solid bank owned jointly by the two families. Echoing the contrast between Tony and Paul, the Beever house is the antithesis of Tony's. James describes it as a "high square temple of mahogany and tapestry, in which, the last few years, Mrs. Beever had spent much time in rejoicing that she had never set up new gods . . . Her mahogany had never moved." The lady herself, "so 'early Victorian' as to be almost prehistoric—was constructed to move amid massive mahogany and sit upon banks of Berlin-wool." One is reminded of Kate Croy's Aunt Maud, "a complex and subtle Britannia, as passionate as she was practical, with a reticule for her prejudices as deep as that other pocket, the pocket full of coins stamped in her image, that the world best knew her by," except that Mrs. Beever does not match Aunt Maud's power or her success at having her way. She is a figure, sometimes comical, of pompous authority, and her interventions, directed primarily at accomplishing the union of her lethargic son and Jean Martle, are entirely unavailing.

It is Dr. Ramage, already mentioned as discovering Effie's body, who presides over the book's end, as he

does over the deathbed of Tony's wife at the beginning. Ramage is

a little man . . . who had a face so candid and circular that it suggested a large white pill. Mrs. Beever had once said with regard to sending for him: "It isn't to take his medicine, it's to take him. I take him twice a week in a cup of tea." It was his tone that did her good.

Effie's drowning must be explained; therefore Rose schemes to frame Jean Martle for the crime. Her scheme unravels almost at once, as one by one the other characters realize that she alone can be the murderer. Whereupon, horrifyingly, the respectable Dr. Ramage arranges a cover-up that, among the many cover-ups in James's fiction, is the only one that is an explicitly cooperative effort. On condition that Dennis Vidal will take Rose away, the doctor proposes to make it appear that the child died of an "attack," which he will make out to be "sufficiently remarkable." And the father, Mrs. Beever, Paul, and even Dennis, fully understanding that he is in a "black, bloody nightmare," all acquiesce. Only Jean protests. "I wish to hunt her to the death! I wish to burn her alive!" she tells Tony, who answers "Her doom will be to live." What is Dr. Ramage's motive for arranging to let Rose off? Tony

has already begun to give out that it was he who murdered his own child, and it may be to prevent such a monstrous self-sacrifice that the doctor acts. But then, as Mrs. Beever puts it in another context, Tony is "exaggerated."

Which is a partial explanation of his wanting to go so absurdly far. It is also a matter of dirty secrets and inexpungible guilt. Tony knew Rose was dangerous. He confesses to Jean that, during the years that separate his wife's death from the novel's denouement, he has been "kind" to Rose, and that he "should have been less." "You mean you liked it?" Jean inquires. The answers she receives in the brief exchange that follows are but one example of the bold foreshortenings through which James makes manifest in this very remarkable novel the overpowering force and ignominy of the sexual drive:

"I liked it—while I was safe. Then I grew afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of everything. You don't know—but we're abysses. At least *I'm* one!" he groaned. He seemed to sound this depth. "There are other things. They go back far."

"Don't tell me all," said Jean. She had evidently enough to turn over.

—LOUIS BEGLEY