



# **The Jolly Corner**

*Henry James*

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## **The Jolly Corner** Henry James

The Jolly Corner was first published in 1908 in The English Review. Henry James describes the adventures of Spencer Brydon as he explores the empty New York house where he grew up. He encounters a "sensation more complex than had ever before found itself consistent with sanity." The Jolly Corner is the nickname he gave to his childhood home. Brydon begins to believe that his alter ego-the ghost of the man he might have been is haunting the house. The theme of unlived lives runs throughout the story.

## **The Jolly Corner Details**

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# From Reader Review The Jolly Corner for online ebook

## Stephen Durrant says

"The Jolly Corner" is more a long short story than a novel, but since I read it in a Kindle stand-alone version as a follow-up to Domenico Starnone's "Trick," which plays off James' story, I will briefly review it here. The central character, Spencer Brydon, has returned from Europe to America after thirty years in Europe and renews an acquaintance with a former woman friend. Both of them wonder what he would have become had he remained in America and continued to occupy the impressive family apartment, pursuing a more materialistic American life. He begins to wander the now empty family apartment during the night almost stalking some vision, however illusive, of his alter-ego, the American-him who never went away. And, yes, there is a confrontation (nuff said). As one who wonders about certain "roads not taken" and even lays awake at night imagining where those roads might have led, I was fascinated with this story. After all, perhaps the most intriguing ghosts are just imagined glimpses of ourselves as we might have become.

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## Doug says

2.5, rounded down.

I'm not a fan of James - his prose is way too flowery and longwinded for my taste, and there doesn't ever seem to be much of a plot - so the only reason I read this is because it figures prominently in Domenico Starnone's 'Trick', which I wanted to read, and which translator Jhumpa Lahiri strongly suggested was advisable to know in order to glean the most pleasure from the Italian book. About halfway through, I almost abandoned the idea of reading either, since the James is just a plodding story of a man returning to America from Europe and scaring himself into seeing the apparition of the man he COULD have been, had he stayed, in his old childhood house. That's the extent of the story, and it could have easily been stated in half the length. Hopefully the Starnone will be worth wading through this for.

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## Laura says

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## Alisa Cupcakeland says

I liked some parts of it, but once again, I found it unnecessarily long. Too many details. I like the character of Alice and I would have preferred a deeper exploration of her instead of this obsessive focus on the annoying "ghost".

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## No Books says

## The Jamesian Reread #2

Henry James' last ghost story, and his finest since *The Turn of the Screw*, is also his final meditation on some of his most personal concerns: the international theme, the American who goes back after a long period spent in the Old World and his impressions of a rapidly changing country that at the turn of the century was rising to the role of world power.

Spencer Brydon, 56, a New Yorker, returns home after living in "Europe" [sic] for 33 years, in order to look after his property: two NY buildings, whose leases constitute his income and which are now to be subjected to "reconstruction as a tall mass of flats" (2). He accordingly finds himself willing to supervise the works—something he would never have dreamed of doing in his long European years—and discovers thus a dormant talent. Spencer Brydon is therefore a late assessment of the Jamesian theme of the life not lived, that had already run through the so-called major phase of his career (i.e. the first years of the new century) often in the guise of what could have been of a character had s/he (not) gone abroad.

The theme, however, takes a peculiar turn in this case. Brydon, who has acquiesced to the conversion of one of the buildings, is reluctant about the other one: the house on the corner (the jolly corner) of street and Avenue, where he and his family had always lived. He secretly enjoys nightly visits to the place, now utterly devoid of furniture but still full of his memories. In the course of such visits he develops the belief that his own sense of wonder for the New York he has found upon his return inhabits the house, and that the very life he has not lived is impersonated in a human figure, his *alter-ego*. He grows more and more obsessed with the idea, to the point of overcoming his fear and of actually *hunting* the ghost. James therefore collapses the traditional ghost story trope. Leon Edel has shown that this idea was based on a personal experience: while both his father and his elder brother (Henry senior and William junior) had at some point in their lives hallucinatory experiences of evil and invisible presences, Henry James dreamed a similar situation but was able, in his unconscious, to react and confront the ghost, eventually driving it away. As in *The Turn of the Screw*, the terror of a haunted person can be scary as well.

*The Jolly Corner* then revises themes that had already surfaced in James' canon, and is in fact a reworking of the aborted novel *The Sense of the Past*. It also runs parallel to another, earlier story, *The Beast in the Jungle*. John Marcher, the protagonist, is obsessed quite like Spencer Brydon; except for the fact that the Beast, the event he believes will make his life exceptional, lies in the future (constantly in the future), while Brydon is haunted by his past—or better, by the ghost of the past he has never lived. The two tales build on a similar concept of the untrodden path: *The Road Not Taken* is actually the title of a Robert Frost poem, of which *TJC* is considered a narrative rendering. Both men, moreover, are middle-aged egocentrics, and yet both have the caring attentions of a sensitive, altruistic woman, whose love is their redeeming factor.

Curiously, moreover, in both cases a reading influenced by queer theory is possible, again based on James' closeted homosexuality: the mysterious thing that haunts the two protagonists can be interpreted as an unconfessed homoerotic drive. Spencer Brydon self-obsession (in the end, who would ever dream of being haunted by *his own* ghost?) may then be read in narcissistic terms. And before you label this as far-fetched, remember that both Henry James Sr. and Alice James were probably closeted homosexual as well.

As I said earlier *TJC*, especially in its opening pages, is a profound meditation on the rapid changes of early 20th century USA. The theme had strong autobiographical elements, since James himself had returned to the States in 1904-5 after twenty years. Passages such as the following from p. 8: <http://bit.ly/tXHVYe> show his fiction questioning how he might himself have changed under different circumstances. James' re-evaluation of his country is complex and multi-faceted.

But for all this, *TJC* remains James' most haunting and thrilling ghost story after *The Turn of the Screw* (which should at this point be the next logical step in my Jamesian Re-read), full suspense and psychological subtleties. And my favourite amongst his short stories, so far.

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## Ging says

This short story is undoubtedly unique once you learn how beautifully it was crafted but the experience of reading it is too exhausting for me to like it.

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## Alan says

I expected too much from this edition after I saw that it was listed as "Illustrated." I had just finished reading Domenico Starnone's *Trick* in which a senior-aged illustrator is himself actually working on illustrations for *The Jolly Corner* (1908) while revisiting his own childhood home in order to babysit his grandson.

Unfortunately the illustrations in this specific edition of "*The Jolly Corner*" are mostly a random selection of landscape paintings that have nothing to do with the actual story. The story itself is rather obscure and primarily in an experimental stream of consciousness style (it is late Henry James) and it isn't that impactful.

There was a nice unadvertised bonus though with the addition of Thomas Hardy's *The Three Strangers* (1883) which didn't seem to have anything in common with the Henry James.

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## arcobaleno says

### Cosa sarebbe stato se...?

Ad una prima parte introduttiva e ad un'ultima di chiusura, abbastanza scontate, si aggiunge un solido corpo centrale che vale tutto questo "corto romanzo". In esso appare coinvolgente l'aspetto psicologico; risultano accurate le sfumature, le descrizioni delle ansie, delle fantasticherie, delle ombre del passato; è accattivante la 'vicenda', se vicenda si può chiamare un viaggio alla ricerca di se stessi o, meglio, dell'altro se stesso, di quello che sarebbe stato se invece di...

Tuttavia la mia lettura è proceduta a... ostacoli! In una continua gimcana tra lunghi periodi persi tra coordinate e subordinate, incisi e deviazioni. E non mi ha aiutato il testo originale a fronte, in cui la mia già faticosa traduzione si perdeva tra le innumerevoli frantumazioni; e con il quale Raffaele Guazzone, da parte sua, doveva già aver fatto i conti, come lui stesso esprime nella prefazione, quasi a giustificazione:

*...quello che non si può tradurre davvero di Henry James, è il vocabolario: personale, idiosincratico, immaginifico, dall'aggettivazione dettagliata e quasi materica. Sospettiamo perché abbia preferito quella precisa parola e non un'altra, ma possiamo star certi che solo lui avrebbe potuto operare una selezione simile.*

Credo che la scrittura di H.J. rappresenti uno di quei casi eclatanti in cui una qualunque traduzione non riesce a restituire lo stesso respiro e gli stessi colori dell'originale; e sicuramente io non sono riuscita a cogliervi quel ritmo di cui parla il traduttore stesso, ancora nella prefazione (*chiunque presto o tardi attiverà i collegamenti sinaptici della propria memoria musicale fino ad approdare alla categoria del valzer interiore che anima le pagine di questo romanzo*); peccato! Peccato non averli potuti cogliere nella traduzione di R.G.; e peccato non essere io in grado di coglierli nella lingua originale, per inadeguatezza mia alla traduzione.

P.S. Mi sembra significativo che di *The jolly corner* esistano, oltre a questa, numerose altre traduzioni italiane, singole o in raccolte, con altrettanti titoli diversi, per cui quell'*angol(ett)o* è diventato

alternativamente *ameno, prediletto, allegro, bello, felice...*

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## Ashley says

I don't know why I persist in reading Henry James. He's hard to understand and kind of weird. This book is no exception.

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## Thomas says

Sometimes you take a bite out of literature, and sometimes literature takes a bite out of you. Reading *The Jolly Corner* exhausted me; Henry James's prose, while apt and detailed, felt drawn-out and extended in ways that served only to fulfill the "intellectual for the sake of sounding intellectual" type of writing I come across often while reading classics. I found the story itself intriguing - a man who traveled abroad in Europe comes back to New York after 30 years, and the ghost of his possible self haunts him in his old apartment complex - but the long paragraphs and superfluous language distracted me from the key elements of the story, such as the narrator's complex relationship with himself and his neighbor and how his apartment's physical location alters his self-perception. Recommended for those interested in Henry James, in particular those who would sacrifice some of their precious time to wade through his difficult prose in this piece.

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## Anthony says

Below are spoilers. I am not going to hide spoilers because as I have said before, when you are reviewing books that are very old, it is hard to imagine someone not being at least partially familiar with such a book. Most that would like to read these do so because they have a familiarity with them, either through school or words they have read from critics.

The Jolly Corner is in many ways a pretty straightforward ghost story, or I would say not a ghost story, but a tale of someone having a peek into a possible world that never existed.

Spenser Brydon is the protagonist and the only other people we really meet are Alice Staverton, an old friend that takes an interest in Spenser, and Mrs. Muldoon, a woman working as a cleaner and caretaker of Spenser's birth home.

Brydon has returned to New York, the place of his birth and childhood after 33 years abroad living in Europe. His family, we are told was fairly wealthy, but never incredibly so. They had many real estate holdings in New York, and in Europe as well, but never cracked their way into the truly big business world of New York, that grew around them. Brydon ran away to Europe to escape the family curse that has shortened many a life in his family. It seems however that the thing he was running from more, was his family's expectations of him. They thought he would be the one to carry his family name to the stratosphere of New York business and power, and he ran away not to make his fortune, but to live off the crumbs of his family's wealth abroad. It is hinted that he lived his personal life in an, at times, disreputable fashion. We

find in his backstory that at times he would turn his considerable intellect toward making money, but only enough to comfort himself.

He returns to New York after the last of his family members as passed away, and this return seems to be a permanent one. Brydon reacquaints himself with Alice Staverton, an old friend who he immediately (interestingly) begins to confide in about his life as a semi-good-for-nothing, as well as his feelings about his family and what might have been if he had stayed in New York. He wonders out loud if he might have become rich and powerful if he had stayed at home rather than running abroad. Spenser wonders out loud to Alice, whether he could have used his talent for making money, to become financially powerful. She answers part of that question, in way that tells exactly what she means: “What you feel – and what I feel for you – is that you’d have had power.”

Brydon become more and more obsessed with this notion of an “alternate,” Spenser Brydon, a man that never was because he ran away from his family responsibilities. He speaks of him as real, and as he does this, that alternate man seems to take shape and become real. Alice has had dreams of him twice, and Mrs. Muldoon who is caretaker at Brydon’s childhood home says she has seen a man there, lurking around in spiritual form.

Spenser spends more and more nights at his family home, trying to meet this apparition, though he only barely admits to himself that this is his reason for his nocturnal visits to the house. Finally one night he finds himself trapped in this house that seems haunted by a man that never existed in our world. When he finally cannot avoid an encounter with this being, at first Brydon doesn’t believe this could possibly be some version of himself. This creature doesn’t look like him at all, he is missing two fingers, and his visage holds many hard scars of life. How can this be the other Brydon he believes to exist in some other version of our world? The answer comes to him that this is indeed what he would have been, after a life of accumulating power and wealth. When he is confronted by this other Spenser as he tries to escape the house, he is overwhelmed by the “power” radiated by this man. (Notice the word power, a word that Alice used to describe what Spenser would have accumulated had he remained in New York and devoted himself to the acquiring of such). Brydon is overwhelmed and faints away falling down the stairs onto the black and white marble tiles near the entranceway.

When he awakes he finds himself pillowed in the soft lap Alice, with Mrs. Muldoon nearby worrying about his health. He asks how she knew to come to him here, and she tells him that she had another dream about the other Spenser Brydon and him, and knew he was in danger. Spenser seems to have reconciled his real life with that life not lived and now sees the caring and affection Alice has for him, and has always had. The ending leaves us at first glance to think he will be a better man, happy in the life he still has ahead of him. But is this right?

First off, there are several ways to look at the bones of the story. This story seems more a straightforward fantastic tale than does, *The Turn of the Screw*, but second thoughts allow us to see many different ways to interpret this story. It is possible that none of the obvious fantasy elements happened. It is possible that Brydon’s guilt about his abandonment of his family’s life and business future, has caused him to manifest these visions out of his mind. I don’t think that’s the case, but then I don’t think we are far off here. Brydon’s vision of his other self has very specific things added – such as the missing fingers – for this to be in his mind. But it could be that his obsessiveness toward this possible life he might have lived, and his guilt at abandoning his family to their fate without his help at home, are what cause the breakdown and bleeding into our world, of this person from an alternate now.

To conclude, there is one interpretation of the ending of this story, that when I reread the ending I find myself thinking is the case. We are shown at the end that the sun is shining into Spenser’s life, both literally, and in the form of the soft lap and loving gaze of Alice Staverton. But we also ask ourselves, isn’t this a little too easy? Will this man that has lived just for himself all these years, suddenly become a changed man, who knows all the problems of his life, and how to fix them? Also, where is the actual evidence that Alice has held a torch for him all these years, seeing him now and then a handful of times over the course of 33 years? I think we can see that in this situation he would slip back to his old life easily. But why doesn’t it feel like

that will happen? Some critics have said, and I think I am in agreement, that the clues are there that Spenser is either dying, or already dead. Notice the light streaming into his newly conscious world; the almost religiously posed picture of Brydon's head pillowed in the lap of a nurturing woman; someone that isn't the Virgin Mary, or Brydon's mother, but cares for him in his time of absolute need, after this horrifying experience. Notice his thought that the black and white tiles were cold, but he wasn't. Brydon is comfortable and comforted in these last moments, or in his newly awakened state in the afterlife. Both possibilities work with this theory. It could be that one isn't permitted to see one of your might have been's, and live. It might simply be that Brydon doesn't have the strength of character to face that possibility head on, and can't survive this encounter.

This was a nice collection. Certainly a good one to jump off into reading the work of Henry James. I enjoyed it and think you will also

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### **Natasha says**

Spencer Brydon returns to his childhood home in New York after living abroad for years. He imagines what he could have been if circumstances had have been different and then begins to see his alternative self as a real flesh and blood person.

I'm not sure I fully understood this book, that's not to say I didn't like it, but I did feel like I needed my high school English teacher to come round and explain it to me.

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### **Austin Wright says**

Henry James is damn-near unreadable. This "Ghost-story" is a man visiting his childhood home and confronting the man he could have been. Waste of a tree for this to be printed.

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### **Nick says**

This classic "doppelganger" story sheds new light on Henry James' use of the Gothic. The "Ghost" here is the imagined version of the protagonist as what he might have been if his life had gone a different direction. At first this spectre is dreamed up by a female friend of the protagonist, then the protagonist confronts the ghost. "Is it real, or is it not?" becomes less important than "to whom is the ghost real?" and what does the doppelganger's appearance mean? Is the lonely, repressed female the one who "created" the ghost, or not? -- and even if she did, the "ghost" here only really haunts the man he is doubling. This and "The Beast in the Jungle" both deal with doppelgangers, and were among the last stories to be written by James. In many ways they are "flip sides" of each other, the doppelganger of one being the protagonist of the other. I prefer "The Jolly Corner" as a short read, possibly because the protagonist seems happier with his decisions.

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**Elsa says**

Un hombre se enfrenta a su propio fantasma al regresar a Europa.

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