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Alison Jack*

Henry James's "The Jolly Corner":¹ Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)

Abstract: In this article, various reception-historical analyses of Henry James's short story "The Jolly Corner" and its use of the Bible are subjected to critique. The parable of the Prodigal Son is offered as a convincing and significant intertext which is clearly signalled in the story. Reading this parable in the narrative yields useful insights into the dynamics between the characters, and suggests a psychological rather than supernatural interpretation of events.

Keywords: Henry James; Luke 15:11–32; reception history; psychological realism; supernatural explanations.

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Henry James (1843–1916) was a key figure in the transatlantic literary world of his time, producing critically acclaimed novels, short stories, literary criticism and letters. In his drive towards realism, his focus was often on the consciousness of his characters, famously leading to text which is densely-textured and complex. In this article, a typically elusive short story by James is discussed in terms of its intertextual relationship to the Bible. Existing reception-historical analyses are considered, their conclusions are critiqued, and an alternative intertext is suggested. Both the limits and the significance of reception-historical readings of literary texts are highlighted.

Although not as popular as *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James's short story "The Jolly Corner" has been critically acclaimed as one of his finest ghost stories. Whether it is a ghost story is open to question, however, as the supernatural presence which haunts the story is more of a psychological possibility than an apparition of a soul from beyond the grave, although the setting and atmosphere are certainly filled with suspense and horror. Published first in December 1908 in

1 Henry James, "The Jolly Corner," In *Complete Stories 1898–1910* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 697–731.

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The English Review, it concerns the homecoming of Spencer Brydon from Europe to New York, to review the fate of the properties he has inherited. One is being redeveloped, but he has a great emotional attachment to the other, the house on the “jolly corner” where he grew up. He is drawn there at night, haunted by the possibility of knowing who he might have been had he stayed in New York and gone into business rather than leaving at a young age for a less disciplined life in Europe. Eventually in a moment of deep distress and fear he encounters a presence in the house, which he takes to be the person he would have been, unrecognisable to him and with a grotesquely maimed hand. His friend Alice Staverton, who has waited patiently for him to return, discovers and rescues him. They share a moment of new understanding, including a kiss, which seems to augur a changed life for them both.

That there are biblical images aplenty in “The Jolly Corner” has often been noted: Jason Rosenblatt, for example, asserts that the text is “weighted with the purposefulness of scriptural implication.”² The movement of the narrative from uncertainty and lack of fulfilment to resolution and redemption certainly has a strong biblical undertone. In more specific terms, various connections have been made to particular biblical texts and narratives, and two of these attempts will be considered briefly here. Then the parable of the Prodigal Son will be offered as an important intertext, although its mapping onto the short story is not neat or internally consistent. However, it will be argued that the parable is clearly signalled in the text and hearing the two narratives side by side yields useful insights into the dynamics between the characters in James’s story.

Not all readings of the Bible in this text are entirely convincing, and one of the tasks of reception-historical analysis is to subject all such readings to critical scrutiny. For Terry W. Thompson, there are many “understated” references to the Gospel Passion narratives in “The Jolly Corner,” the aim of which referencing is to “underscore the theme of self-knowledge gained through suffering, be it physical or spiritual.”³ James is careful to indicate that Spencer Brydon has been away from the city for 33 years, which is Jesus’ age at his death – Thompson argues that both Brydon and Jesus would have been considered to be in their middle age. Brydon condemns the ugliness and sordid commercial nature of his home-town just as Jesus rounds on those in religious authority in the temple. Brydon’s sense of being alienated and mocked in the society he has rejoined, for Thompson, relates to Jesus’ treatment by the crowd at his “trial.” After a symbolic last supper,

² Jason P. Rosenblatt, “Bridegroom and Bride in ‘The Jolly Corner,’ ” *Studies in Short Fiction* 14, no. 3 (June 1977), 282–4, 282.

³ Terry W. Thompson, “ ‘A Knife in his Side:’ Evoking the Passion in Henry James’s ‘The Jolly Corner,’ ” *South Carolina Review* 44, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 138–43, 138.

Brydon returns to his ancestral home, which is spoken of as "consecrated,"⁴ and which is living under the shadow of demolition just as the temple in Jerusalem, in the time of Jesus, is in its last few decades before its destruction at the hands of the Romans. The house is filled, for Brydon, as is the temple for Jesus, with the presence of his ancestors. His pursuit of the person he might have become, on his night-time vigils, is described, by Thompson, as a garden of Gethsemane moment: at the moment when he might choose to confront his unrealised self, he begs to be allowed to escape, he adopts a position with his head downward "bent and his hands held off"⁵ which might be considered cruciform, and he does ultimately experience a confrontation which knocks him senseless. He recovers from apparent death to find himself in the fragrant lap of Alice Staverton, who has waited for him so patiently, and who has performed the role of Mary Magdalene for him: she is the first to bear witness to him, and has never abandoned him. The ending is unusually redemptive and hopeful for a Jamesian short story, with a spiritualised kiss and a new beginning in the sunshine.

For Thompson, Brydon has cleansed the temple of his ancestors, having gone through an ordeal described as being "like a knife in his side,"⁶ echoing the soldier's spear thrust into Jesus' body on the cross, proving he is dead and therefore does not need his legs broken in order to speed up the process (John 19:34). Emerging from the dark, tomblike house, Brydon is both healed and filled with self-knowledge: the "gossamer echoes and understated parallels"⁷ in the story to the biblical accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus underline the significance of the role of suffering in bringing about a new sense of purpose and resolution. Thompson quotes from Hazel Hutchison's exploration of James's belief, *Seeing and Believing*, in which she describes Brydon's confrontation with his other self as representing "a state of inner turmoil and division that can only be resolved by a realignment of the self."⁸ The agony of the passion experience, as described in the Gospels, is for Thompson a powerful model invoked by the short story, which invests this realignment of self with deeper significance.

My problem with this identification of "The Jolly Corner" so closely and definitively with the death and resurrection of Jesus lies with the lack of congruity between the two stories. For example, the notion of struggle between the self and what might have been is peripheral to the passion story, but lies at the heart

4 James, "The Jolly Corner," 698.

5 James, "The Jolly Corner," 719.

6 James, "The Jolly Corner," 723.

7 Thompson, "A Knife in his Side," 143.

8 Hazel Hutchison, *Seeing and Believing: Henry James and the Spiritual World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 171, quoted in Thompson, "A Knife in his Side," 143.

of this short story. Thompson has to focus on slight correspondences between the story and the Gethsemane episode, and give them a higher priority than they would seem to merit. The alter ego figure in the story has no real correspondence in the biblical narrative, as Jesus' death can scarcely be described as a confrontation with a supernatural emanation of his lost potential. The idea of return from rebellion is non-existent in the Gospel account but key to the short story, and the "realignment of the self" which Brydon undergoes is a strange definition of resurrection as presented in the Gospels. The pivotal description, for Thompson, of the experience of Brydon's ordeal of confrontation as being "like a knife in his side," is misplaced if read alongside the Gospel narrative, in which the point is clearly made that Jesus does not feel the spear, as it proves he is already dead.

Of course Thompson makes some useful observations and connections between the stories. There are certainly echoes of Brydon's suffering being Christ like in "The Jolly Corner:" the scene in which Brydon is cradled in Alice's lap is surely an image of the crucified Christ in the arms of his mother (not Mary Magdalene), a classic *pietà*. However, here the redemption is personal, rather than universally significant. More positively, by highlighting the consecrated nature of the house on the Jolly Corner, and relating it to the temple in Jerusalem, Thompson gives content to a wider point about the attitude of James to the possibility of alternative realities. In James's fiction, the sense of the sacred is often transferred to old buildings, such as the house on the Jolly Corner, so they "acquire a mysterious significance and emotional power," as Hutchison puts it.⁹ Places which have significance, particularly when they hold memories of the past, allow both James's characters and temple-goers in the Bible narrative to come close to experiences that would not happen elsewhere. These buildings have the potential somehow to contain the mystery which defies explanation. However, in James's short story, the sacred significance of the house is less to do with it being a place of worship than with its status as Brydon's childhood home.

More convincing still, perhaps because less ambitious, in his article Rosenblatt¹⁰ argues that Matthew 25 offers a way to read the story which finds spiritual realities behind the material qualities of the world as they are presented. Alice is one of the wise virgins of Matthew 25:1–13, prepared for the return of the bridegroom: both are described as having "trimmed their lamps" (Matt 25:7)¹¹ in readiness. Alice has watched and waited ("You were to have come, you remember – and you had sent no word")¹² just as the virgins have done, and her reward is,

⁹ Hutchison, *Seeing and Believing*, 29.

¹⁰ Rosenblatt, "Bridegroom and Bride," 282–3.

¹¹ Also James, "The Jolly Corner," 700.

¹² James, "The Jolly Corner," 728.

it is assumed, marriage to the one for whom she has waited. The heightened spirituality of the scene, however, is clear from the description of the kiss – “something in the manner of it, and in the way her hands clasped and locked his head while he felt the cool charity and virtue of her lips, something in all this beatitude somehow answered everything.”¹³ This kiss speaks more of spiritual fulfilment than of realised physical desire.

Rosenblatt is less convincing when he turns to the next parable in the Matthean chapter, that of the talents, in which a master leaves servants in charge of his property and then returns to discover whether or not they have invested the money he has left with them. The notion of leaving and returning is certainly present in “The Jolly Corner,” but further echoes are hard to find.

As Rosenblatt admits, the “thematic implications” of the biblical chapter in the short story are “sometimes indeterminate,” but the “tonal and formal resources” of the parable of the virgins are suggestive.¹⁴ Alice’s renunciation of other possibilities and Brydon’s of social and material gain, when read with the parable in mind, are compensated for by their ultimate spiritual communion. The parable’s metaphorical openness – a story about a scene at a wedding potentially leads the reader to a deeper truth about the rich reward for those who prepare for the return of the Messiah, unexpected but with the promise of otherwise unimaginable consummation – encourages a reading of the story which is open to otherworldly realities. Beyond the economics of the life Brydon has chosen not to lead is the potential for a connection with another which is on a completely different dimension. As Rosenblatt comments: “By this point in the story, we can recognise the spiritual reality behind the material symbol; a knowledge of Matthew 25 assists us in making the necessary transformations.”¹⁵

I will argue that hearing such a parabolic echo certainly opens the story up to wider and more sacred dimensions, however, I suggest that while Alice may be identified with the wise virgin of Matthew 25 at the beginning of the story, by the end she has taken on a much more significant role. And the parable which encourages the reading I will suggest is that known as the parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15, which Rosenblatt mentions only in passing, and Thompson ignores completely.

This is not to say that every aspect of the parable correlates with the “The Jolly Corner,” or that every detail of “The Jolly Corner” may be mapped onto the parable. Rather that this parable is specifically highlighted in the narrative, and its powerful human message of rebellion, homecoming and reaction is at the

¹³ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 727.

¹⁴ Rosenblatt, “Bridegroom and Bride,” 283.

¹⁵ Rosenblatt, “Bridegroom and Bride,” 284.

heart of the story; and that the story offers imaginative responses to questions left unanswered by the parable. These questions include: why did the younger brother leave the family home in the first place; what would have happened if he had stayed; and what might have happened after the abrupt ending of the parable as we have it?

In “The Jolly Corner” there are many verbal clues which lead the reader towards the parable of the Prodigal Son, in addition to the similarities on the level of metanarrative. Brydon muses that on his return from his long sojourn in Europe, made possible by the inheritance of property, he had expected change, but he realises he had “allowed for nothing; he missed what he would have been sure of finding, he found what he would never have imagined.”¹⁶ While in the parable we are not given access to the thoughts of the younger son on his return home, the parable has carefully set up his expectations. We see the younger son rehearsing what he is going to say to his father, and it is stressed that he hopes only to be welcomed back as a hired servant, rather than as a son (Luke 15:18–19): in fact, he is not given time to recite his whole speech before his father is arranging a party to celebrate the return of his son. Both Brydon and the younger son have their expectations turned on their heads.

Brydon’s experiences while in the “far country” (Luke 15:13 [all biblical quotations are taken from the KJV]) of Europe are in stark contrast to those of Alice, who has stayed in New York: Brydon’s life has been “overlaid [...] by the experience of a man and the freedom of a wanderer, overlaid by pleasure, by infidelity, by passages of life that were strange and dim to her.”¹⁷ Later, he describes his experiences in a similar way to the description offered by the older son of his brother’s fall from grace. Brydon tells Alice:

I’ve not been edifying – I believe I’m thought in a hundred quarters to have been barely decent. I’ve followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods. It must have come to you again and again – in fact you have admitted to me as much – that I was leading, at any time these 30 years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life. And you see what it has made of me.¹⁸

So the older brother castigates the Prodigal to his father as “this thy son...which hath devoured thy living with harlots” (15:30): how he knows this is not explained in the parable, but in his short story James makes an explanation explicit.

Later Brydon will speak of his “shame...the deep abjection,”¹⁹ and while the issue of the younger son’s repentance in the parable is a debated one,

¹⁶ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 698.

¹⁷ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 700.

¹⁸ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 707.

¹⁹ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 722.

there is no doubt that he accepts that he has sinned against God and before his father (15:18). The scene of reconciliation with Alice after the terrifying confrontation with his alter ego has further powerful associations with aspects of the parable. His "rich return" leaves him "abysmally passive,"²⁰ just as the Prodigal's return is described from the perspective of the father, and he seems to have no role to play in the drama unfolding around him. Brydon has been on a "prodigious journey" which had "brought him to knowledge," just as the Prodigal Son had to "c[o]me to himself" (15:17) before he could make the journey home. Alice, like the parable's father (15:24), had "thought he was dead;"²¹ she kisses him²² and draws him to her "breast,"²³ and Brydon asserts that in her presence "he was as much at peace as if he had had food and drink:"²⁴ a clearer network of associations could scarcely be made with the father's response in 15:20, 23, with the embrace, the kiss and the call to prepare the fatted calf. Echoing the Prodigal, Alice explains to Brydon that he "came to [him]self," and to him her "clearness [...] was like the breath of infallibility":²⁵ she is touched with the association of the father in the parable with God himself. Equally significantly, she "accepts" and "pities" the figure Brydon has confronted, just as she accepts him:²⁶ the father in the parable shows concern for both brothers, the one who has gone and returned, and the one who has stayed. Alice's steadfast love for both is one of the clearest indications that she at least in the end plays the role of the parent/God in the story, as she has patiently longed for Brydon's return, and refuses to judge the image of what he would have been had he stayed.

One of the puzzles of the parable is the impetus behind the younger son's decision to leave, often described as a scandalous act. James offers a clue in his short story, although it is characteristically shrouded in ambiguity. As Brydon contemplates what he might have been like, had he stayed, he wonders:

*Not to have followed my perverse young course – and almost in the teeth of my father's curse, as I may say; not to have kept it up, so, "over there," from that day to this, without a doubt or a pang [...] some variance from that, I say, must have produced some different effect for my life and for my "form."*²⁷

²⁰ James, "The Jolly Corner," 726.

²¹ James, "The Jolly Corner," 727.

²² James, "The Jolly Corner," 727.

²³ James, "The Jolly Corner," 731.

²⁴ James, "The Jolly Corner," 727.

²⁵ James, "The Jolly Corner," 730.

²⁶ James, "The Jolly Corner," 730.

²⁷ James, "The Jolly Corner," 706.

The reflection suggests a falling out with his father as well as his own “perversity” or inability to settle where he was expected; later he speaks of being too young to judge if it would have been possible for him to have stayed. But the role of his father and his curse, “almost in the teeth” of which he left, is left very open. The comment “as I may say” also throws the reader back upon Brydon’s uncertain perspective and recollection. “The Jolly Corner” opens up the possibility of friction between the generations, and specifically between the father and the younger son, about which the parable is silent. That the story moves the identification of the one patiently watching for the son from the shadowy figure of the father (now dead) to the more concrete figure of Alice suggests that the father’s role in the parable may also be split and a duality detected. Perhaps the Lukan father who watches and waits is a different person to the one who allowed his son to leave (or who implicitly drove him away): he too has been changed by the son’s absence. The spirituality rather than sexual physicality of the reunion, which Rosenblatt emphasised, may be a nod to the familial aspect of the echo of the parable, rather than a pointer to the metaphysical depths of the story.

Furthermore, the parable does not address the question of what would have happened to the younger son had he stayed, except in its portrayal of the older son, but the story certainly offers an answer which horrifies Brydon, if not Alice. The image Brydon offers is of the “fullblown flower [...] in the small tight bud” which he took to a climate that “blighted him [his alter ego] for once and for ever.”²⁸ Alice’s response that such a flower would have been “splendid, huge, monstrous”²⁹ suggests that the image is inadequate as it produces something incongruous and unnatural. The older brother in the parable is a much more real figure, with his simmering resentment, although his father’s words of approval (“Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine” [15:31]) suggest that he has lived the life expected of him in a way that the younger son has not. The character of the older son in the parable, as a representative of what staying rather than leaving might do to a person, problematizes Brydon’s obsessive searching for the person he might have been, and its result. That the older brother exists offers him a glimpse of what he too might have been, had he stayed: that he is presented in an unattractive yet underdeveloped way fuels Brydon’s need to know him/himself better.

In the story, the reader is offered a glimpse of a potential confrontation between the two brothers in the parable, which again the parable abruptly avoids, and an effect of reading the two texts together is to raise questions about the

²⁸ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 707.

²⁹ James, “The Jolly Corner,” 707.

nature of the confrontation. When the figure apparently hunts Brydon down in the house at night, Brydon describes it as "the prodigy of a personal presence":³⁰ for a reader aware of the character of the older brother in the parable, the temptation is strong to understand this presence as a projection of the younger brother's anxieties, to which Brydon's tormented wonderings may be aligned. And so, a reader aware of the connection between the parable and the story may justifiably retain some scepticism about the nature of the presence Brydon eventually "sees." The confrontation certainly occurs on the boundary between reality and the supernatural, or perhaps between reality and the psychological. The figure is "rigid and conscious, spectral yet human"³¹ and Brydon greets it with "revulsion" and a sense of deep disjunction: "such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous [...] the face was the face of a stranger."³² Here the story shakes off the constraints of the parable and enters an alternative world of its own which is horrifying and mysterious. The two stumps of the missing fingers over the face of the brother/alter ego figure speak of something beyond conscious imagination, but not necessarily beyond the unconscious or psychologically explicable. For this the parable is no guide, and the story quickly retreats from the "darkness" into which Brydon falls, back to the fragrant presence of Alice and her patient and accepting love, a resolution which the parable promotes, at least on its surface.

The role of the parable of the Prodigal Son in "The Jolly Corner," I have suggested, is a complicated yet significant and under-discussed one which both offers a metanarrative springboard for new ideas, and questions the experiences of the main character as they are described through his consciousness. The story also offers new ways to read the parable. The key figures in the parable find representations in the story, and their thoughts and fates are explored from angles which the parable does not attempt to cover. The reach of the parable does not extend into the supernatural, which the story certainly offers as one explanation of what "happens," but the parable's psychological realism questions the supernatural experiences which Brydon believes he has had. The relationship between the parable and faith, and its relationship to theological truth, is more or less left unexplored in the short story, although any easy identification of the father figure with God is challenged by the shifting role of Alice Staverton as the one who waits and welcomes. Throughout the story, in parallel to this and in typical Jamesian style, James's language resists clarity of understanding, perhaps reflecting his well-established lack of certainty about matters of faith and belief. However, the

³⁰ James, "The Jolly Corner," 723.

³¹ James, "The Jolly Corner," 724.

³² James, "The Jolly Corner," 725.

connections between the parable of the Prodigal Son and this story speak positively of hope in human relationships and the power of graceful waiting for the return of those who run away. While some biblical echoes may offer gateways to deeper spiritual reflection, the parable of the Prodigal Son, which itself works beautifully as a story about the complexity and redemptive quality of family relationships and the power of home, offers a way to read “The Jolly Corner” which resists the pull of the supernatural.

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