

UNIT TEN

Questions for discussion:

What function does it serve to have the story in James's Tale "nested" in another story—the story of its coming into possession of the narrator who transmits it to the reader? What is the function of having the story come into possession of the narrator through the agency someone other than its original author? How does the governess's first-person narration compare with the narrative voice-over in *Sunset Boulevard*, another narrative of possession told by a dead person? A question relating to difference in media: there is nothing easier than to preface a fictive story with an account of how the fictive manuscript narrating it came into possession of its fictive narrator. The literary device has the effect of associating the reader with the recipient of the story, who now presents it to us (as direct first-person narrative does not). But how odd is it to have a film narrated by a dead man? "The poor dope! He always wanted a pool. Well, in the end, he got himself a pool—only the price turned out to be a little high." The narrative voice does not yet identify itself, but the audience is familiar with William Holden's voice and must have got a perceptible shock to see his face as the body of which he speaks is viewed from below the surface of the water. The device of a dead man's voice-over was later copied by *American Beauty* (1999) but we learn this only at the end of the film, not at the outset. What difference does this make to the device? How would you compare the character of the voice-over, its know-it-all, wise-guy sarcasm, with the character of Gillis as he speaks within the action of the film? At the end of James's story, the price of Miles's dispossession is his death (that is, if the threat posed by the ghosts is real). Is this the right ending of James's ghost story? What does it imply about the character of the governess? At the end of *Sunset Boulevard*, the price of Joe Gillis's dispossession is his death. Is this the right ending for the film? We know that Joe will die from the opening sequence onwards but Miles's death is unexpected, right down to the moment that it occurred. What difference does knowledge of the ultimate outcome make to a story when the narrative presentation of the story's ending occurs at the outset?