

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Turn of the Screw

by

Henry James

Book Information

Henry James, The Turn of the Screw
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In this classic tale of terror and obsession, imagination weaves a fascinating tale of the lives of two children, a governess in love, and a country house.

Topics: Emotions, Love; Horror/Thriller, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Douglas the man who says he knows a story in which two children are visited by ghosts

Flora the eight-year-old orphaned sister who is in the governess's care

Miles the ten-year-old orphaned brother who is in the governess's care

Miss Jessel former governess for the children, who died mysteriously the previous year

Mrs. Grose the housekeeper in whom the governess confides

Peter Quint former and now deceased valet to the uncle and companion of Miles

the governess narrator, who is hired as governess of Flora and Miles

Vocabulary

abjure to reject

infamous having a bad reputation

interlocutor one who takes part in a conversation

prodigious amazing; also huge or enormous

reticence refraining from talking, silence

Synopsis

The conversation of a group of people gathered

together in an old house on Christmas Eve turns to the subject of ghosts. Douglas tells of his sister's governess, who had shared with him a personal story about seeing apparitions.

The governess had been hired to care for a brother and sister, who (due to the death of their parents) are under the guardianship of their uncle. He has one stipulation of employment: she is to address any problems that arise and should not bother him.

The children, Flora and Miles, seem to be perfect children who are a joy to teach. The governess and Mrs. Grose can't imagine why Miles has been dismissed from school, and they decide he was too fine for the school.

One evening, the governess notices a man on the tower of the house. Later, she sees the face of the same man outside the dining room window. When she relates these sightings to Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper is convinced it is Peter Quint, the master's deceased valet.

Another apparition makes its appearance in the form of Miss Jessel, the previous governess who died mysteriously. Mrs. Grose indicates that neither Peter nor Miss Jessel were good influences on the children.

After seeing the apparitions several times, the governess is convinced they are returning for the children. From the behavior of the children, she assumes they also see the apparitions.

Flora begs Mrs. Grose to keep the governess away after she confronts Flora about seeing Miss Jessel. Even though she can't see the ghosts, Mrs. Grose finally believes in their existence when Flora uses language Mrs. Grose feels she must have learned from some evil person.

The governess sends Flora away. That night, she tells Miles that she sees Peter Quint at the window, and Miles dies.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How does Mrs. Grose become convinced that the apparitions really exist?

After the governess confronts Flora about seeing Miss Jessel, Flora uses language Mrs. Grose finds horrifying. She feels only a bad person could have taught Flora that language, and the deceased Miss Jessel is, to her, the most likely person.

Literary Analysis

Why might Henry James have chosen to structure the governess's tale as a "story within a story" by making her words consist in a manuscript Douglas reads to his friends?

Initially, holiday gatherers are swapping ghost stories by a hearth fire. If Douglas had simply told his story aloud like the others, its status would have remained artificial and dubious. James lends the tale an extra "twist" of reality by giving it the physical form of a manuscript in Douglas's possession. Once the manuscript is begun, the reader's attentions are confined to the governess's presentation of that reality. Her reliability as narrator becomes at least suspect, setting up a psychological trap for the reader: either the governess's testimony is completely true, in which case the dead remain active in the affairs of the living; or she is lying from evil or deranged intentions, creating an exonerating tale to hide an unspoken, even more horrifying deed, possibly one she herself committed. That James intended this extra "turn of the screw" to ratchet up the reader's dilemma is stressed by the nature of the tale's end. Rather than returning to Douglas' hearth fire to re-establish the artificial circumstances in which the telling of the tale began, James simply and abruptly terminates the manuscript with Miles's death. That ending poses the psychological question for the reader: why would the governess, who has so patiently described the progression of her insights into Miles's mind and motives, return to silence at the very instant she pronounces the boy's death?

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Inferential Comprehension

Why does the governess decide not to investigate the reason for Miles's expulsion from school?

At first, the boy's angelic demeanor persuades her that the school had been unjust. With her sighting of Quint's ghost and her increasing conviction that Miles is falling under the evil apparition's influence, pressing the boy to discover the true nature of his "crime" becomes a double-edged sword: he will likely lie, and then have the advantage of knowing the governess's suspicions of his true nature; or he will confess to a horror, which would force her to entirely revise her method of governing him. The only way she can retain a "decent" command of Miles is by the boy voluntarily admitting his transgression. The governess attempts to lay out occasions for him to do precisely that.

Constructing Meaning

After Mrs. Grose leaves Bly with Flora, the governess and Miles must dine alone. The governess describes the situation by writing, "We continued silent while the maid was with us--as silent, it whimsically occurred to me, as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter." Analyze the psychological portent of the governess's simile for her predicament with Miles.

The key word in her sentence is "whimsically." On the one hand, it mitigates the sexual content of her image of Miles as her bridegroom. On the other, it smacks of alibi. Why would she grow "whimsical" at this moment of confronting the evil in which she believes Miles to be caught? Recall that Miles habitually refers to the governess as "dear," and she has often bestowed physical affection upon her charges, which they pleasantly (by her account) accept. Whether there is indeed a prospect of a "sexual horror" behind the trappings of this ghost story, the simile at the very least verifies the intimacy of the emotional link between the governess and Miles as the climax of the tale nears.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In the story, Miles has returned from his school. The young parson's daughter has been hired to be a governess for both Miles and Flora. Research the practices of the times regarding sending children to school and hiring governesses. You may want to find the answers to these questions: Who was sent to school? At what age did children leave home to attend school? What were the responsibilities of a governess? Who was most likely to have a governess? Explore any other related topics of interest to you.

Making Predictions At the end of the story, Flora demands to be taken away from the cruel governess. She is sent to her uncle, and the governess assumes Flora will tell him the lowest things about her. Before she leaves Bly, Flora uses bad language in reference to the governess in front of Mrs. Grose. Imagine you are the uncle. Flora relates uncomplimentary things about the governess, while Mrs. Grose supports the existence of apparitions as claimed by the governess. What do Flora and Mrs. Grose offer as evidence for releasing or keeping the governess as an employee? (Assume they have not been informed of the death of Miles.) Whom do you believe? What arguments convince you? What decision do you make concerning the employment of the governess?

Identifying Reading Strategies Most of the novella is related in the form of the governess's direct narration. Most students are likely to accept her version of events at face value. James's psychological acuity offers you a chance to challenge their ability to defend their interpretations. Pose the issue for an essay topic: why should readers believe the governess's testimony? What makes her tale credible? Alternatively, adventurous readers can be released to make a case against her testimony: if we assume the governess is a liar, what portions of the text cast her credibility in doubt? What tale may be hidden behind the false one that she tells?

Responding to Literature Henry James influenced the writing of the nineteenth century

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with his innovative style. He is credited with being the first to use several new writing techniques. Read about Henry James. Find two writing techniques which he is thought to have been the first to use.