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# **The Turn of the Screw**

**by Henry James**

**adapted for the stage by Jeffrey Hatcher**

DVxT Theatre Company Study Guide

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This study guide provides materials for teachers preparing students for a performance of *The Turn of the Screw*, and suggests a number of approaches to post-performance class discussion.

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## 1. The Playwright

Jeffrey Hatcher grew up in Ohio before attending New York University to study acting. After a brief career on stage, he turned his hand to writing. His award-winning plays have been performed on Broadway, off-Broadway, and regionally across the US, Canada and abroad. They include *Three Viewings*, *Scotland Road*, *Neddy*, *Korczak's Children*, *A Picasso* and *Mercy of a Storm*. His stage adaptations include: Anouilh's *Leocadia: To Fool the Eye*, *Smash*, based on George Bernard Shaw's novel *An Unsocial Socialist*, *Murder by Poe*, *Pierre*, based on the novel by Herman Melville, and Kaufman and Hart's *The Fabulous Invalid*. Fast becoming one of the most prolific and frequently produced playwrights in the U.S., Jeffrey Hatcher is also an author and a screenwriter. He wrote the screenplays for *Casanova*, *Secretary* and *Boys Don't Cry*, and adapted his acclaimed stage play *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* for the screen. Hatcher is also the author of *The Art and Craft of Playwriting*. Has won grants and awards from the NEA, TCG, Lila-Wallace Fund, Rosenthal New Play Prize, Frankel Award, Barrymore Award and others. A four-time participant at the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, he is a member of the Dramatists Guild, New Dramatists, The Playwrights' Center, and the WGA.

Biography courtesy of The Playwright Centre.

## 2. The Setting

### a. England

In 1800, London had approximately 900,000 inhabitants. As a result of the industrial revolution, English cities became heavily populated, with the population of London expanding to 4.7 million by 1900. Industrialization led to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, with the poor forced to live in slums and the rich owning multiple properties both in the city and country. It was common at the time for wealthy English men to live in the city where the business centers were and leave their country estates under the care of hired hands. *The Turn of the Screw* takes place during the month of June at Bly, a lavish country estate in Essex, England. Essex is a county in southeastern England with a lowland area of gently rolling terrain with fertile soils. Ghost stories written in the 1800s also usually took place in an English village, seaside or country estate.

1. How does the country setting of the Bly estate influence the events and mood of the play?
2. James's choice of a country estate for *The Turn of the Screw* was in keeping with his reader's expectations of the setting for a ghost story. What kind of setting would modern audiences expect a ghost story to be set in today?

3. Discuss your thoughts on the setting of DVxT's production of *The Turn of the Screw* in a site-specific venue as opposed to a theatre. How do you think the performance location will affect the mood of the play and the audience's experience of watching a ghost story? After seeing the play, does your opinion change? How?

## **b. Historical Context**

### **i. The Author**

Henry James was born on April 15, 1843 in New York City. The second of five children born to theologian Henry James Sr. and his wife, Mary, Henry Jr. spent much of his time surrounded by his father's friends, noted philosophers and transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas Carlyle, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Henry Sr.'s friends and influential thinkers had a profound effect on his son's life. Education was of the utmost importance to Henry Sr. and the children spent many years in Europe and the major cities of England, Italy, Switzerland, France, and Germany, being tutored in languages and literature.

In 1864, after attending schools to study science and law, Henry Jr. decided he would become a writer. Although he had many friends and acquaintances, James maintained a certain distance from most people he knew. He never married, and the absence of any known romantic attachments has led some critics to speculate that he was a repressed or closeted homosexual.

James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* in 1897, at a low point in his life. Two years earlier, he had suffered a tremendous personal and professional blow when his play *Guy Domville* was booed off the London stage. Deeply wounded, James retreated from London and took refuge in Sussex, in a mansion called Lamb House. Shortly thereafter, he began writing *The Turn of the Screw*, one of several works from this period that revolve around large, rambling houses.

Like many writers and intellectuals of the time, James was fascinated by spiritual phenomena, a field that was taken very seriously and was the subject of much scientific inquiry. James had written ghost stories before *The Turn of the Screw*. It was a popular form, especially in England, where, as the prologue to *The Turn of the Screw* suggests, gathering for the purpose of telling ghost stories was something of a Christmas tradition.

*The Turn of the Screw* first appeared in the magazine *Collier's Weekly* in twelve installments between January and April 1898. Not until after World War One did anyone question the reliability of the governess as a narrator. With the publication of a 1934 essay by the influential critic Edmund Wilson, a revised view of the story began to gain currency. Wilson's Freudian interpretation, that the governess is a sexually repressed hysteric and the

ghosts mere figments of her overly excitable imagination, echoed what other critics like Henry Beers, Harold Goddard and Edna Kenton had previously suggested in the 1920s. Throughout the course of his life, Wilson continued to revise and rethink his interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*, but all criticism since has had to confront the central ambiguity in the narrative: Is the governess a hopeless neurotic who hallucinates the figures of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, or is she a plucky young woman battling to save her charges from damnation? Adherents of both views abound, though the former take on the story is rarer. Other critics maintain that the beauty and terror of the tale reside in its ambiguity, arguing that both interpretations are possible and indeed necessary to make *The Turn of the Screw* the tour de force that it is.

1. What might our knowledge of some of the details of Henry James's life contribute to our understanding of *The Turn of the Screw*? (In relation to his social, academic and religious background, for instance.)
2. Are there any similarities between Henry James's personal background and that of the character of the Uncle in the play? For example, they both grew up extremely wealthy and were both bachelors.
3. How do you think the fact that Henry James Sr. was a theologian contributes to Henry Jr.'s writing of the Governess character? For example, the Governess's father worked in a vicarage and she grew up only reading the Bible.
4. James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* at a time when ghost stories were very popular amongst British audiences; audiences were familiar with their format. How do you think our perceptions and expectations are different? What do we expect of a ghost story?

## ii. Summary of the Novel

An anonymous narrator recalls a Christmas Eve gathering at an old house, where guests listened to one another's ghost stories. A guest named Douglas introduces a story that involves two children - Flora and Miles - and his sister's governess, with whom he was in love. After procuring the governess's written record of events from his home, he provides a few introductory details. A handsome bachelor persuaded the woman to take the position as governess to his niece and nephew in an isolated country home after the previous governess died. Douglas then begins to read from the written record, and the story shifts to the governess's point of view as she narrates her strange experience.

The governess begins her story with her first day at Bly, the country home, where she meets Flora and a maid named Mrs. Grose. The governess is nervous but feels relieved by Flora's beauty and charm. The next day she receives a letter from her employer, containing a letter from Miles's headmaster saying that Miles cannot return to school. The letter does not specify what Miles has done to deserve expulsion, and, alarmed, the

governess questions Mrs. Grose about it. Mrs. Grose admits that Miles has on occasion been bad, but only in the ways boys "ought to be". The governess is reassured as she drives to meet Miles.

One evening, as the governess strolls around the grounds, she sees a strange man in a tower of the house and exchanges an intense stare with him. She says nothing to Mrs. Grose. Later, she catches the same man glaring into the dining-room window, and she rushes outside to investigate. The man is gone, and the governess looks into the window from outside. Her image in the window frightens Mrs. Grose, who has just walked into the room. The governess discusses her two experiences with Mrs. Grose, who identifies the strange man as Peter Quint, a former valet who is now dead.

Convinced that the ghost seeks Miles, the governess becomes rigid in her supervision of the children. One day, when the governess is at the lake with Flora, she sees a woman dressed in black and senses that the woman is Miss Jessel, her dead predecessor. The governess is certain Flora was aware of the ghost's presence but intentionally kept quiet. The governess again questions Mrs. Grose about Miles's misbehavior. Mrs. Grose reveals that Quint had been "too free" with Miles, and Miss Jessel with Flora. The governess is on her guard, but the days pass without incident, and Miles and Flora express increased affection for her.

The lull is broken one evening when something startles the governess from her reading. She rises to investigate, moving to the landing above the staircase. There, a gust of wind extinguishes her candle, and she sees Quint halfway up the stairs. She refuses to back down, exchanging another intense stare with Quint until he vanishes. Back in her room, the governess finds Flora's bed curtains pulled forward, but Flora herself is missing. Noticing movement under the window blind, the governess watches as Flora emerges from behind it. The governess questions Flora about what she's been doing, but Flora's explanation is unrevealing.

The governess does not sleep well during the next few nights. One night, she sees the ghost of Miss Jessel sitting on the bottom stair, her head in her hands. Later, when the governess finally allows herself to go to sleep at her regular hour, she is awoken after midnight to find her candle extinguished and Flora by the window. Careful not to disturb Flora, the governess leaves the room to find a window downstairs that overlooks the same view. Looking out, she sees the faraway figure of Miles on the lawn.

Later, the governess discusses with Mrs. Grose her conversation with Miles, who claimed that he wanted to show the governess that he could be "bad." The governess concludes that Flora and Miles frequently meet with Miss Jessel and Quint. At this, Mrs. Grose urges the governess to appeal to her employer, but the governess refuses, reminding her colleague that the children's uncle does not want to be bothered. She threatens to leave if Mrs. Grose writes to

him. On the walk to church one Sunday, Miles broaches the topic of school to the governess. He says he wants to return and declares he will make his Uncle come to Bly to get his way. The governess, shaken, does not go into the church. Instead, she returns to the house and plots her departure. She sits on the bottom stair but springs up when she remembers seeing Miss Jessel there. She enters the schoolroom and finds Miss Jessel sitting at the table. She screams at the ghost, and the ghost vanishes. The governess decides she will stay at Bly. Mrs. Grose and the children return, saying nothing about the governess's absence at church. The governess agrees to write to her employer.

That evening, the governess listens outside Miles's door. He invites her in, and she questions him. She embraces him impulsively. The candle goes out, and Miles shrieks. The next day Miles plays the piano for the governess. She suddenly realizes she doesn't know where Flora is. She and Mrs. Grose find Flora by the lake. There, the governess sees an apparition of Miss Jessel. She points it out to Flora and Mrs. Grose, but both claim not to see it. Flora says that the governess is cruel and that she wants to get away from her, and the governess collapses on the ground in hysterics. The next day, Mrs. Grose informs the governess that Flora is sick. They decide Mrs. Grose will take Flora to the children's uncle while the governess stays at Bly with Miles. Mrs. Grose informs the governess that the messenger didn't send the letter she wrote to her employer, because he couldn't find it.

With Flora and Mrs. Grose gone, Miles and the governess talk after dinner. The governess asks if he took her letter. He confesses, and the governess sees Quint outside. She watches Quint in horror, then points him out to Miles, who asks if it is Peter Quint and looks out the window in vain. He cries out, then falls into the governess's arms, dead.

1. What are the differences between *The Turn of the Screw*, the novel and Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation? For example, which details does Hatcher leave out of his adaptation, and why?
2. Where do you think the source of evil lies in the play? In the estate, the children, the Governess or in the dead servants?
3. From whose point of view are the events in the *Turn of the Screw* told? The governess's or the narrator who introduces the play?

### 3. Characters

#### The Governess

A twenty-year-old woman who has been put in charge of educating and supervising Flora and Miles at the country estate of Bly. She has had a very sheltered upbringing and little life experience. Her new job puts an immense responsibility on her, since she has no one to supervise or help her. She is extremely protective of her charges and hopes to win her employer's approval. She views herself as a zealous guardian, a heroine facing dark forces.

**Mrs. Grose**

A servant who acts as the governess's companion and confidante. Mrs. Grose, who is illiterate, is very aware of her low standing in comparison with the governess and treats the governess with great respect. Mrs. Grose listens patiently to the governess's constantly changing theories and insights, most often claiming to believe her but sometimes questioning whether the ghosts are imaginary or not. Mrs. Grose cares deeply about Flora and Miles and consistently defends them against the governess's accusations.

**Miles**

A ten-year-old boy, the elder of the governess's two charges. He is expelled from school for an unspecified reason, and although he seems to be a good child, he often hints that he is capable of being bad.

**Flora**

An eight-year-old girl, the younger of the governess's two charges. Flora is beautiful and well-mannered, a pleasure to be around. She never speaks and Mrs. Grose explains that she has in fact not spoken a word since she and Miles discovered the dead bodies of the former governess Jessel and the valet, Quint.

**The Children's Uncle**

The governess's employer, a bachelor who lives in London. The uncle's attractiveness is one of the main reasons the governess agrees to take on her role at Bly. The uncle is friendly and pleasant, likely rich, and successful in charming women. He hires the governess on the condition that she handles his niece, nephew, and all problems at Bly herself, without ever bothering him.

**Peter Quint**

A former valet at Bly. According to Mrs. Grose, he was Miss Jessel's lover and was inappropriately "free" with both Miles and Flora. The governess believes Quint's ghost is haunting Bly with the intention of corrupting Miles.

**Miss Jessel**

The governess's predecessor. Mrs. Grose describes Miss Jessel as a lady, young and beautiful but infamous. Miss Jessel apparently had an inappropriate relationship with Quint, who was well below her class standing. The governess believes Miss Jessel's ghost is haunting Bly with the intention of corrupting Flora.

1. Does the governess's social and religious background influence her actions in the play? If so, how?
2. Do you believe the ghosts were real and posed a real threat to the children or was it just the governess's imagination? Explain and give support to your argument.
3. Why do you think Flora stopped speaking after Jessel's death?
4. Why do you think that Miles was sent home from boarding school and why does he steal the governess's letter?

## 4. Telling the Story

### a. The Jamesian tale

*The Turn of the Screw* is curious precisely because compared to other works by Henry James, the author exhibits a ripe *consciousness* of evil and of profound psychological disturbance. Using the genre of the ghost story, credited as originating with M.R. James, a contemporary of Henry James, the author skillfully provokes the reader's anxieties by evoking the psychological mechanisms of the horror of the unknown.

M.R. James perfected a method of story-telling that was very popular at the time that Henry James was writing *The Turn of the Screw* and has since become known as Jamesian. The classic Jamesian tale usually includes the following key elements:

1. a setting, full of character, in an English small village, seaside town or country estate; an ancient town in France, Denmark or Sweden; or a venerable abbey or university;
2. a nondescript and rather naive gentleman-scholar as protagonist (often repressed in nature);
3. the discovery of an old book or other antiquarian object that somehow calls down the wrath, or at least the unwelcome attention, of a supernatural menace, usually from beyond the grave.

According to M.R. James, the story must "put the reader into the position of saying to himself: 'If I'm not careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'" He also perfected the literary technique of the genre: narrating supernatural events principally through implication and suggestion, letting his reader fill in the blanks, and focusing on the mundane details of his settings and characters in order to throw the horrific and bizarre elements into greater relief. He summed up his approach in his foreword to the anthology *Ghosts and Marvels* (Oxford, 1924): "Two ingredients most valuable in the concocting of a ghost story are, to me, the atmosphere and the nicely managed crescendo. ... Let us, then, be introduced to the actors in a placid way; let us see them going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings; and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head, unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently, until it holds the stage."

The ghost in the Jamesian tale should also "be malevolent or odious: amiable and helpful apparitions are all very well in fairy tales or in local legends, but I have no use for them in a fictitious ghost story."

1. How does *The Turn of the Screw* fit into the conventions of a Jamesian tale? How does it differ?



## **b. Adapting *The Turn of the Screw* for the stage**

1. *The Turn of the Screw* has been adapted many times for the opera, ballet, stage and screen. Why do you think this is the case?
2. Do you think that stage and screen adaptations of *The Turn of the Screw* should show the ghost characters of Jessel and Quint? How does having these ghosts featured in a film or a play influence an audience's understanding of the events?
3. In the play by Jeffrey Hatcher, the roles of Mrs. Grose, Flora, Miles and the Uncle are all played by one actor. The second actor only plays the governess.
  - a. What does this say about his interpretation of the novel?
  - b. How might this affect the audience's understanding of the events in the play? Would it heighten or lessen the dramatic tension?

## **5. Imagery**

There are many tools for expressing meaning in the theatre in addition to the main story-telling elements: plot, characters, and setting. The word "imagery" is a useful word that has a wide range of reference. It can refer to what the audience sees and hears directly or it can refer to mental pictures, sense experiences, memories, associations, patterns, or structures that are called up in our minds and bodies through the dialogue.

The word imagery may be broadly interpreted: almost anything in a play can be felt to have the force of an image, if it evokes associations beyond itself. We have already discussed the setting and its importance in telling the story. A few more images will be mentioned here, however students are encouraged to carry their interpretation beyond the brief questions and comments that follow.

### **Ship Imagery**

Early on in the play, the governess describes how when she first arrives at Bly, Flora leads her to the lake where they find "an old rowboat banked amid the reeds" and sit there, "holding hands under the shade of the great tower of Bly". It is at this instant that the Governess says she falls in love with Flora and makes the determined decision to protect her from whatever evils may come her way. The ship imagery continues further into the play, with the governess later imagining herself at "the helm of a ship called Bly", alone and afraid of water, yet still wanting desperately to protect the children and win her master's favor. The governess's struggle to control the "Bly ship" continues to the end of the play, with the tragic death of Miles.

### **Silence**

The presence of silence in the play is very dominant and seems to be tied with the evil lurking at Bly. Flora, as previously discussed does not speak a single

word throughout the entire play and neither do the ghosts that appear to the Governess. The Governess and Mrs. Grose do not speak of the reason why Miles is expelled from his school and neither does Miles. Miles and Flora do not speak about Jessel and Quint, and the Uncle does not want to be disturbed at any time, for any reason.

### **The Written Word**

In *The Turn of the Screw*, events become real only when they have been written down. The governess at first refuses to record the circumstances at Bly in a letter to her employer. If she preserves the events in a material document, she will have reached a point of no return—she will be forever unable to deny what happened. Eventually, she does write the letter, and she also writes down the entire account in the manuscript that we are reading. The manuscript, unlike the letter, allows her to present events in a way that will persuade her readers she is both sane and telling the truth. In keeping with the ambiguity of the tale, the trajectories of both written records, the letter and the manuscript, are interrupted, which further impedes our ability to determine whether the events are or are not “real.” The letter is never sent, and the manuscript stops short of a definite conclusion.

1. How does the imagery in this play compare to images of other plays, movies you have seen set in the same time period? For example, the Governess describes Bly Estate as her “Elsinore”.
2. In what way is the imagery surrounding Miss Jessel’s death similar to that of other literary heroines?

## **6. Themes**

Lastly, we come to themes. Too early a consideration of themes might lead to a premature judgment concerning what the play is “about.” Another reason for leaving consideration of themes to the end is that if the play is successful, the themes will emerge as an inevitable result of an examination of the material of the play—the characters, the action, the setting, the imagery. To begin by looking for the theme implies that these elements are merely the means to an end, and that once we have isolated what the play is “about”, we can take that home and leave the play behind.

Students will already have discovered the themes of the play, then, if they have been discussing the questions that make up the body of this study guide. Nonetheless, as a final review, students could be asked to consider the following themes in relation to the material in the play:

### **Sexuality**

The Governess seems intrigued and frightened of the “unspeakable” sexual acts apparently performed by Jessel and Quint. We do not know much about her own sexual experience except for that she is very young and has spent her

life living in vicarage with her father. She also shares a long intimate kiss with Miles. Some critics have suggested that Miles was expelled from school for being engaged in a homosexual act.

### **Corruption**

Nobody seems to be safe of corruption at Bly. Not the children, not the Governess and not Jessel. According to Mrs. Grose, it is Quint who brings the evil into the estate and seduces Jessel and the children, and ultimately the Governess.

### **Power**

The power dynamics in the play are constantly shifting, and not a single character appears to retain power. At first, the Uncle puts the Governess in charge of the children and of Bly. Once she is there, the Governess has power over Mrs. Grose, but eventually the ghosts she sees have power over her, and so do Miles and Flora.

### **Gender Roles**

When Miles is expelled from boarding school, the Governess asks for him to live in his Master's room, putting him in the position of the head of the household. She then seems to take on more and more of a matriarchal role as mother to Flora.

## **7. Post Show Discussion**

DVxT's production of *The Turn of the Screw* directed by Vikki Anderson is set in a site-specific venue, the historic Campbell House Museum in downtown Toronto. The production will move through different spaces within the venue and will also incorporate video footage.

- 1.** How is watching *The Turn of the Screw* in a site-specific venue different than if you had seen the play in a more traditional theatre?
- 2.** The Campbell House Museum was built in 1822, before *The Turn of the Screw* was written, and is the oldest remaining brick building from the town York. What did the historical nature of the building add to the story?
- 3.** Discuss the function of the video footage in the production.
- 4.** Discuss the role the audience played in your experience watching the production.