The Turn of the Screw

by Henry James

SUMMARY

The Turn of the Screw is a haunting and powerful ghost story. It was published in 1898 and was immediately recognized as a masterly piece of storytelling.

The story begins with a young governess who agrees to look after two orphaned children. Their governess has recently died and their former guardian wants nothing to do with them. The governess starts her new job. The children, Flora and Miles, are both beautiful and charming. The housekeeper is friendly and helpful. The only puzzling thing is that Miles’s school have written saying they do not want him to return because he is so ‘dangerous’. Weeks pass and all seems well. Then the governess starts seeing two ghosts. One is a dangerous ‘dreadful man’. The housekeeper identifies him as an evil servant, Quint, who has since died. The governess intuitively realizes that the second ghost is the ghost of Mrs Jessel, the dead governess.

The ghosts continue to appear. The children will not admit that they can see the ghosts, but the governess believes that the children are looking for them. The governess has no proof but suspects that the ghosts want the children to die; they ‘have taught Flora and Miles to love wickedness’.

Autumn arrives. The governess sees the ghost of Mrs Jessel when Flora and the housekeeper are with her. The housekeeper sees nothing and Flora claims that she too sees nothing. The governess intuitively realizes that she has ‘lost’ Flora. Flora becomes very ill and the housekeeper takes her away from the house. In a last climactic scene, the governess questions Miles about his bad behaviour at school, and he begins to tell the truth at last. The governess feels that a terrible battle between her and Quint is in progress for the possession of Miles. ‘I have you now! You are mine, not his,’ she shouts. Then the boy screams, and she realizes that he is dead in her arms.

In 1876 James settled in England, making it his home for the rest of his life. Over the next forty years he was to have a remarkable range of literary friendships; these included Joseph Conrad and his good friend Edith Wharton. His first important novel, Roderick Hudson, was published in 1876. In the following thirty years he wrote some twenty novels. He also wrote travel books, books of criticism and nearly 100 short stories.

James had great hopes of being a dramatist and wrote a number of unsuccessful plays. One play in particular, Guy Domville, was a disaster; when James appeared on the stage at the end of the performance he was jeered at. As a result he became severely depressed for a period of time.

James’s last great novel was The Golden Bowl, published in 1904. His writing was universally praised. He died in 1916, leaving two unfinished novels, prolific to the last.

WORKS AND THEMES

Henry James was a cosmopolitan man-of-the-world. He was fascinated by the differences between Europe and America - the sophistication and tiredness of the old world contrasting with the vitality and naivety of the new. It is this theme that he continually returns to in such famous novels as The American (1877), Daisy Miller (1879) and Portrait of a Lady (1881). In the next twenty years he devoted himself to exploring the English character with great subtlety. The novel, What Maisie Knew, belongs to this period. In his last three great novels, The Wings of the Dove (1902), The Ambassadors (1903) and The Golden Bowl (1904), he returns to his first theme.

James had acute powers of observation; he was fascinated by people and loved to watch and analyse them. But he was also a great storyteller. His hero was the great French novelist Balzac, another great weaver of tales.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The Turn of the Screw is one of James’s best-known short stories. It is a very long short story, more like a short novel; James called it a ‘tale’. The Turn of the Screw was first published in serial form. It was much praised. The famous dramatist, Oscar Wilde wrote: ‘it is a most wonderful, lurid, poisonous little tale ……… I am greatly impressed by it.’

James got the basic idea for The Turn of the Screw from no lesser person than the Archbishop of Canterbury (the...
most important bishop in the Church of England). Two days later he scribbled the plot down: ".......the story of the young children left to the care of servants in an old country house, through the death of the parents. The servants corrupt the children; the children are bad, full of evil. The servants die, and the apparitions return to haunt the house and the children, to whom they seem to beckon, from across dangerous places .......... so that the children may destroy themselves by responding, getting into their power:"

The Turn of the Screw is frightening and compelling. Evil is constantly suggested but nothing evil actually happens until the last chapter. Part of the power of the story lies in the contrast between the descriptions of the children's innocent faces and the evil that hangs around them. They seem to be both passive victims and active perpetrators; but we are never quite certain whether the governess is really seeing these things - could she just be imagining them? Anything seems possible. At the end, there appears to be a psychic battle for the possession of Miles's soul between the governess and Quint. The governess wins, and instantly, Miles dies. James seems to be suggesting that, separated from Quint, Miles must die. Still, we are unsure as to exactly what has happened. The story's genius lies in the deliberate ambiguity with which James veils his story.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class teachers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1 Look at the information on Henry James in the introduction to the book. Read this information to your students. Then divide the students into small groups. Tell them they have eight minutes to write down as many facts as possible. The winning group is the one with the most correct information.

2 Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss the following questions:
   - What is a ghost? Do you believe in ghosts? Have you or a friend experienced any telepathic experiences?
   - How can Miles be 'dangerous' to the other children at school?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Chapters 1-3

1 Put students into pairs. One student plays the governess, the other plays the children's uncle. Ask them to imagine that the governess goes to see her employer. She tells him her feelings about the job and the children. She tells him about the letter from Miles's school and the ghost, Peter Quint. Students must decide before they do the role play what the children's uncle will say.

2 Put students into pairs. Ask them to discuss this question:
   How could Miles be 'dangerous' to the other children at school?

Chapters 4-6

In pairs, students write an ending for the story. Then they read their endings to the class. Students vote for the ending that they think is most likely to happen.

Chapters 7-8

Put students into small groups. Ask them to look up the words telepathy and experience in their dictionaries. Then ask them to discuss the following:
   - (a) What examples are there of telepathy in these chapters?
   - (b) Do you believe in telepathy? Have you or a friend had any telepathic experiences?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

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Glossary

It will be useful for students to know the following new words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-3

- alone (adv/adj) without other people
- dreadful (adj) very bad or unpleasant
- employ (v) to give work to someone
- ghost (n) a dead person who people can see
- governess (n) a woman who lives with a family and teaches their children at home
- innocence (n) when somebody has only seen and heard good things, they do not know about the bad things in the world. They have innocence.
- lady (n) a woman from a good family
- master (n) the boss
- naughty (adj) doing things they are told not to do
- servant (n) someone who lives in another person's house and works for them in the house
- stare (v) to look at somebody or something for a long time
- tower (n) a tall, narrow part of a building, at the top of the building

Chapters 4-6

- candle (n) people burnt these for light before there was electricity
- suffer (v) to feel pain
- wicked (adj) very, very bad
Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book
1 Read the first 13 lines of the Introduction in the book. Then answer these questions.
(a) Where does the young lady teach the children?
(b) Where does she see the man?
(c) Where does she see the woman?
(d) Who is dead and who is alive in this story?
(e) Who is wicked in this story?

2 Work in pairs. These are the names of the chapters in the story. They are in the wrong order. Try to put them in the right order. Then look at the book. Were you right?
Flora Disappears
A Frightening Face
A Governess Gets a Job
Trying to Save Miles
Two People Who Died
The Two Children
A Letter to Miles's Uncle
The Children in Danger

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1
1 Which is the right answer?
(a) Douglas is going to tell his friends a story about
   (i) a child who sees a ghost.
   (ii) two children who see ghosts.
(b) Douglas heard the story from
   (i) his sister's governess.
   (ii) a student at university.
(c) The governess met
   (i) a man who wanted to employ a housekeeper.
   (ii) a man who wanted to employ a governess.
(d) The man wanted her to look after
   (i) his sister's children
   (ii) his brother's children
(e) The man was worried about the children because
   (i) their first governess died suddenly.
   (ii) the housekeeper died suddenly.

2 Answer these questions.
(a) Why does the governess take the job?
(b) What does the man want the young woman to promise?
(c) Why do you think he wants her to do this?
(d) The governess thinks the man is ‘wonderful’. What do you think of him? Say why.

Chapter 2
1 None of these sentences are true. Correct them.
(a) Mrs Grose is unfriendly to the governess and the children.
(b) Miles is there when the governess arrives.
(c) Flora and the governess do not like each other.
(d) Miles's school is very pleased with him.
(e) The last governess died in the house.
(f) Miles seems very bad.
(g) The governess decides to tell the children's uncle about Miles.

2 Imagine that you are the new governess. Write a letter from the governess to a friend. In the letter, tell your friend about your new job.

Chapter 3
1 Are these sentences right or wrong?
(a) The governess sees a man standing on the roof of the tower.
(b) The governess immediately knows he is a ghost.
(c) The governess sees the man twice.
(d) The governess feels that the stranger is a good man.
(e) The stranger is looking for the governess.
(f) The governess says the stranger has black hair and a round face.
(g) The stranger is wearing a hat.
(h) The housekeeper says that Peter Quint was the master's servant.
(i) When the master left, Mrs Grose looked after everything in the house.
(j) Peter Quint is dead.

2 Work in pairs. Make the conversation between Mrs Grose and the governess after the governess sees the face at the window.

CHAPTERS 4-6

Chapter 4
1 What new things do we learn about these people?
   Peter Quint, Mrs Jessel, Flora, Miles, Mrs Grose

2 Work in small groups. Discuss these questions.
(a) Who does the governess see by the lake?
(b) What is your opinion of the new governess? Do you think she is really seeing ghosts? Or is she imagining things? Give reasons for your opinion.
Chapter 5

1. Complete these sentences with a name or names.
   (a) .................................. stares up at the governess on the stairs.
   (b) The governess sees ............................... sitting on the stairs.
   (c) ................................. stands by the window staring out.
   (d) ................................. goes outside at midnight.
   (e) .................................. stares up at the roof of the tower.
   (f) .................................. lie to the governess.

2. Answer these questions.
   (a) What does the governess believe about the ghosts and the children?
   (b) Why does the governess think the ghosts wait in 'high, strange or dangerous places'?
   (c) Why does Mrs Grose think that 'a terrible accident can happen'?
   (d) Do you think the governess is right in her opinions?
   (e) What do the governess and Mrs Grose decide to do to protect the children?
   (f) Why could this be a problem?

3. Work in pairs. Find the word 'situation' in your dictionary. Imagine that you are the governess. What will you do in this situation?

Chapter 6

1. Complete these sentences.
   (a) The governess doesn't speak to the children about the ghosts because ............................... .
   (b) Miles says he wants to go to school because ............................... .
   (c) The governess wants to leave the house because ............................... .
   (d) The governess decides to stay in the house because ............................... .
   (e) The governess writes to the children's uncle because ............................... .

2. Look at the words in italics. Who are these people? What do you think these sentences mean?
   (a) 'I've talked to Mrs Jessel.'
   (b) 'He seems to be so good, that he must be wicked, really wicked.'
   (c) 'But I knew at once it was a mistake.'
   (d) 'I blew it out, my dear.'

Activities after reading the book

Talk with another student.
   (a) What do you think the governess does when Miles dies?
   (b) What is your opinion of this story? Did you enjoy it? Why?