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The Turn of the Screw
Henry James



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

The Turn of the Screw

Pre-Reading

1. *The Turn of the Screw* was written in 1897, toward the end of the Victorian period. At that time, women had very few professional options. They could become teachers, childcare workers, or domestic servants. In other words, women's work tended to involve the home or children. The young protagonist, full of energy and recently finished school, answers an ad for a governess. Of course, today, women can apply for any job they want. Conversely, men can become domestic assistants and take care of other people's children.

Imagine you have two children, and you need to hire someone to look after them. What skills would your applicants need to have? What responsibilities would you want them to assume? For instance, would you want them to prepare meals or clean the house, as well as watch the children? Determine what you are looking for, and compose a clear and concise advertisement to put in your local paper. The ad must state the job requirements, as well as incentives that will attract a dependable and professional domestic assistant.

2. From an intellectual standpoint, author Henry James was fascinated by the supernatural. He, his father, and his brother supported the early scientific study of spiritual phenomena. In the 1840s, the Fox sisters, three contemporaries of James, claimed to communicate with the spirits of the dead. Their stories sparked an increased interest in spiritualism, involving ghost tours and séances. One of the sisters eventually revealed that they were frauds, having been taught by their eldest sister how to trick their parents into believing the sounds they heard in their house were ghosts.

Imagine that you are to deliver a persuasive speech to a group of spiritualists, in which you disprove the existence of ghosts and other supernatural phenomena. As an alternative, imagine that you must deliver a speech to a group of skeptical scientists in support of the existence of the spirit world. Your speech should be about 3-5 minutes long, and it should commence with a thesis statement, followed by a few examples and anecdotes that support your argument. Whatever side of the issue you choose to support, remember that you must try to write a convincing speech, the goal of which is to persuade others to take your viewpoint.

The Turn of the Screw

Prologue

4. The title of the novel derives from the Prologue. A small group of dinner guests sit around a fire, eagerly discussing a ghost story they have just heard, in which a ghost appears to a child. Later, a man named Douglas, introducing a story of his own, says, “If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to *two* children—?”

The phrase “turn of the screw” illustrates an increase in tension and a build-up of suspense as the listeners prepare to hear a story more frightening than what they had just heard. However, Douglas tells them that they must wait a few days to hear the story. The guests, including the narrator, wait in anticipation.

Think about a scary story you have read or have been told. Think about the details of the plot and what elements made it frightening. Then, use that information to write a prologue to your story—one that will make your friends eager to hear it.

5. In a Gothic romance, such as *A Turn of the Screw*, the setting—an old mansion, standing alone, in the vastness of the open countryside—plays a very important role. The location contributes to the mood of anxiety and fear, which intensifies as the story progresses. The house provides dark passageways in which apparitions prowl, tall windows from which ghostly figures may peer, heights from which to jump, and towers from which to fall. The setting provides an ideal environment for storytellers to build suspense and arouse fear.

Of course, the characters in these stories also help to create the atmosphere. If characters are nervous and emotional, they might allow imagination to supersede reality. On the other hand, if characters are well grounded and mentally stable, they could have an entirely different experience in the same place.

Look around your classroom. What kind of story might use your classroom as a setting? Answer this question in a few paragraphs.

Chapter II

9. The governess receives a letter from her employer, in which he instructs her to read a correspondence he received from Miles's school and remedy the situation. The letter from the institution states, quite simply, that Miles cannot return next term. With no explanation for Miles's expulsion, the governess and Mrs. Grose begin draw their own conclusions. Of course, Mrs. Grose would be more apt to discover the reasons behind his punishment, since she already knows Miles very well.

The governess learns as much about Miles from the housekeeper as she can; then, she fills in the missing details with her own inferences and speculations. Based on the information you have gleaned from this chapter, what do you think ten-year-old Miles could have done to get expelled from school? Why do you think the letter from the headmaster omitted his offense? If you were the person in charge of Miles, how would you resolve the situation?

Carefully compose a letter to the headmaster, in which you make an inquiry about Miles's behavior and the reason he was dismissed from school. Additionally, include a persuasive paragraph convincing them to take Miles back.

10. Appearances and perceptions based on them play an important role in *The Turn of the Screw*. For instance, the governess is inclined, and even encouraged by Mrs. Grose, to judge the children by their appearances. She describes them, each in turn, as beautiful, and whenever she becomes suspicious of their behavior, she dismisses her anxiety with a comment about how angelic and innocent they appear.

Later, Mrs. Grose describes the former governess as being "...almost as young and almost as pretty [as the governess]." The governess comments that she hoped the woman's youth and beauty helped her get and maintain her position. It appears as though they did.

Chapters XII – XVII

28. The governess seems certain that the children perpetually meet with the ghosts. She is also certain that the spirits of Miss Jessel and Quint can destroy the children if they continue to interact. Furthermore, she feels that it is her duty to save the children from the ghosts. Miles and Flora's uncle does not wish to be bothered, and as such, the governess dismisses Mrs. Grose's idea to contact her employer, even threatening to quit if she does.

The governess is obviously infatuated with her employer, hence her desire to abide by his wishes at any cost. However, his actions and wishes seem a bit strange. Why do you think he is so determined to remain uninvolved in the lives of his niece and nephew? One would think that, after the deaths of the people closest to the children, he would want to be an active part of their lives.

Pretend that a classmate has asked you why the governess cannot write the uncle to tell him what is happening. Write a convincing explanation for him or her, explaining the governess's reasons and motives.

29. The children write letters to their uncle that the governess will not send. She calls these letters charming literary exercises, too beautiful to be posted. Instead of forwarding them to her employer, she keeps them as mementos of her time at Bly.

Have you ever written a letter you had no intention of sending? What were the reasons behind you writing it? If you have never done this before, why do you think a person might write such a letter? Write an informal letter to someone close to you, in which you say anything you want, secure in the knowledge that he or she will never see it.

30. Miles expresses his wish to return to school and to get his uncle involved, if necessary, in order to do so. Miles's comments upset the governess because she believes that the boy is trying to manipulate her. Do you think Miles is manipulative? Do you think the governess has an accurate perception of him?