



The Turn of the Screw

BY HENRY JAMES



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Notes

What is a literary classic, and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Henry James was born in New York City on April 15, 1843, into a wealthy and intellectual family. His father, Henry James, Sr., had been acquainted with Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. James briefly attended Harvard Law School, but did not pursue the law as a career. He traveled between Europe and the United States dabbling in the law and attending Harvard University, but being primarily interested in writing and literature. A serious back injury kept James out of the Civil War.

His first novel, *Watch and Ward* (1871), first appeared in the *Atlantic Magazine* in serial form. It was not an immediate success, but with the publication of *Daisy Miller* in 1878, *Washington Square* in 1880, and *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881, his reputation as an important novelist began to grow. James treated his subjects realistically, despite there being very little mention of the underclass, poverty, or societal problems in his works. Much of his early writing shows that he had a strong interest in the supernatural, a person's place in society, and the psychological elements that determine human behavior.

From its first printing in 1898 until today, *The Turn of the Screw* has intrigued readers, who still cannot agree on the short novel's full meaning: Is it merely a great ghost story, or is it a portrait of a madwoman?

James did return to the U. S., but Europe continued to fascinate him, and he eventually became a British citizen in protest against the United

Pointers

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. To better understand *The Turn of the Screw*, consider some of the following themes that the book examines:
 - the battle between good and evil
 - the corruption of innocence
 - the destructive nature of heroism
 - sexual fears and repression
 - insanity and the destructive power of the human mind
 - the unreliability of vision and perception
 - class structure and fear of the underclass
2. It is important to consider the historical context in which the book was written. Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* in 1897, during the last years of the Victorian period. Victorian-era morality and class structure play important roles in *The Turn of the Screw*. Here are some things to know:
 - The Victorian period in Britain takes its name from Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 – 1901. Victoria's influence was strong and extended beyond the British Empire to America.
 - The Victorian period was marked by extremely rigid codes of morality. Purity and restraint were emphasized, especially with regard to sexuality. It was deemed improper to speak of or even hint at matters of sexuality.
 - Victorian-era morality expected women to remain ideally pure and clean. The role of women was to raise children and to keep house. Women were permitted to hold jobs, only as teachers or governesses.
 - The class system during this time in Britain was also very rigidly maintained. A system of social hierarchies was in place, with the aristocracy at the top and the poor at the bottom.
3. *The Turn of the Screw* is considered a Gothic Romance and, at the same time, a satire of the Gothic Romance. The Gothic Romance was a popular literary genre in England from the late 18th century through the early



THE TURN OF THE SCREW

THE STORY HAD held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to note it as the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child. The case, I may mention, was that of an apparition in just such an old house as had gathered us for the occasion—an appearance, of a dreadful kind, to a little boy sleeping in the room with his mother and waking her up in the terror of it; waking her not to dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again, but to encounter also herself, before she had succeeded in doing so, the same sight that had shocked him. It was this observation that drew from Douglas—not immediately, but later in the evening—a reply that had the interesting consequence to which I call attention. Some one else told a story not particularly effective, which I saw he was not following. This I took for a sign that he had himself something to produce and that we should only have to wait. We waited in fact till two nights later; but that same evening, before we scattered, he brought out what was in his mind.

“I quite agree—in regard to Griffin’s ghost, or whatever it was—that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it’s not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have been concerned with a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw,[†] what do you say to two children—?”

“We say, of course,” somebody exclaimed, “two children give two turns! Also that we want to hear about them.”

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

I can see Douglas there before the fire, to which he had got up to present his back, looking down at this converser with his hands in his pockets. "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible." This was naturally declared by several voices to give the thing the utmost price, and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: "It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it."

"For sheer terror?" I remember asking.

He seemed to say it wasn't so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. "For dreadful—dreadfulness!"

"Oh, how delicious!" cried one of the women.

He took no notice of her; he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of. "For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain."

"Well then," I said, "just sit right down and begin."

He turned round to the fire, gave a kick to a log, watched it an instant. Then as he faced us again: "I can't begin. I shall have to send to town." There was a unanimous groan at this, and much reproach; after which, in his pre-occupied way, he explained. "The story's written. It's in a locked drawer—it has not been out for years. I could write to my man and enclose the key; he could send down the packet as he finds it." It was to me in particular that he appeared to propound this—appeared almost to appeal for aid not to hesitate. He had broken a thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter; had had his reasons for a long silence. The others resented postponement but it was just his scruples that charmed me. I adjured him to write by the first post and to agree with us for an early hearing; then I asked him if the experience in question had been his own. To this his answer was prompt. "Oh thank God, no!"

"And is the record yours? You took the thing down?"

"Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*"—he tapped his heart. "I've never lost it."

"Then your manuscript——?"

"Is in old faded ink and in the most beautiful hand." He hung fire again. "A woman's. She has been dead these twenty years. She sent me the pages in question before she died." They were all listening now, and of course there was somebody to be arch, or at any rate to draw the inference. But if he put the inference by without a smile it was also without irritation. "She was a most charming person, but she was ten years older than I. She was my sister's governess," he quietly said. "She was the most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever. It was long ago, and this episode was long before. I was at Trinity,[†] and I found her at home on my coming down the second summer. I was much there that

year—it was a beautiful one; and we had, in her off-hours, some strolls and talks in the garden—talks in which she struck me as awfully clever and nice. Oh yes; don't grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too. If she hadn't she wouldn't have told me. She had never told any one. It wasn't simply that she said so, but that I knew she hadn't. I was sure; I could see. You'll easily judge why when you hear."

"Because the thing had been such a scare?"

He continued to fix me. "You'll easily judge," he repeated: "*you will.*"

I fixed him too. "I see. She was in love."

He laughed for the first time. "You *are* acute. Yes, she was in love. That is she *had* been. That came out—she couldn't tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw I saw it; but neither of us spoke of it. I remember the time and the place—the corner of the lawn, the shade of the great beeches and the long hot summer afternoon. It wasn't a scene for a shudder; but oh—!" He quitted the fire and dropped back into his chair.

"You'll receive the packet Thursday morning?" I said.

"Probably not till the second post."

"Well then; after dinner—"

"You'll all meet me here?" He looked us round again. "Isn't anybody going?" It was almost the tone of hope.

"Everybody will stay!"

"*I will—and I will!*" cried the ladies whose departure had been fixed. Mrs. Griffin, however, expressed the need for a little more light. "Who was it she was in love with?"

"The story will tell," I took upon myself to reply.

"Oh I can't wait for the story!"

"The story *won't* tell," said Douglas; "not in any literal vulgar way."

"More's the pity, then. That's the only way I ever understand."

"Won't *you* tell, Douglas?" somebody else enquired.

He sprang to his feet again. "Yes—to-morrow. Now I must go to bed. Good-night." And, quickly catching up a candlestick, he left us slightly bewildered. From our end of the great brown hall we heard his step on the stair; whereupon Mrs. Griffin spoke. "Well, if I don't know who she was in love with I know who *he* was."

"She was ten years older," said her husband.

"Raison de plus—at that age! But it's rather nice, his long reticence."

"Forty years!" Griffin put in.

"With this outbreak at last."

"The outbreak," I returned, "will make a tremendous occasion of Thursday night"; and every one so agreed with me that in the light of it we lost all attention for everything else. The last story, however incomplete and like the mere opening of a serial, had been told; we handshook and

“candlestuck,” as somebody said, and went to bed.

I knew the next day that a letter containing the key had, by the first post, gone off to his London apartments; but in spite of—or perhaps just on account of—the eventual diffusion of this knowledge we quite let him alone till after dinner, till such an hour of the evening in fact as might best accord with the kind of emotion on which our hopes were fixed. Then he became as communicative as we could desire, and indeed gave us his best reason for being so. We had it from him again before the fire in the hall, as we had had our mild wonders of the previous night. It appeared that the narrative he had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue. Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give. Poor Douglas, before his death—when it was in sight—committed to me the manuscript that reached him on the third of these days and that, on the same spot, with immense effect, he began to read to our hushed little circle on the night of the fourth. The departing ladies who had said they would stay didn’t, of course, thank heaven, stay: they departed, in consequence of arrangements made, in a rage of curiosity, as they professed, produced by the touches with which he had already worked us up. But that only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill.

The first of these touches conveyed that the written statement took up the tale at a point after it had, in a manner, begun. The fact to be in possession of was therefore that his old friend, the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson, had at the age of twenty, on taking service for the first time in the schoolroom, come up to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the advertiser. This person proved, on her presenting herself for judgment at a house in Harley Street that impressed her as vast and imposing—this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage. One could easily fix his type; it never, happily, dies out. He was handsome and bold and pleasant, off-hand and gay and kind. He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid, but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she afterwards showed was that he put the whole thing to her as a favour, an obligation he should gratefully incur. She figured him as rich, but as fearfully extravagant—saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women. He had for his town residence a big house filled with the spoils of travel and the trophies of the chase; but it was to his country home, an old family place in Essex,[†] that he wished her immediately to proceed.

Glossary

PROLOGUE

“**turn of the screw**” – Henry James (1843 – 1916) titled his story *The Turn of the Screw* and the phrase is also used at least twice within the story. Here, in the prologue, the imagery seems to be that of a screw boring into a hole. This idea of a screw being turned and tightened seems to represent the build-up of suspense and excitement that occurs in the story. In other words, with every turn of the screw, things get more interesting and frightening. One critic suggests that the screw might refer to the thumbscrew, a medieval instrument of torture which crushed the fingers and thumbs. The governess is certainly tortured throughout the story, whether she is tortured by the ghosts, her own mind, or a combination of both.

Trinity – Douglas could be referring to any number of colleges in the United Kingdom and Ireland. In England, both Cambridge University and Oxford University contain colleges called Trinity. There is also the well-known Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.

Essex – a county in southeastern England, north of London

“**‘Oh, I have!’**” – The narrator says this after Douglas admits that he does not have a title for the story. It has been suggested that the narrator is a stand-in for Henry James himself, since the narrator is suggesting that *he* has a title for the story.

CHAPTER I

“**...I believed I recognised...the cry of a child...**” – This is an example of foreshadowing, a literary device used to give the reader a hint of what will come later in the story.

“**one of Raphael’s holy infants**” – Raffaello Sanzio (1483 – 1520) was a famous Italian painter during the High Renaissance period. The quote also reinforces the idea that the governess perceives an almost holy purity in Flora’s appearance and behavior.

“**...I’m rather easily...away in London!**” – The governess is admitting two things in this quotation. The first is that she is easily carried away by her imagination (see note: “...*it would be...to meet someone.*” in Chapter III). The second is that she has a crush on her employer. This crush is significant because it illuminates the governess’ sexual repression. The story makes it clear that the governess is naïve, inexperienced, and possibly frustrated regarding love and sex, which would have been quite common for a woman living in England when James wrote the book. England during the Victorian era was marked by extremely rigid codes of morality. Even the slightest hint of sexuality was deemed improper.

Vocabulary

PROLOGUE

adjured – commanded, directed

apparition – a ghostly figure

belowstairs – among the servants; below the status of owners, guests, or governesses

andlestuck – set candles into candlesticks

diffusion – a scattering or spreading of something

disburdened – released from a burden

dissipate – to vanish

incur – to invite; to bring upon oneself

inference – an idea or conclusion that is developed on the basis of other information

propound – to bring up an idea in conversation

raison de plus – [French] “all the more reason”

rendering – a verbal or artistic representation

reticence – unwillingness to talk

scruples – morals; concerns

solicitor – a lawyer

succumbed – gave in; surrendered

sufficiently – adequately, enough

transcript – a written copy

trepidation – fear, reluctance

vicarage – a house provided for a minister

visitation – a sighting of or visit by a being or spirit

CHAPTER I

agitation – a state of restlessness

allusions – references or hints

beatific – innocent, pure; blessed

brooded – worried

commodious – roomy

contrive – to arrange or to plan

diversion – a distraction

fly – a light, horse-drawn carriage

fortitude – strength

imputed – attributed to another person

inordinately – excessively

liberality – generosity

machicolated – containing narrow windows or openings

oppression – a burden, especially on the mind or spirit