



## Expert English Tuition

### THE TURN OF THE SCREW

*'This shadow of a shadow.'*

*'the thing had for me the immense merit of allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand, of inviting it to act on a perfectly clear field, with no 'outside' control involved.'*

*'An excursion into chaos while remaining... but an anecdote – though an anecdote amplified and highly emphasised and returning upon itself...'*

Henry James, Preface to **The Turn of the Screw**.

1. Consider the significance of the **prologue** in the novel. What type of 'frame' does it provide for the text? Is the story pathologised as a 'case' from the beginning? Does the apparently **cosy familiarity** of the hearthside tale affect a simplicity and transparency that the narrative refuses to deliver? In a sense the story opens in a small 'amphitheatre of fiction' and in doing so introduces conflicts and narrative anxieties that are never satisfactorily resolved. James's text is a heavily ironic late Victorian 'blog!' 'The story *won't* tell...'
2. Are we aware of the text's representation of the problematic tension between reading and authenticity? Or perhaps between any reading of the text and the location of the text's **origin**? Consider also the problems of **anteriority** and **posteriority** in your understanding of the prologue. For the story opens years after the event and so the actual activity of the story is dependent upon a series of probably unreliable testimonies. The emphasis by Douglas upon his testimony's lack of 'vulgar' meaning is highly problematic and utterly Jamesian. What does this resistance to bad taste suggest about **clarity** in terms of storytelling? If clarity or simplicity are 'vulgar' ways of telling then the opaque deferrals of telling as evidenced through the preponderance of italics and chronological disruptions in both the act of telling and listening must be in good taste? How comfortable and comforting is this 'civility' do you feel? The insinuated meanings of James's text destabilise our understanding and indeed our capacity to trust the word!
3. If the text is produced as a **chain of narratives**, then how ironical might this strategy appear, when we read the tale as a **ghost story**? Think about the text's interest in repetition/ haunting/echoes and how finally ambiguous or imprecise the identity of the visitor(s) might be. Like Almodovar's brilliant film '**Volver**' things come back to haunt the central figures in the narrative, only we find we do not know their origin or indeed their intention. As Language is the only means of communicating these hauntings, then the difficulties of the narrative mimics the **imprecision of the origin**. **Who is actually turning the screw in James's narrative?** And indeed do the 'returns' or 'revenants' in **The Turn of the Screw** depend far more on the teller than is ever admitted to directly?
4. Everything may stand for something else in the tale: **it is a tale predicated upon surrogacy and substitution**. If the governess cannot 'have' the mastering any Romantic or intimate way, then she can 'have' the master's ward( possibly of course the Master's son) Thus her impoverished



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and impotent role as the economically challenged Governess( with little governing power) becomes transformed into a 'masterly' series of actions in which she 'saves' and 'governs' the threatened children. In short she narrates herself into heroism, into power. An elaborate and most appealing act of transference for her!

5. And what is the 'threat' that faces the children? Is it supernatural possession or sex itself? Or is their **inferred vulnerability** an oblique way of presenting that great Victorian anxiety (and indeed James's recurring subject matter) - homosexuality? The tale's investment in 'closeting' the truth may make such a reading powerfully persuasive and seductive. But whose sexuality are we exploring? And what is our role as the audience/reader seeking closure as a form of consummation?
6. Shoshana Felman talks at length about the preponderance of '**couples**' in the text and this narrative investment is established initially in the prologue. Indeed **conversation** presents itself as **seduction** in both the prologue and the main body of the text. Remember an old translation of conversation is intercourse. Why should James create this labyrinthine interest in couples/coupling? Does this reveal the presence of ongoing **transference** in the text, a transference that refers as much to the way and how the story unveils itself as to any relationship itself. Remember the exchanges between the narrator and Douglas? At different times each are presumed to know things and this instigates the transference. And then we as readers are also reading to know meanings, and the meanings slip away as the narrative **substitutes** one exchange/transference of meaning for another.
7. If the **Master of Bly** is absent throughout the text, what might this loss mean? Remember he literally transfers his power onto the governess, through a conversation that resembles seduction? Think in terms of mastery, authority and censorship? Does this loss demand some reaction in terms of haunting? And if the text moves forward through the death of a protagonist then where does this leave the reader with the final death and transference of meaning when Miles dies at the end? Is the manuscript itself a ghost? Comprehension as death and murder?
8. Look at the moment when Quint is identified by Mrs Grose. How is he identified and what is note-worthy about the process of naming? Do we recognise initially the probability of Quint as a phantasy figure? Is the text also destabilised by the ongoing battle between the children 'who know' and the Governess who is presumed to know but progressively seems more patient/analytical than the children who KNOW (think of biblical meaning here too).

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9. Edmund Wilson's essay on the text remarks on the unreliability of the governesses testimony originating as she does from a Hampshire Vicarage and uneducated in the ways of love. Could you equate the endless ambiguities in the novel with desire? Are some manifestations of desire more taboo than others in the text? Why? Camille Paglia not atypically argues that the 'governess is a decadent artist, joining moral and aesthetic extremes. Evil with beauty, A Beardsleyesque black and white... she kills in order to save, enveloping the children in her mortifying fiction.' Do you agree at all? Does he recall Cathy in **Wuthering Heights**? As Paglia also says is the text showing 'what must be kept out'?
10. The text ends with the death of a child, perhaps even the murder of a child. If Miles dies once he 'confesses' to his knowledge of Quint, then what does this suggest about the problem of naming in the novel and what horrors are attached to naming as comprehension. If you look at the ending again obviously there is a MAJOR AMBIGUITY as to who is actually the DEVIL? In other words where meaning and horror are located. You may also like to look at the play on 'grasp'. Why?
11. Why does James call the novel **The Turn of the Screw**? (Think splinters and control and interpretation?!!) ■

