

The Turn of the Screw

By: Henry James

(according to Sparknotes)

The Turn of the Plot

- An anonymous narrator recalls a Christmas Eve gathering at an old house, where guests listen 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 governess to take a position as governess for his niece and nephew in an isolated country home after the previous governess died. Douglas 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, which contains 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 the governess.
- 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 go back and declares he will make his uncle come to Bly. The governess, shaken, does not go into 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 Luke 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.

The Turn of the Character List

- **The Governess** - The protagonist of the novella, a twenty-year-old woman who has been put in charge of educating and supervising Flora and Miles at the country estate of Bly. The governess has had a very sheltered upbringing and little life experience, and her new job puts an immense responsibility on her, since she has no one to supervise or help her. She is intelligent as well as sensitive and emotionally volatile. Over the course of two short interviews with her employer, she fell in love with him, but she has no opportunity to see him or communicate with him. 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. However, we never know for certain whether the ghosts and visions the governess sees are real or only figments of her imagination. No one else ever admits to seeing what she sees, and her fears, at times, seem to border on insanity.
- **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 may not be imaginary. The governess, however, tends to overwhelm Mrs. Grose, often finishing Mrs. Grose's sentences or leaping to conclusions about what Mrs. Grose is saying. Thus, it can sometimes be difficult for us to judge whether Mrs. Grose is as strongly on the governess's side as the governess thinks. 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. Miles is charming and very attractive. He seems unnaturally well behaved and agreeable for a child, never fights with his sister, and tries constantly to please his governess. He is expelled from school for an unspecified but seemingly sinister reason, and although he seems to be a good child, he often hints that he is capable of being bad. The governess is alarmed by the fact that Miles never refers to his own past and suspects that wicked secrets belie his perfect exterior.
- **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. Although the governess loves Flora, she is disturbed that Flora, like Miles, seems strangely impersonal and reticent about herself. Flora is affectionate and always ready with an embrace or a smile. She is so unusually well behaved that her first instance of misconduct is disquieting. The governess eventually becomes convinced that Flora sees the ghost of Miss Jessel but keeps these sightings secret.
- **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 handle his niece, nephew, and all problems at Bly herself. He asks not to be bothered about them.

- **Peter Quint** - A former valet at Bly. Red-haired, handsome, and exceedingly clever, Quint was “infamous” throughout the area of Bly. According to Mrs. Grose, he was a hound and “too free” with everyone, Miles and Flora included. The governess describes his specter as an unnaturally white, silent “horror.” She 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 describes Miss Jessel's black-clad ghost as miserable, pale, and dreadful. The governess believes Miss Jessel's ghost is haunting Bly with the intention of corrupting Flora.
- **Luke** - A servant at Bly. Luke is expected to deliver the governess's letter to the children's uncle, but he cannot find it. Miles uses Luke as an attempted escape route and asks to see Luke before telling the governess what she wants to know.

- **Anonymous Narrator** - The narrator of the prologue. The anonymous narrator is an educated guest at the Christmas Eve gathering. The narrator is most likely a man, since he speaks disdainfully of the sensation-hungry women at the gathering. The narrator may be a stand-in for Henry James, as he mentions he has a title for the tale at the end of the prologue. As Douglas repeatedly hints, the narrator will find a deeper meaning in the story.
- **Douglas** - The teller of the governess's tale at the Christmas Eve gathering. Douglas knew the governess, who had been his sister's governess after her time at Bly, and may have been in love with her. He is the only one who has heard the tale, since the governess left him in charge of her manuscript after she died. Douglas was fond of the governess and introduces her as a “most agreeable” person, giving her credibility regarding the tale to come.
- **Griffin** - A storyteller at the gathering. Griffin tells a ghost story involving a child and his mother.
- **Women at the Gathering** - Guests at the house. The women are characterized as sensation hungry and eager to hear the most “dreadful” and “delicious” ghost stories.

The Turn of the Major Character Analysis

- **The Governess**
- Although the governess adores Miles and Flora when she first meets them, she quickly becomes suspicious of their every word and action, convinced that they hope to deceive her. She is fickle, however, and frequently switches back to being absolutely sure of their pure innocence. At these times, her affection for the children can be intense. She embraces them often and with passion, going so far as to kiss Miles. The ambiguity of the text allows these displays of affection to appear both harmless and inappropriate. Her volatile relationship with the children renders her an unreliable narrator and a dubious source of information. According to Douglas, the governess's confidant and admirer, she is "the most agreeable person" he has ever known "in her position." However, he says also that she was "in love," as though this is an excuse for her behavior, which he admits is questionable. Mrs. Grose's increasing skepticism casts doubt on the governess's visions and fears and suggests that the governess may indeed be losing her mind.
- The governess, with her overabundant concern for the children and her violent suspicions of them, may be regarded as either a heroine or a villain. On one hand, she seems to be an ambitious young woman who unwittingly places herself in a position in which she is forced to struggle heroically to protect her charges from supernatural forces. On the other hand, she seems to be a sheltered, inexperienced young woman whose crush on her employer and nervous exhaustion at being in charge of two strange children result in an elaborate and ultimately dangerous fabrication or hallucination. James provides only the governess's side of the story, which may be inaccurate in whole or in part. In any case, the governess's account is by no means the full account, which we never learn.

- **Mrs. Grose**
- An illiterate servant at Bly, Mrs. Grose provides the governess with open ears and loyal support. Although the governess thinks her simple minded and slow witted, Mrs. Grose knows more of the story than the governess fathoms and is as capable of piecing things together as is the governess, though slower to leap to dire conclusions. Although Mrs. Grose is the source for most of the governess's information, the governess does not take her words at face value or ask Mrs. Grose for her opinions. Instead, the governess uses Mrs. Grose as a “receptacle of lurid things.” The governess frequently attempts to seize moments alone with Mrs. Grose so that she can try out her latest speculations. Mrs. Grose is usually skeptical of these speculations, but the governess takes Mrs. Grose's incredulity for astonished belief. Like the reader, Mrs. Grose is willing to hear the governess out but doesn't necessarily agree with her logic or conclusions.
- **Miles**
- Miles might be either a cunning and deceitful plaything of ghosts or merely an innocent, unusually well-mannered young boy. The governess repeatedly changes her mind on the matter, leaving Miles's true character in question. When the governess first meets Miles, she is struck by his “positive fragrance of purity” and the sense that he has known nothing but love. She finds herself excusing him for any potential mishap because he is too beautiful to misbehave. Yet she also senses a disturbing emptiness in Miles, an impersonality and lack of history, as though he is less than real.
- Once the governess begins having her supernatural encounters, she comes to believe that Miles is plotting evil deeds with his ghostly counterpart, Quint, and indeed Miles does exhibit strange behavior. For example, he plans an incident so that the governess will think him “bad,” and he steals the letter she wrote to his uncle. Mrs. Grose tells us that Peter Quint was a bad influence on him, but we have no way to measure the extent or precise nature of this influence, and Miles's misdeeds may be nothing more than childish pranks. The fact that Miles is otherwise unusually pleasant and well behaved suggests that the sinister quality of his behavior exists only in the governess's mind. The governess eventually decides that Miles must be full of wickedness, reasoning that he is too “exquisite” to be anything else, a conclusion she bases only on her own subjective impressions and conjectures.
- **Flora**
- Like Miles, Flora might be either angelic or diabolical. She appears to be a completely wonderful little girl, even preternaturally so, well behaved and a pleasure to be around. The governess thinks Flora possesses “extraordinary charm” and is the “most beautiful child” she has laid eyes on. Flora seems, however, to have a personality quite distinct from these glowing descriptions. When the governess questions Flora as to why she had been looking out the window, Flora's explanation is evasive and unsatisfying. Flora's next turn at the window turns out to be, according to Miles, part of a scheme to show the governess that Miles can be “bad.” At this point, the governess has already assumed Flora to be conniving and deceptive, but this is the first instance in which Flora seems to be exhibiting unambiguous deceit. The story remains inconclusive, however, and we never know for sure what Flora and Miles are up to. Flora may very well be the innocent child the governess thought her to be, her strange, diabolical turns existing only in the governess's mind.

Just Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

- **Themes**

- **The Corruption of the Innocent**

- The governess only rarely indicates that she is afraid the ghosts will physically harm or kill the children. In fact, Miles's death comes as a shock to us as readers, because we are unprepared to think of the ghosts as a physical threat. Until she sends Flora away, the governess never seems to consider removing the children from the ghosts or trying to expel the ghosts from the house. Instead, the governess's fears focus almost entirely on the potential "corruption" of the children—whether they were corrupted by Quint and Jessel when the latter were alive and whether they continue to be similarly corrupted by the ghosts. Before she even knows about Quint, the governess guesses that Miles has been accused of corrupting other children. Although the word corruption is a euphemism that permits the governess to remain vague about what she means, the clear implication is that corruption means exposure to knowledge of sex. For the governess, the children's exposure to knowledge of sex is a far more terrifying prospect than confronting the living dead or being killed. Consequently, her attempt to save the children takes the form of a relentless quest to find out what they know, to make them confess rather than to predict what might happen to them in the future. Her fear of innocence being corrupted seems to be a big part of the reason she approaches the problem so indirectly—it's not just that the ghosts are unmentionable but that what the ghosts have said to them or introduced them to is unspeakable.

- Because the corruption of the children is a matter of fearful speculation rather than an acknowledged fact, the story doesn't make any clear and definitive statement about corruption. Certainly, the governess's fears are destructive and do not result in her saving the children. Notably, while the governess is the character most fearful of and vigilant for corruption, she is also the least experienced and most curious character regarding sex. Mrs. Grose is married, and the uncle, though a bachelor, seems to be a ladies' man. The governess is singularly horrified by Miss Jessel's sexual infraction and apparently fascinated by it as well. We might conclude that the governess's fear of the children's corruption represents her projection of her own fears and desires regarding sex onto her charges.

– **The Destructiveness of Heroism**

- The governess's youth and inexperience suggest that the responsibility of caring for the two children and being in charge of the entire estate is more than she could possibly bear, yet she does not look for help. Her isolation is largely her employer's fault, because he chooses to remain absent and specifically tells her to deal with all problems by herself. However, the governess responds to her experiences at Bly by taking on even more responsibility—to bury the headmaster's letter and keep Miles at home; to be the one who sees the ghosts rather than the children and who attempts to screen them from any exposure to the ghosts; and to save the children from the ghosts' corrupting influence. These decisions are all self-conscious—she is not forced to make them because she can't think of another way to respond. Instead, she deliberately chooses to view these challenges as “magnificent” opportunities to please the master and deludes herself into thinking that the master recognizes her sacrifices. Clearly, she is misguided on both counts. The master never comes down or sends any letter, and her crusade to save the children is an even worse disaster. Flora leaves the estate sick and in hysterics, vowing never to speak to the governess again, and Miles dies. Whether or not the governess was correct in thinking that the children were being haunted, she was definitely wrong in thinking she could be the hero who saves them.
- The fact that the governess was misguided in adopting a heroic stance suggests several interpretations. One possibility is that the forces of corruption are too powerful for one person to oppose. Perhaps the governess could have succeeded only with the concerted efforts of the school and the uncle, and perhaps the children could not have been saved. Another possible reason why her heroism might have been inappropriate is that childhood and innocence may be too fragile to be protected in such an aggressive fashion. The governess's attempt to police and guard the children may have proven to be more damaging than the knowledge from which she wanted to protect them.

– Forbidden Subjects

- One of the most challenging features of *The Turn of the Screw* is how frequently characters make indirect hints or use vague language rather than communicate directly and clearly. The headmaster expels Miles from school and refuses to specify why. The governess has several guesses about what he might have done, but she just says he might be “corrupting” the others, which is almost as uninformative as the original letter. The governess fears that the children understand the nature of Quint and Jessel's relationship, but the nature of that relationship is never stated explicitly. The governess suspects that the ghosts are influencing the children in ways having to do with their relationship in the past, but she isn't explicit about how exactly they are being influenced. This excessive reticence on the part of the characters could reflect James's own reticence (which was marked), or it could be interpreted as a satiric reflection on Victorian reticence about sex. More straightforwardly, it could be a technique for engaging the imagination to produce a more terrifying effect.

• Motifs

– Vision

- Throughout *The Turn of the Screw*, references to eyes and vision emphasize the idea that sight is unreliable. Vision and the language used to describe it are particularly important in each of the governess's encounters with Quint and Miss Jessel. She deems her first meeting with Quint a “bewilderment of vision,” an ambiguous phrase that suggests she imagined what she saw. Characters lock eyes with each other several times in the novella. The governess shares intense gazes with both Quint and Miss Jessel and believes she can determine the ghosts' intentions by looking into their eyes. Although she and Miss Jessel do not actually talk, the governess claims Miss Jessel's gaze appears “to say” she has a right to be there. At times, the governess regards the clarity of the children's eyes as proof that the children are innocent. In these cases, she determines whether the children are capable of deception by looking at their eyes, when it may be her own eyes that deceive her.

– A Ship Lost at Sea

- Early on in the novella, the governess imagines herself at the helm of a “great drifting ship,” and the metaphor of Bly as a ship lost at sea soon proves to be appropriate. When the governess goes out to look for the vanished Quint, she describes Bly as “empty with a great emptiness,” as though it is a vast, unlimited sea. After her first ghostly encounters, she decides she will save the children but later cries that they are hopelessly “lost.” Her navigation skills have failed her, and she envisions the children drowning. However, she perseveres, and when she speaks with Miles near the end of the novel, she feels she is “just nearly reaching port.” The ship imagery extends further when, soon thereafter, she imagines Miles “at the bottom of the sea,” a disturbing image that foreshadows Miles's fate. Ultimately, the governess is the character who is most lost. She cannot find a direction or destination for her theories and suspicions, and her perceptions are constantly changing.

– Silence

- Sound acts as a signal of life and nature in *The Turn of the Screw*, and its absence is a predictor of the governess's supernatural visions. Prior to the governess's ghostly encounters, she experiences a hush in the world around her. When she first sees Quint in the tower, the sound of birds stops and the rustling of leaves quiets. The governess takes the scene to be “stricken with death.” Nothing else changes, however, and the visual aspects of the world around her are unaffected. The governess's sense of a hush is more marked when she meets Quint on the staircase. She interprets the “dead silence” of the incident as proof that the encounter is unnatural. In fact, she remarks that the silence is the specific thing that marks the event as unnatural and that otherwise she would have assumed Quint to be a living being. Quint's subsequent disappearance into silence suggests that the dead dwell in a realm without sound, making silence a mark of the unnatural and unliving.

- **Symbols**

- **Light**

- Candlelight suggests safety in the governess's narrative, while twilight suggests danger. On a number of occasions, the governess's lighted candle is extinguished, always with the implication that something is awry. At the top of the stairs, her candle goes out at the exact moment she sees Quint. She views him in “cold, faint twilight.” A week or two later, the governess wakes up to find her candle extinguished and Miles on the lawn in bright moonlight. Her view of him in that light suggests danger and, in a way, prefigures his imminent death. Later, Miles blows out the governess's candle, plunging the two into darkness. The lack of moonlight implies an absence of the supernatural, and the blowing out of the candle indicates a loss of protection.

- **The Written Word**

- In *The Turn of the Screw*, events become fully 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. She also has relied on threats and passionate speech to persuade Mrs. Grose of her visions and theories, and convincing someone through the written word will be much more difficult. 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. These interruptions suggest the story remains unresolved—and cast doubt on its reliability.