

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Turn of the Screw

by Henry James

written by Michelle Ryan

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Note To Teacher

To students who are likely to ask, “Are the ghosts in this story real or not?” the answer is, “You must decide for yourself.” The author, Henry James, means this to be an ambiguous story. As such, it can be read as a ghost story, or it can be read as a psychological novel.

As students read the story, they should try to look at it from both points of view. When they are finished, they will have to decide for themselves how to interpret what James intended.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, published 2006.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. correctly identify incidents in the plot that make this tale a classic ghost story.
2. discuss the author's deliberate use of ambiguity in this novel, and state reasons why James employs this device. In this regard, the student will be able to formulate answers for the following:
 - What actually happens versus what is only imagined by the governess.
 - Is Miles expelled from school for an evil act or merely for a routine infraction?
 - Are Miles and Flora bright, normal children, or are they evil and consorting with ghosts?
 - Does Mrs. Grose believe in ghosts?
 - Does the governess actually see ghosts, or is she engaging in some type of fantasy?
3. identify and discuss "the presence of evil" that is a motif in this novel. In doing so, the following points are to be mentioned:
 - Miles's expulsion from school and Miss Jessel's death.
 - the evil acts Quint and Miss Jessel involve the children in while they are alive, and the evil acts they involve them in now.
 - the contrast brought out by the "Garden of Eden setting" and the "angelic" descriptions of the children, with the presence of evil.
4. write an essay on the topic "The Governess—A Study in Sexual Repression and its Effects." The essay should present a compelling reason to believe that the governess is sexually repressed and should mention some of the Freudian symbolism cited in the novel to support this thesis.
5. define stream-of-consciousness as a literary style, relate the definition to parts of this novel, and state why a style that concentrates on what is within the narrator's mind is particularly appropriate for this novel.
6. identify the two narrators in this story and discuss reasons the author might have chosen to use both rather than just one or the other.
7. write an essay on the topic "*The Turn of the Screw*: A Ghost Story or a Psychological Novel?"
8. recognize and appreciate examples of imagery, and correlate their importance to the setting of the story.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Why does Miles's expulsion from school become a point of importance in this novel?
2. Provide support for the following thesis: Miles and Flora—A Study of Two Possessed by Evil.
3. Provide arguments to support the contention that this is a story of a country parson's daughter whose obsession with evil deranges her mind.
4. Provide a logical supposition of your own to explain why Henry James chose to make this an ambiguous novel. Or, if the story line does not seem ambiguous to you, refute the notion that it is an ambiguous story line.
5. Write an essay in which you discuss the function of Mrs. Grose in this novel.
6. What is Douglas's function in the novel? (Remember, he is the one the story focuses on in the prologue.)
7. Identify and discuss points in the novel that lead some critics to maintain that the governess's actions are a result of her sexual repression.
8. Assuming that the governess did actually see ghosts and that she does not just imagine their existence, trace the battle between good and evil in this novel and identify who wins and why.
9. Choosing a passage from the novel that you think is representative, describe Henry James's style of writing in objective terms. (Do not include your opinion.) State why you think that the style in which it was written is or is not appropriate for this story.
10. Is this story's purpose to characterize the innocence of children or to make a wry observation of their predatory nature? Explain, and give your reasons with reference to the text.
11. Is there a possibility that Henry James wrote this "ghost story" as a humorous tale—unbelievable, but with high entertainment value? Explain your answer and discuss it with the class.
12. Discuss the features of a Gothic novel and whether *The Turn of the Screw* qualifies as such. Explain the reasons for your opinion.

The Turn of the Screw

Prologue

VOCABULARY

adjured – commanded, directed
apparition – a ghostly figure
belowstairs – among the servants; below the status of owners, guests, or governesses
candlestick – set a candle into a candlestick
diffusion – a scattering or spreading of something
disburdened – released from a burden
dissipate – to vanish
incur – to invite; 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

1. The setting in the prologue is an old house on Christmas Eve (circa 1899). Who is narrating this part, what action is taking place, and what character seems to be the center of focus?

2. The story's title, *The Turn of the Screw*, refers to what incident in the prologue?

Chapter IV

VOCABULARY

blanched – lost color from the face; paled
certitude – a conviction, certainty
chastised – reprimanded, disciplined
indiscretion – an act that is not polite or acceptable
inexplicably – without explanation
infallibly – unfailingly, reliably
infinitesimal – miniscule, tiny
obscurity – murkiness; darkness
singular – extraordinary; peculiar
unscrupulous – dishonest, corrupt
vanity – uselessness; worthlessness
vindictive – spiteful, malicious

1. Why does the governess not share with Mrs. Grose her experience of the sighting in Chapter III? What emotions does she go through regarding the sighting, and what does she finally conclude?

2. The governess, at this point, appears to be somewhat nervous. How may the letters from home have made her even more nervous?

Chapter XII

VOCABULARY

brace – a grouping of two; a couple
depravity – moral corruption
derision – scorn; ridicule
lucidity – a state of clarity; clearness of speech or mind
scrupulously – carefully, meticulously

1. Why does the good behavior and comportment of the children seem to be “too good” to the governess?

2. How does the governess respond to the suggestion of contacting the uncle and asking him to come down?

3. In the beginning of the chapter, the figure of speech “a slip of the tongue” is used. What does it mean?

4. While Miles reads to Flora, what does the governess say about him?

Chapter XX

VOCABULARY

ambiguous – unclear in meaning
breach – a break, gap
compassion – pity, sympathy
countenance – the face or expression
ebbing – receding, diminishing
exemption – freedom from a normally required duty
feign – to pretend
imperative – essential
interposing – coming between
odorous – smelly
pert – forward; sassy
ravenous – hungry
repress – to stifle; hold in
reprobation – moral depravity
repulsion – the act of pushing away
smitten – affected as if hit or slapped
undaunted – unconquered; fearless
vulgarly – rudely

1. As the chapter opens, the governess points across the lake and shouts, “She’s there, she’s there!” She is referring to Miss Jessel. Why is the governess excited to see the apparition at this time?
