

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *The Turn of the Screw*

*by Henry James*

written by Rebecca Challman

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*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.

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3. *The Turn of the Screw* is a famous novella, and it is possible that you have encountered it before at some point. However, even if you have not, you can make inferences about the story and its characters based on the cover (e.g., the title, the illustrations, and the synopsis). What do you think the story is about? What predictions can you make about the outcome of the plot? What do you think the book's title means?

Free-write a few paragraphs, in which you predict what might happen in the story.

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## 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.

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## Chapter I

6. The narrator describes her journey to Bly House in Essex as “a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong.” At first, she was worried that she had made a bad decision to take the job; then, her mood lightened as she observed the beauty of the countryside. She was especially glad to see that the old house was nicer than she anticipated.

Write about a time when your mood fluctuated, starting bad, and ending good. Explain the reasons why you were initially upset and what idea or event made you happier. Use an image, like the see-saw one employed by the narrator, which conveys the way in which your mood changed. Avoid clichés, and create with a new way to describe the “flights and drops.”

7. The narrator’s first impression of Bly is a pleasant one, which surprises and delights her. She describes open windows and fresh curtains, green lawns and bright flowers, and clusters of trees over which birds fly in a golden sky. Her room is large and impressive, with lovely draperies and full-length mirrors. However, since her story is told in flashback, she soon lets the reader know that what she first thought of as a storybook castle is, in actuality, a big old ugly house, “a great drifting ship” with her at the helm.

Think of a time when you were deceived by a first impression. Perhaps a teacher you judged as harsh and rigid turned out to be relaxed and friendly. Maybe a place that looked quiet, peaceful, and relaxing turned out to be the opposite. Write an amusing anecdote about the incident.

8. Despite the pleasant first of impression of the house where she is to work, the good nature of the housekeeper with whom she is to work, and the beauty and agreeable attitude of her charge, Flora, the governess has a feeling of uneasiness. Her instincts tell her that something is not right at Bly. Inexplicably, she feels a sense of foreboding.

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A sense of foreboding is one of apprehension, in which a person awaits something negative or evil to reveal itself. Think of a time when you have experienced a sense of foreboding. Was it well founded? Did a problem eventually surface? Did you experience temporary anxiety that passed without incident? Did your instincts help you avoid a bad situation, or were your instincts wrong?

Write a brief personal narrative detailing a time when you listened to or ignored your instincts. Remember to describe the outcome.