

# *The Turn of the Screw*

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## *The Turn of the Screw*



Title page of the original (1898) edition of *The Two Magics*, in which *The Turn of the Screw* was first published

<b>Author(s)</b>	<a href="#">Henry James</a>
<b>Country</b>	United Kingdom, United States
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Genre(s)</b>	<a href="#">Novella</a> , <a href="#">Gothic fiction</a>
<b>Publisher</b>	William Heinemann, <a href="#">London</a> The Macmillan Company, <a href="#">New York City</a>
<b>Publication date</b>	13 October 1898 (USA) & (UK)
<b>Media type</b>	Print ( <a href="#">Hardback</a> & <a href="#">Paperback</a> )
<b>Pages</b>	310 pp (US first edition) 393 pp (UK first edition) Both editions also included the story <i>Covering End</i>
<b><a href="#">ISBN</a></b>	<a href="#">978-0-393-95904-8</a>
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*The Turn of the Screw* is a [novella](#) written by [Henry James](#). Originally published in 1898, it is a [ghost story](#).

Due to its [ambiguous](#) content, it became a favourite text of academics who subscribe to [New Criticism](#). The novella has had differing interpretations, often mutually exclusive. Many critics have tried to determine the exact nature of the evil hinted at by the story.

## Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Plot summary](#)
- [2 Major themes](#)
- [3 Literary significance and criticism](#)
- [4 Adaptations](#)
- [5 Allusions in literature](#)
- [6 References](#)
- [7 External links](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

An unnamed narrator listens to a male friend reading a manuscript written by a former [governess](#) whom the friend claims to have known and who is now dead. The manuscript tells the story of how the young governess is hired by a man who has become responsible for his young [nephew](#) and [niece](#) after the death of their parents. He lives mainly in [London](#) and is not interested in raising the children himself.

The boy, Miles, is attending a [boarding school](#), while his younger sister, Flora, is living at a country estate in [Essex](#). She is currently being cared for by the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose. The governess's new employer, the uncle of Miles and Flora, gives her full charge of the children and explicitly states that she is not to bother him with communications of any sort. The governess travels to her new employer's country house and begins her duties.

Miles soon returns from school for the summer just after a letter arrives from the headmaster stating that he has been expelled. Miles never speaks of the matter, and the governess is hesitant to raise the issue. She fears that there is some horrid secret behind the expulsion, but is too charmed by the adorable young boy to want to press the issue. Soon thereafter, the governess begins to see around the grounds of the estate the figures of a man and woman whom she does not recognize. These figures come and go at will without ever being seen or challenged by other members of the household, and they seem to the governess to be supernatural. She learns from Mrs. Grose that her predecessor, Miss Jessel, and another employee, Peter Quint, had had a sexual relationship with each other and had both died. It is also implied that Quint was a [molester](#), who molested Miles and the others members of the household. Prior to their deaths, they spent much of their time with Flora and Miles, and this fact has grim significance for the governess when she becomes convinced that the two children are secretly aware of the presence of the ghosts.

Later, Flora leaves the house while Miles plays music for the governess. They notice Flora's absence and go to look for her. The governess and Mrs. Grose find her in a clearing in the wood, and the governess is convinced that she has been talking to Miss Jessel. When she finally confronts Flora, Flora denies seeing Miss Jessel, and demands never to see the governess again. Mrs. Grose takes Flora away to her uncle, leaving the governess with Miles. That night, they are finally talking of Miles' expulsion when the ghost of Quint appears to the governess at the window. The governess shields Miles, who attempts to see the ghost. The governess tells him that he is no longer controlled by the ghost, and then finds that Miles has died in her arms.

## [\[edit\]](#) Major themes

Throughout his career James was attracted to the ghost story genre. However, he was not fond of literature's stereotypical ghosts, the old-fashioned 'screamers' and 'slashers'. Rather, he preferred to create ghosts that were eerie extensions of everyday reality—"the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy," as he put it in the [New York Edition](#) preface to his final ghost story, "[The Jolly Corner](#)".

*The Turn of the Screw* is no exception to this formula. In fact, some [critics](#)<sup>[[who?](#)]</sup> have wondered if he didn't intend the "strange and sinister" to be embroidered only on the governess's mind and not on objective reality. The result has been a long-standing critical dispute about the reality of the ghosts and the sanity of the governess.

Beyond the dispute, critics<sup>[[who?](#)]</sup> have closely examined James's narrative technique for the story. The framing introduction and subsequent [first-person narrative](#) by the governess have been studied by theorists of [fiction](#)<sup>[[who?](#)]</sup> interested in the power of fictional narratives to convince or even manipulate readers.

The imagery of *The Turn of the Screw* is reminiscent of the [gothic](#) genre. The emphasis on old and mysterious buildings throughout the novella reinforces this motif. James also relates the amount of light present in various scenes to the strength of the supernatural or ghostly forces apparently at work. The governess refers directly to [The Mysteries of Udolpho](#) and indirectly to [Jane Eyre](#), evoking a comparison of the governess not only to *Jane Eyre*'s protagonist, but to Bertha, the madwoman confined in Thornfield.<sup>[1]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Literary significance and criticism

The dispute over the reality of the ghosts has had a real effect on some critics, most notably [Edmund Wilson](#), who was one of the first major proponents of the insane governess theory. However, he eventually recanted this opinion after consideration of the governess's point-by-point description of Quint. Then John Silver<sup>[2]</sup> indicated hints in the story that the governess might have gained previous knowledge of Quint's appearance in non-supernatural ways. This induced Wilson to recant his recantation and return to his original opinion that the governess was abnormal and that the ghosts existed only in her imagination.

[William Veeder](#) sees Miles's eventual death as induced by the governess. By a complex [psychoanalytic](#) reading, Veeder concludes that the governess expressed her repressed rage toward her father and toward the master of Bly on Miles.

Other critics, however, have defended the governess strongly. They indicate that James's letters, his *New York Edition* preface, and his [Notebooks](#) contain no definite evidence that *The Turn of the Screw* was intended as anything other than a straightforward ghost story, and James certainly wrote ghost stories that did not depend on the imagination of the narrator. For example, "Owen Wingrave" includes a ghost which causes the sudden death of its title character although no one actually sees it. James's *Notebooks* entry indicates that he was inspired originally by a tale he heard from [Edward White Benson](#), the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#). This unconventional source, like almost everything else about the story, has generated critical commentary.

James revised the novella substantially over the years. In *The Collier's Weekly Version of The Turn of the Screw*,<sup>[3]</sup> Peter G. Beidler presents the tale in its original serial form and presents a detailed analysis of the changes James made over the years. Among many other changes, James changed the ages of the children.

Poet and literary critic [Craig Raine](#) in his essay on *Sex in nineteenth-century literature* states quite categorically his belief that Victorian readers would have identified the two ghosts as child-molesters.

## [\[edit\]](#) Adaptations

- An opera, *The Turn of the Screw*, composed by [Benjamin Britten](#) in 1954
- *The Turn of the Screw* (1959) an early live television play directed by [John Frankenheimer](#) and featuring [Ingrid Bergman](#)
- Perhaps the best-regarded adaptation is *The Innocents* (1961) directed by [Jack Clayton](#) and featuring [Deborah Kerr](#)
- *The Nightcomers*, a prequel to the actual novel, directed by [Michael Winner](#) and featuring [Marlon Brando](#) as Quint
- Dan Curtis's well-regarded TV movie *The Turn of the Screw* (1974) with [Lynn Redgrave](#)
- A 1974 adaptation for French television, *Le Tour d'écrou*, by [Raymond Rouleau](#) with [Suzanne Flon](#)
- *The Turn of the Screw* (1982), which is actually a German-made operatic adaptation
- A graphic novel, *Giro di vite* (1989), published originally by Olympia Press, adapted by [Guido Crepax](#)
- A 1989 television adaptation for [Shelley Duvall](#)'s *Nightmare Classics* featuring [Amy Irving](#)
- [Rusty Lemorande](#)'s film *The Turn of the Screw* (1994) with [Patsy Kensit](#) and [Julian Sands](#), which updated the story to the 1960s
- The television movie *The Haunting of Helen Walker/The Turn of the Screw* (1995) featuring [Valerie Bertinelli](#)
- A theatrical adaptation by [Jeffrey Hatcher](#) in which one woman plays the governess and a man fills the rest of the roles
- *Presence of Mind* (1999), an acclaimed Spanish-made film adaptation with [Sadie Frost](#) and [Harvey Keitel](#)
- A British television adaptation *The Turn of the Screw* (1999) with [Jodhi May](#) and [Colin Firth](#)
- A 2001 film, *The Others* starring Nicole Kidman, is cited as being inspired partly by *The Turn of the Screw*<sup>[4]</sup>

- [BBC Radio 4](#) broadcast an adaptation in 2004 (later re-broadcast on [BBC Radio 4 Extra](#) on 14 November 2011) by [Neville Teller](#), directed by [Peter Leslie Wilde](#) and starring [Cathy Sara](#) as the Governess and [Joseph Tremain](#) as Miles.
- 2004 Hindi film, *Hum Kaun Hai*, was an unauthorized remake of *The Others*
- A 2006 film, *In a Dark Place* is based upon the novel
- [BBC Radio 4](#) (and later [BBC Radio 7](#) broadcast in 2010 an adaptation by [John Tideyman](#), directed by [Glyn Dearman](#) and starring [Charlotte Attenborough](#) as the Governess, [Rosemary Leach](#) as Mrs. Grose, Sam Crane as Miles and [Jonathan Adams](#) as the Storyteller.
- The story has also been converted into a ballet by [William Tuckett](#).
- A 2009 BBC television drama starring [Michelle Dockery](#) and [Sue Johnston](#), set during the 1920s: *The Turn of the Screw*<sup>[5]</sup>
- A very important storyline of the soap opera *Dark Shadows* was based on this story. The *Dark Shadows* character [Quentin Collins](#) was originally based on the character Peter Quint.
- The Italian filmmaker Marcello Avallone will direct a 3-D adaptation of the novel.<sup>[6]</sup> It will be the first Italian-produced and screened 3-D film.<sup>[7]</sup>
- A Photographic Book, 2011: 'A Very Victorian Haunting - Images Inspired by The Turn of the Screw.' Text and Photography by Jonathan Pearlman <sup>[8]</sup>

## **[[edit](#)] Allusions in literature**

- [Leon Edel](#) identifies structural and tonal similarities between [Joseph Conrad](#)'s *Heart of Darkness* and *The Turn of the Screw*.<sup>[9]</sup>
- [Joyce Carol Oates](#)' story "The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" (featured in the collection *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*) is a retelling of the novel from the point of view of the ghosts.
- In Muriel Spark's *The Public Image* (1968), the protagonist's husband writes a play to which the protagonist comments, "It resembles 'The Turn of the Screw'."
- *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* contains a reference to *The Turn of the Screw* and suggests that it is the governess's belief in ghosts, and not ghosts themselves, which causes Miles's death.
- In [Peter Straub](#)'s novel *Ghost Story*, the personal anecdote that Sears James recounts to his fellow storytellers in the Chowder Society is a thinly disguised homage to *The Turn of the Screw*.
- There is also a modern adaptation of the novel in [Toby Litt](#)'s "Ghost Story", published in 2004.
- [Stephen Beachy](#)'s novella *Some Phantom* is described as a cross between "The Turn of the Screw" and [Herk Harvey](#)'s film *Carnival of Souls*.
- In [Donald Thomas](#)'s novel *Sherlock Holmes and the Ghosts of Bly and Other New Adventures of the Great Detective*, Holmes investigates the aftermath of the events described in *The Turn of the Screw*.
- There is a modern adaption of the story in [Adele Griffin](#)'s "Tighter", published in 2011.

## **[[edit](#)] References**

- *The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism* edited by Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1999) [ISBN 0-393-95904-X](#)
  - *The Tales of Henry James* by [Edward Wagenknecht](#) (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1984) [ISBN 0-8044-2957-X](#)
  - *The Collier's Weekly Version of The Turn of the Screw*, edited by Peter G. Beidler (Seattle: Coffeetown Press, 2010) [ISBN 978-1-60381-018-0](#)
1. [^](#) See Prof Linda Kaufmann, *Discourses of Desire*, ISBN 0-8014-9510+5, for an argument that Bronte was actually the source of the tale, through Mary Sedgwick Benson.
  2. [^](#) "A Note on the [Freudian](#) Reading of 'The Turn of the Screw'" *American Literature*, 1957
  3. [^](#) *The Collier's Weekly Version of The Turn of the Screw*
  4. [^](#) [\[1\]](#)
  5. [^](#) *TV Choice*, London, Anglia and Central edition, 19 December 2009-1 January 2010
  6. [^](#) "'Turn of the Screw' Ghost Tale Being Adapted in 3-D, Promo Trailer!". BloodyDisgusting.
  7. [^](#) "3D Telling of The Turn of the Screw On Its Way". DreadCentral.
  8. [^](#) [\[2\]](#)
  9. [^](#) [Colm Tóibín on Joseph Conrad | Books | The Guardian](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) External links



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- [Author's preface to the \*New York Edition\* text of \*The Turn of the Screw\* \(1908\)](#)
- [Note on the various texts of \*The Turn of the Screw\* at the \[Library of America\]\(#\) web site.](#)
- [Synopsis of \*The Turn of the Screw\* from the \[English Touring Opera\]\(#\)](#)
- [turnofthescrew.com](#) A History of Its Critical Interpretations 1898-1979 Edward J. Parkinson, PhD
- [The Turn of the Screw \(1959\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
- [The Innocents \(1961\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
- [The Innocents \(1961\)](#) at the [TCM Movie Database](#)
- [The Turn of the Screw \(1999\)](#) at the [Internet Movie Database](#)
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