The Turn of the Screw

Henry James

About the author

Henry James was born in New York in 1843, of Scottish and Irish ancestry. Educated in New York, London, Paris and Geneva, he entered law school at Harvard in the United States but left after a year to concentrate on writing. From 1865 he was a regular contributor of reviews and short stories to American magazines.

In 1876 James settled in England, making it his home for the rest of his life. That year his first important novel, Roderick Hudson, was published. In the following thirty years he wrote some twenty novels, travel books, books of criticism and nearly 100 short stories. He also wrote a number of unsuccessful plays. His last great novel, The Golden Bowl, was published in 1904. He died in 1916, leaving two unfinished novels, prolific to the last.

James was fascinated by the differences between a sophisticated and tired Europe and a vital and naive America. This is this theme that he continually returns to in such famous novels as The American, Daisy Miller and Portrait of a Lady.

He explored the English character with great subtlety. He had acute powers of observation and was fascinated by people, whom he loved to watch and analyse. The novel What Maisie Knew, belongs to this period.

Summary

A young governess agrees to look after two orphans. Their former governess has died and their uncle and guardian wants nothing to do with them. The housekeeper is kind and the children, Flora and Miles, are charming. Miles's school, however, have written saying that he must leave.

After some weeks, the governess starts seeing the ghosts of an evil servant, Quint, who has died and the dead governess. She suspects that the ghosts have taught the children to be wicked and want them to die. The children don't admit they see the ghosts.

The governess's ghost appears in the presence of Flora and the housekeeper, who say they can't see her. Flora becomes ill and the housekeeper takes her away from the house. In a last climactic scene, the governess feels that a terrible battle between her and Quint is in progress for the possession of Miles. When she thinks she is winning, Miles dies in her arms.

Chapter 1

The night before Christmas a group of friends are gathered. Douglas mentions a ghost story that was passed on to him by his sister's governess before she died. The story is about her job as the governess of two children whose former governess had died. The children's guardian and uncle, with whom the governess falls in love, makes her promise she will not write to him.

Chapters 2–3

The governess is welcomed by a kind housekeeper, Mrs Grose, and Flora, a beautiful girl. The boy, Miles, comes a few days later. A letter has arrived from school saying he cannot stay because he is dangerous. For some weeks everything is normal. In her walks in the park, the governess sometimes sees her employer's face, as she thinks of him. One evening she sees a man on the roof, and some time later, the man's face at a window. From her description, Mrs Grose infers it is Peter Quint, a former evil servant who is now dead.

Chapter 4

Mrs Grose tells the governess about Quint. He was very close to Miles, and a dreadful man. The cause of his death is not clear. People say he was drunk and hit his head on a stone. The governess takes Flora to the lake and sees a woman on the other side. She intuitively knows it is the ghost of Miss Jessel, the dead governess, and is sure Flora can see her. Mrs Grose tells the governess that Miss Jessel was Quint's lover, had suffered a lot, and had had to leave.

Chapter 5

Life goes back to normal, but soon the ghosts return. One night the governess finds Flora staring through the window, at somebody outside. It is Miles, who, questioned, confesses it was a plan they had made to frighten her. Fearing that something may happen to the children, the governess speaks with Mrs Grose about writing to the children's uncle, in spite of her promise.
Chapter 6
Life goes back to normal once again. Miles asks the governess when he will go back to school. He wants to know if the governess has written to his uncle and says he will write the letter himself. The governess feels Miles has a plan and decides to leave the house, but changes her mind when she sees Miss Jessel in the schoolroom. She begins to write the letter to her master. Miles insists on her finishing it, and evades her questions about his former school.

Chapter 7
The governess finishes the letter and leaves it on a table for the servants to post it. In the afternoon, while listening to the strange music that Miles is playing, she notices Flora is missing. After looking for her everywhere, she and Mrs Grose find her on the other side of the lake. The ghost of Miss Jessel is there, but only the governess seems to see her. Flora is frightened by the governess's behaviour and does not want to see her again.

Chapter 8
Flora falls ill and says dreadful things. Mrs Grose takes her away from the house. At lunch, Miles admits he has burned the governess's letter to his uncle. He wanted to know what the governess had written. The governess sees Quint's face in the window. Miles tells her that at school he 'said things' and asks if Miss Jessel is there. He can't see Peter Quint. When told his ghost is there, he screams and dies in the governess's arms.

Background and themes
The Turn of the Screw is one of James's best-known short stories. It is a very long short story; James called it a 'tale'. First published in serial form, it was much praised. The famous dramatist, Oscar Wilde wrote: 'It is a most wonderful, lurid, poisonous little tale (...) I am greatly impressed by it.'

According to his notes, James got the basic idea for The Turn of the Screw from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the most important bishop in the Church of England. The Turn of the Screw is frightening and compelling. Evil is constantly suggested but nothing evil actually happens until the last chapter. Part of the power of the story lies in the contrast between the children's innocent faces and the evil that hangs around them. They seem to be both passive victims and active perpetrators; but we are never sure. In the same way, we are never quite certain whether the governess is really seeing these things — could she just be imagining them? Anything seems possible. At the end, there appears to be a psychic battle for the possession of Miles's soul between the governess and Quint. The governess wins, but Miles dies. James seems to be suggesting that, separated from Quint, Miles must die. Still, we are unsure as to exactly what has happened. The story's genius lies in the deliberate ambiguity with which James veils his story.

Discussion activities
Chapter 1, pages 1–3
Before reading
1 Discuss: Ask students if they believe in ghosts. Have them tell any ghost story they know.

After reading
2 Discuss: Ask students: Why are the children in Essex? What is better for children, family or a quiet town? Has the idea of children's needs changed in the last hundred years?
3 Artwork: Tell students: In this chapter there is a story inside another story. Make a picture illustrating this.

Chapters 2–3, pages 4–12
Before reading
4 Discuss and Guess: Have students discuss what ghosts look like in popular belief and what they think the ghosts in this story will look like.

After reading
5 Check students' predictions in Activity 4.
6 Group work and Write: Students look at the pictures on pages 7 and 8. Tell them: Imagine Peter Quint wants to be noticed, so he makes strange things happen, for example, he makes a picture fall. What else can he do? In class or as homework, students write the episode.
7 Research and Artwork: Ask students to search the web for tips on how to make sounds. They make the sounds the governess heard on her first night in the house. Other groups guess what the sounds are.

Chapter 4, pages 13–16
Before reading
8 Group work and Discuss: Have groups make a list of the ingredients of a ghost story. The whole class discusses which they have found or expect to find in this story.

After reading
9 Group work: Speak with students about how writers create suspense by leaving open ends. They scan page 14 for 'With them all?' and 'But she couldn't stay in the house after that.' and decide what 'them all' and 'that' refer to. They tell their stories to their classmates.
The Turn of the Screw

10 **Write and Role play:** Have students write and act out the episode of Peter Quint’s death.

11 **Artwork:** Students write acrostic poems. Tell them: Write a poem for one of the characters. Start each line with one letter of his/her name. Hang the poems in the classroom.

**Chapter 5, pages 16–21**

**Before reading**

12 **Guess:** Tell students: These are lines from the coming chapter. What do you think is happening? What do you think will happen next?

‘We stood and stared silently, and that was the strangest thing. A murderer can talk, but a ghost cannot.’ (page 17)

**After reading**

13 **Check** students’ predictions in Activity 12.

14 **Group work and Role play:** Divide the class into two groups. Tell students: The governess tells Mrs Grose about the night Miles went to the garden. Write their conversation. Group A: In your conversation, Mrs Grose gets frightened. Group B: In your conversation Mrs Grose gets angry. Groups role play their dialogues.

15 **Read carefully and Discuss:**

a Discuss with students how writers can create atmospheres in stories.

b Tell them to scan pages 17 and 19 and find what the lighting was when the governess saw:

1 Peter by the window, 2 Flora’s bed was empty, 3 Flora’s innocent smile, 4 Flora standing by the window, 5 Miles in the garden

c Ask them: Is the story different if all this happens in daylight? Why/Why not?

**Chapter 6, pages 21–27**

**Before reading**

16 **Guess:** Tell students: Look at the illustration on page 25. Who are these women? Who is holding what in her hands?

**After reading**

17 **Check** students’ predictions in Activity 17.

18 **Read carefully and Discuss:** Tell students: This story is famous for its ambiguity. There is ambiguity when meanings or things people say are not clear. Have them find the sentences below. Ask them: What do these words refer to? Is it clear? What do you think?

Page 22

a ‘She’s a wonderful lady, of course.’

b ‘Does my uncle know about everything?’

c ‘He’ll use it in his plan!’

Page 24

d ‘And about all these strange things—’

e ‘You must tell him everything.’

f ‘The things that you don’t tell me.’

Ask them further: Is Miles a good boy? Does the governess really love him?

**Chapter 7, pages 28–31**

**Before reading**

20 **Discuss and Role play:** Ask students: Do you think Miles is acting strangely, doing normal things in strange ways? Create a scene where Miles does something common in a strange way. Students act their scenes out.

**After reading**

21 **Pair work:** Have pairs of students answer the questions below in the shortest possible time. The first pair to finish wins.

a The governess expects that one of Miles’s father’s brother’s servants sees something on the table. Is this true?

b The woman who thinks that the woman who was in love with a servant is near the lake is the housekeeper. Is this true?

c Three persons’ hats are mentioned. Whose?

d The governess notices that Flora has disappeared in the morning and returns to the house late at night. Is this true?

e Who asks who about their outdoor clothes?

22 **Write:** Have students imagine Flora went to the lake to throw a bottle with a note in it. They write it.

23 **Artwork:** Tell students: Which is the ‘strange and beautiful music’ that Miles plays to the governess? Bring it to class and explain why you have chosen it.

**Chapter 8, pages 31–39**

**Before reading**

24 **Artwork and Group work:** Students make a four-picture cartoon illustrating the ending they would like. They vote for the most likely, if any.

**After reading**

25 **Pair work and Role play:** Have students imagine Peter Quint and the governess can speak. They make their conversation after Miles dies.

26 **Group work and Write:** Students decide what the governess did after Miles’ death. They write the CV she sent to Douglas’s family.

**After reading the book**

27 **Debate:** Divide the class in two. Group A supports the idea that all happens in the governess’s imagination. Group B supports the idea that there are ghosts in the house. Each group tries to persuade the other.

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.
Henry James was born into a wealthy and educated family in New York on April 15, 1843. His father Henry James Sr. was a well known clergyman and a rich intellectual having connections with some of the most influential and educated people of the time. Education was of utmost importance to Henry’s family. Henry’s siblings like Henry were also accomplished individuals in their own rights in life. His brother William James was a philosopher while his sister Alice James, a diarist. Henry James was born 15 April 1843, to a wealthy family. He was born in New York, New York USA. His parents were Henry James Sr. and Mary Robertson Walsh; He had one brother William James (January 11 1842-August 26 1910) and one sister Alice James. When Henry James was a young boy he would enjoy reading the classics of English, American, German.