ILLUSIONARY TALES: THE TURN OF THE SCREW

Study Guide
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The Turn of the Screw by Henry James is a lesson in perspective. The journey we make with the Governess is one in which perspective has been tainted with abuse, fear, and guilt. She does not see the world as it is but instead as she is. In this gothic horror story, the message to be gleaned is one we can all benefit from. What are we haunted by? What are the ghosts in our past? How do we allow our fears to distort our view of others? Finally, how can we exorcise them before the innocent are destroyed?

"I listened for the possible recurrence of a sound, a child’s cry or footsteps. It made me catch my breath and turn cold.” —The Governess

Fear is one of the strongest human emotions, often recognizable by the staccato drumbeat of a startled heart or the prick of awakening goosebumps. For some, fear is an unpleasant experience that must be avoided at all costs. Others constantly seek out the adrenaline rush that comes from a good scare. Fear can pull us in, causing us to question the dichotomy between pain and pleasure and invoking an odd sense of wonder within us.

Storytelling is one of the many mediums in which fear is communicated. In early societies, fear-inducing tales were useful tools to teach children about safety and obedience. Many gothic horror stories, like The Turn of the Screw, reflect the human struggle with inner demons, self-recognition, and isolation. The Turn of the Screw is a story about the tightening of one already tense: the isolation of a young woman, marginalized by her society, left alone with the unattended cobwebs of her past. This story delves into the deeper, darker parts of humanity, the parts we are often too afraid to address.

View this story as a warning: address the shadows and the skeletons in your closet before it’s too late. Such things may come back to haunt you.
The COVID-19 restrictions on the number of people who can be together on stage gave us the opportunity to play with a design technique called Pepper’s Ghost. It is a projection technology that allows actors to appear on stage as ghostly holograms. This effect has been a staple of theaters and haunted houses since John Henry Pepper popularized it in the 1800s. Disney’s Haunted Mansion attraction is currently the world’s largest implementation of Pepper’s Ghost. Unlike previous special effects used to create early phantasmagoria, the Pepper’s Ghost effect owed its invention to mechanical engineering. Its staging required major modifications to the theaters in which it was shown.

The Turn of the Screw is BYU’s first full-length show to utilize the effect. This was made possible after the successful test-run of the effect in the three ten-minute plays comprising BYU’s Illusionary Tales series in the Fall of 2020.

At BYU, with one actor on stage and additional filmed and projected actors in various other locations, we continue to explore the exciting ways that theatre can safely be performed during a pandemic.
Gothic fiction, also called gothic horror, is a literary genre that gained popularity in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The genre was inspired by dark romanticism, a subgenre of romanticism that emphasizes human sin and fallibility. Works of gothic fiction often employ dark scenery and startling narrative devices to create atmospheres filled with mystery and fear.

The New York Library states, “Early novels in the gothic horror subgenre heavily feature discussions of morality, philosophy, and religion, with the evil villains most often acting as metaphors for some sort of human temptation the hero must overcome.” Examples of gothic fiction range from dark romances, like Horace Walpole’s 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*, to supernatural mysteries, like Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein*.

*The Turn of the Screw* explores another facet of gothic fiction: the effects of isolation and trauma on a protagonist’s psychological state. Within the production, the Governess’s experiences with past trauma, and her restricted role as a woman in Victorian society, greatly impact her sanity.

Consider This:

- What is one of your favorite stories that has been adapted many times?
- Check out this recommended list of gothic novels to see how many you’ve read. Do any of these stories seem familiar?
**HENRY JAMES**
**THE NOVELLA’S AUTHOR**

Who was Henry James?
- American-born, British-naturalized citizen
- One of the most significant writers of nineteenth-century fictional realism
- Spent much of his childhood and later adult years in Great Britain
- Heavily influenced by European culture and history
- Added new depth to his creative works by writing an unreliable narrator which allowed him to withhold information from the reader
- Plots often centered around moral questions

*The Turn of the Screw* was written during the second phase of James’ writing which was characterized by plays and short stories. Though the novella received criticism for violating the Victorian presumption of childhood innocence, it was recognized as one of the most chilling ghost stories of its time.

Since its publication in 1898, *The Turn of the Screw* has undergone numerous adaptations for the stage, film, literature, and television. *The Turning* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* are some of the most recent film/television adaptations of this novella.

Consider This:
- Have you seen any adaptations of *The Turn of The Screw*?
- Do you have a favorite story that you would like to see adapted for the stage or screen?
As with many artistic endeavors, the driving force behind BYU’s retelling of *The Turn of the Screw* was the desire to create. This production was adapted by David Morgan and a team of students (Sten Shearer, Mikah Vaclaw, Clara Wright, and Dylan Wright) in a “special projects” class held January-March of 2020.

After reading the book over winter break, the team came back to campus ready to devise. Their focus was the eerily intriguing story of a young governess haunted by trauma and mental turmoil, grappling with societal and religious pressures.

According to members of the team, students were assigned to read the same chapter of *The Turn of the Screw* for homework and come to class with their own interpretation of the chapter in scene form. The team would then read and discuss each student’s devised scene. After workshopping the scenes, David Morgan would meld the most effective elements from each script into a single, specific scene.

The team focused on the writing process before adding other storytelling devices like sound and movement. For student Clara Wright, the devising process also extended to music. “I didn’t ever think about what scene I was writing for, but Dave told me what tone he was looking for in a piece of music and then I experimented until I found something I liked by layering on different sounds I could make on my violin,” she said.

Though the global pandemic prevented members of the original devising team from performing, their valuable contributions to the piece live on through the further-adapted retelling in April 2021.

• Click [here](#) for the full interviews with the student devisers.
• Click [here](#) to listen to Clara’s compositions.
During the play, the Governess practices self-mortification with a cilice as she prepares for church attendance. A cilice (pronounced SILL-iss) is a barbed metal/chainmail belt worn around the thigh of devout followers of religious sects. This metal garter belt has sharp prongs designed to dig into the leg with every move. Self-mortification serves as both a reminder of Christ’s suffering and a punishment for “sins of the flesh.”

Cilices and other tools, such as hairshirts, have been implemented since Old Testament times to aid in the “mortification of the flesh”. To early saints, the human body, with all its functions, needs, and cravings, was inherently sinful. Thus, causing the body pain or humiliation was considered holy. This discomfort serves as both an act of penitence and a constant reminder of faith so as to better avoid the temptation to sin.

Religious sects, such as Opus Dei, continue to implement tools of self-mortification, though not to such an extreme extent, explored most notably in The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown.

Consider This:

• Do you think the human body is inherently sinful? Why or why not?
• How else do Christians remind themselves of Christ’s Atonement?
About the Victorian Era

The Victorian era (1837-1914) was a time of progress characterized by the Industrial Revolution and social shift towards romanticism. Though Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain, aristocratic men dominated the class-based society which favored upper and middle classes.

Morality

Victorians believed in the “wholeness” of reality cultivated by religious belief, moral obligations, and established social habits. At the time, a pure and simple life consisted of stifling individuality, attending church, and excessive worrying about the state of one’s salvation. Such belief brought stability to the post-Revolutionary society.

Separate Spheres

The characters in *The Turn of the Screw* would have lived by the Victorian doctrine of “separate spheres.” This stated that men and women were different and meant for different things: men were physically strong, while women were inherently weak.
Chastity

Victorians experienced a prudish refusal to admit the existence of sex outside of marriage. According to that double standard, men wanted and needed sex, and women were free of sexual desire and submitted to sex only to please their husbands. A Victorian woman was only worth as much as her chastity. The Governess would have been indoctrinated with this belief since childhood by her father, a parson.

Religion

A parson is a clergyman responsible for a small area, typically a parish. The term was formerly used in the Anglican Church. In the Victorian era, there was a strong religious drive for higher moral standards. Though most Victorians were Christians, religious culture was competitive. Though the Anglican Church dominated the religious landscape, there were many active participants in non-Anglican religions, including Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Jewish denominations.

Von Willebrand’s Disease

The character Miles suffers from Von Willebrand’s disease, which is similar to hemophilia in that the body’s blood does not clot properly. The disease is characterized by easy bruising and frequent nose-bleeds. In more serious cases, after getting cut, one can experience heavy, hard-to-stop bleeding lasting more than five minutes.

Consider This:

• What are some Victorian-era beliefs that still exist in society today?
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