



# Jumpstart into the Play

## 5 insights you want to know about *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

### 1. Ghosts and the 19th Century

In his preface to the 1908 edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, James reveals the source for the story:

The germ of the story has been a half-remembered anecdote told to him by the archbishop of Canterbury: a story of small children haunted by the ghosts of a pair of servants who wish them ill.  
— *James vii*

Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* at a time when there was a prevalent fondness for ghost stories. Nineteenth century audiences were fascinated by macabre tales and it was the fashion of the day to tell frightening stories on Christmas Eve. The world of ghosts were considered by many to be real, dangerous and a scientifically-provable experience.

It turns out that James' family was quite involved in "spiritual phenomena." His father Henry James Sr. was a member of the Society for Psychical Research and his brother William was president of the society and devoted a great deal of time into research on the subject.

### 2. Is It All in Your Head?

When Jeffrey Hatcher set out to adapt *The Turn of the Screw*, he had three specific goals in mind:

1. To create a dramatic piece that was true to the essence of Henry James' story and themes.
2. To preserve the ambiguity of the story's point-of-view.
3. To provide an opportunity for two bravura performances.

Through wonderfully theatrical words and two imaginative performers, a whole household estate gets created on a bare stage. This allows for a leap in the imagination. It also makes it easier to entertain the possibility of ghosts, which leads to one of James' main themes: What is real and what is imagined?

### 3. Is It Really About the Ghosts?

The plot of *The Turn of the Screw* revolves around the psychological state of the governess who apparently sees ghosts, but only when she is alone or preoccupied by fantasies. After she first meets her employer, she is attracted to him and becomes a bit infatuated. She respects his wishes to not be disturbed, but often amuses herself that he might show up just to please her. It is at these moments when the ghosts appear to her.

Freud would have said that the governess is sexually repressed and the ghosts are figments of her overly aroused imagination. Other critics believe that Henry James was writing about his own repressed homosexual feelings at a time when it would have been scandalous to express such emotions. Although there's no definitive answer, the metaphor adds an intriguing layer to the tale of horror.

### 4. Homages to a Horror Classic

For such a slim novella, *The Turn of the Screw* has generated a great deal of fascination over the years. In 1954 Benjamin Britten wrote an opera based on the tale. The story has been filmed numerous times with the most famous adaptation being *The Innocents*, co-written by Truman Capote and starring Deborah Kerr.

In her book *The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly* author Joyce Carol Oates created a re-telling of the novel from the point of view of the ghosts. Several television adaptations inspired by the novel have aired (most recently a British version in 1999 with Jodhi May and Colin Firth) and even the television series *Lost* featured a glimpse of the book at a key plot moment in the second season of the show.

### 5. Who Was Henry James?

An American-born British writer, Henry James is considered one of the masters of the novel and novella form. He is primarily known for his series of novels (*Daisy Miller*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Bostonians*, *The Ambassadors*) exploring the encounter of America with Europe through the personal experiences of his characters, often American's living abroad.

James' imaginative use of point of view, interior monologue, and unreliable narrators expanded the form and brought increased interest in realistic fiction. Highly prolific, he published articles, books of travel writing, biography, criticism, essays, and plays. James' most famous work is *The Turn of the Screw* and it was written three years after the suicide of a close friend and five years after his sister Alice's death. James became a British citizen in 1915 and died shortly thereafter in London.

