

The Turn of the Screw Synopsis

ACT I

Prologue

In an abandoned English countryside mansion named Bly, a young man finds a diary. It was written long ago by a young Governess who served there taking care of two children. After their parents' death the Governess was hired by their uncle and guardian in London. A previous Governess had already left the position and, too busy to care for the children himself, the guardian puts her in charge and asks that she follow three rules: never to write to him, never to ask about the family's history, and never to abandon the children. Flattered by the offer and captivated by the guardian's charm, the Governess accepts.

The Journey

The Governess describes her nervous excitement on her journey from London to Bly. Will the children like her? How will the housekeeper Mrs. Grose welcome her? Will she succeed in the job and be able to impress their guardian?

The Welcome

The children, Miles and Flora, anxiously await the arrival of the new Governess. Mrs. Grose calms them down just as the Governess arrives. The Governess' worries are quickly relieved when she is welcomed warmly by everybody. Bly is now her home.

The Letter

Mrs. Grose delivers a letter that has arrived from Miles' school. He has been expelled for causing "an injury to his friends." The Governess and Mrs. Grose cannot make sense of this since they have only experienced the boy as kind and angelic. Encouraged by Mrs. Grose, the Governess decides to ignore the letter and not confront Miles.

The Tower

The Governess reflects on how she is starting to feel comfortable in her new position. Her first fears when she arrived, when she worried about the letter from school and when she heard footsteps outside her door, have vanished. If only their guardian could see how well she is doing! All of a sudden she sees him looking down at her from the house, but quickly realizes it is not he at all but a curious stranger whom she doesn't know.

The Window

A few days later the Governess sees the unknown stranger again, now looking at her through the dining room window. The Governess describes the stranger to Mrs. Grose and asks whether she might know him. Mrs. Grose tells the Governess about Peter Quint, the former valet at Bly. She implies that Quint may have been a pedophile who preyed on Miles. Quint had also had a sexual relationship with Miss Jessel, the previous governess who eventually left and later died. Shortly thereafter,

Quint died as well under mysterious circumstances. Shocked and frightened, the Governess rededicates herself to protecting the children.

The Lesson

The Governess is working with Flora and Miles on their schooling. When Miles is asked about his Latin vocabulary he enters into a trance-like state and sings a song, "Malo" (Latin for bad).

The Lake

A few days later the Governess sits by a lake with Flora, who is playing with her doll. The Governess suddenly sees a strange woman who seems to be watching Flora. Horrified, she realizes the woman is the ghost of Miss Jessel and hurries Flora home to safety.

At Night

A few days later the Governess wakes in the middle of the night to find Flora and Miles not in their beds. Together with Mrs. Grose she finds the children, who appear to have sleep-walked. When she asks Miles what has happened, he answers her: "See, I am bad."

-Intermission-

ACT II

Still at the mansion, the young man who found the Governess' diary continues reading, increasingly mesmerized by her story...

Colloquy and Soliloquy

What had happened between the former valet Quint and the previous Governess Miss Jessel?

What may have prompted their spirits to come back and haunt the children?

The Governess feels lost in a labyrinth of evil.

The Bells

On their way to church the children play in a graveyard. While Mrs. Grose can't see anything abnormal in their behavior, the Governess believes the children are possessed by Quint and Miss Jessel. Frightened, Mrs. Grose suggests it may be time to contact their guardian. At first the Governess declines, recalling her employer's admonitions. But when Miles mentions the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel, the Governess realizes things are more dire than they seem. She resolves to leave Bly immediately.

Miss Jessel

As the Governess is frantically packing her belongings, Miss Jessel's ghost enters the room. The Governess confronts the spirit, which then vanishes. Realizing the children need her more than ever, the Governess decides to stay and protect them

but she feels she can't do it alone. With a deep sense of failure she decides to write to their guardian in London.

The Bedroom

That same evening the Governess finds Miles in his room and tells him she has written to their guardian. When she presses him to tell her why he was expelled from school and what happened at Bly before she arrived, the boy vehemently refuses and screams out as a candle extinguishes. He insists it was he who blew it out. Confused, the Governess exits leaving the letter she has written on the desk. Miles takes it.

The Piano

The next morning, Miles plays the piano for everyone. The Governess informs Mrs. Grose that she has written to their guardian. Distracted by Miles' exquisite performance, the Governess doesn't notice that Flora sneaks out of the house. Together with Mrs. Grose she runs after her.

Flora

They find Flora at the nearby lake. All of a sudden the Governess sees Miss Jessel but, when she points her out, neither Mrs. Grose nor Flora are able to see the appearance. Flora violently expresses her wrath against the Governess, who pressures the girl to admit that she knows about the ghosts. Mrs. Grose, convinced the Governess has gone too far, takes Flora home. Defeated and betrayed, the Governess stays behind.

Miles

The next morning Mrs. Grose informs the Governess that Flora has told her unimaginable things and that she will take her away from Bly. She also tells her the letter to their guardian was never mailed and that Miles must have taken it. The Governess decides to stay behind with Miles. When she questions him about the letter he first denies taking it but finally admits to it. Miles is increasingly distressed as the Governess urges him to admit he is aware of the ghosts. In a desperate attempt to make Miles face his demons, the Governess forces Miles to confront what possesses him. Miles finally screams out the name of Peter Quint. Triumphant, the Governess believes Miles to be saved.