

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

Music by Benjamin Britten
Libretto by Myfanwy Piper after the story by Henry James

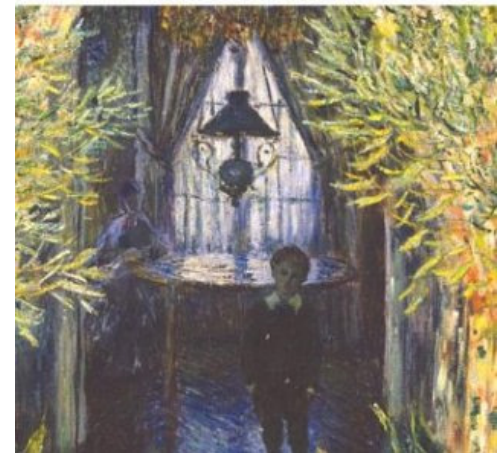
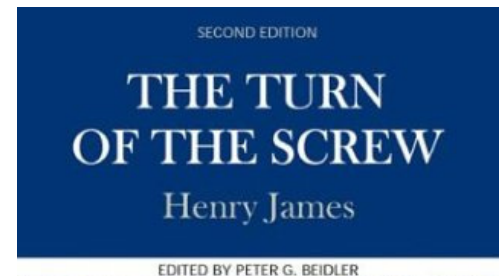
The Turn of the Screw premiered at La Fenice in Venice on September 14, 1954

Act I "It is a curious story....written in faded ink...a woman's hand"

In the prologue, a narrator begins the story: a woman agrees to become the new governess to two orphaned children in the country. But there was to be one condition: she must never write or contact their busy young uncle and guardian. "... to do everything...to be silent...to do her best." She accepts. On her way to her new position she has misgivings and doubts, but "No, I've said I will do it and for him I will."

At Bly, the country house, Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, and the children, Miles and Flora, eagerly await the Governess and when she arrives they excitedly show her around. The Governess feels all will be well, "for Bly is now my home." A letter arrives from Miles's school - he has been expelled - "an injury to his friends." The Governess and Mrs. Grose reject the implications as nonsense, a lie, and they decide to say nothing about it to Miles.

As the Governess strolls through the grounds on a beautiful summer evening, she suddenly catches a glimpse of a man in one of the towers of the house. For a moment she thinks it is the guardian but then wonders who it can be. Later she sees the same figure outside a window, but when she runs out to accost him, he has disappeared. As she describes him to Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper recognizes him as Peter Quint, the master's former valet. "Quint was free with everyone...with little master Miles...with lovely Miss Jessel, governess to those pets." Mrs. Grose goes on to say that Miss Jessel went away "away to die." And then, to the Governess's horror, she tells her that Quint died also. The Governess senses that Quint has "returned" to look for Miles and she must protect him. The situation becomes more ominous during a Latin lesson when Miles suddenly sings an enigmatic haunting song, "Malo...Malo." The Governess sees Miss Jessel standing on the far side of the lake and realizes that Flora has seen her too. Late one night, Quint and Miss Jessel seductively call to the children and they answer, but when interrupted by the Governess and Mrs. Grose, the ghosts disappear. Miles challenges the Governess, "You see, I am bad. I am bad, aren't I?"



Act II "The ceremony of innocence is drowned"

Quint and Miss Jessel reproach each other: "Betrayed...self-deceiver" and reveal their desperate desires for "obedience...a soul to share my woe." The Governess is tortured in turn by the evil she feels and sees around her. "Lost in my labyrinth, I see no truth...Oh

innocence you have corrupted me." One Sunday morning, the Governess realizes that the children are not singing a hymn, but "are talking horrors." Mrs. Grose begs her to write to their guardian. The Governess refuses. But when Miles insinuatingly confronts her and mentions the "others" she decides she must go "away from fears, away from this poisoned place."

In the schoolroom the Governess encounters Miss Jessel who is "waiting...hovering...ready for the child." The Governess realizes that she cannot desert the children, but she must write to their uncle. She tells Miles that she has done so, but Quint calls to him again and induces Miles to steal the letter. Miles plays the piano to distract Mrs. Grose and the Governess as Flora steals away to Miss Jessel. They find her by the lake and Flora refuses to admit Miss Jessel's presence and violently rejects her new Governess. "Hateful, cruel...nasty...horrible." After a night in which Flora has spoken "things I never knew, nor hope to know or dare mention," Mrs. Grose decides to take Flora away. Left alone, the Governess makes Miles admit he took the letter. Quint appears and she begs Miles to admit his presence. "Say it...say it...only say the name and he will go forever." Miles shrieks out "Peter Quint, you devil" and runs into the Governess' arms. Quint slowly disappears calling out "Ah Miles, we have failed." The Governess holds Miles until at last she realizes he is dead.