



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1984 Volume IV: The Oral Tradition

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## **Visions for Students: A Study of British Ghost Stories**

Curriculum Unit 84.04.08  
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There is a growing number of young people for whom experience remains limited. Within this group superficiality is rampant, pride nonexistent, and depression palpable. These students are adamant nonreaders. They try our patience, make us feel inadequate, and test (to the limits) our abilities as teachers. I believe that reading leads to refinement of understanding and that to freedom of thought. Ultimately reading hints at personal possibilities. Nonreaders must, once again, be encouraged to read. This unit is conceived with these students in mind. I hope that the topic itself, the ghost story, will provide a “hook” or a successful way of introducing literature and reading to my students.

The ghost story should be orally introduced to students. A suitable setting or ambiance should be created for the ghost-story telling experience in order to promote student reaction. If student passivity can be overcome, curiosity and interest will evolve. It seems to me that the topic of ghosts and ghost stories is inherently interesting to children and, for that matter, to adults. There are few of us who have not heard ghost stories told at one time or another. We reacted with fear, wonder, or skepticism, but we reacted nonetheless. I hope that this introductory plan will kick off discussion with regard to the ghost story’s form, theme(s), and its reactive qualities. Story suggestions for this first oral reading can be found in the student bibliography.

The main body of this unit will consist of three sections. These sections will build on one another; that is, students will be eased into more sophisticated reading/thinking experiences as the unit progresses.

### **SECTION ONE**

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Section One will consider ghost legends which are associated with the city of London. This portion of the unit will enable me to share some of my travel experiences (summer, 1984) with my students. I plan to show slides of various sites associated with ghostly legends. These legends are interesting historically as well as culturally. They include legends of the thirteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. It seems to me that a simultaneous visual and reading (actually listening) experience will insure student interest in the tales themselves as well as in the historical and cultural perspectives these tales embody. The visual component will “ground” students and/or give them a tangible sense of a different culture.

The teacher should be prepared to provide historical background and answer questions as they arise during

the course of this presentation. I hope that students' understanding of a different time in a different place will be strengthened; this will generally broaden their awareness. However, the slide show must be interesting for students. The mood of the presentation must not be didactic; it is important that students, not teacher, raise questions during this introductory section of the unit.

It may be appropriate following the slide show to discuss the general topic of ghost stories with students. They may wish to comment on the latest versions (movies). They might note the longevity of the ghost story and "wonder why."

## **LONDON GHOST STORIES**

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### **I. Anne Boleyn/Tower of London**

Anne Boleyn is said to have spent her last night in the Queen's House. There she may have written to the King proclaiming her innocence and begging for mercy for the five men accused with her. (Some say the note was a forgery written later to clear Anne of adultery, for her daughter was to become heir to the throne.)

In 1864, a sentry claimed to have seen the ghost of Anne Boleyn coming from the Queen's House. Two others corroborated his story. For several years afterwards, sentries claimed to see not only the ghost, but the shadow of an axe as well.

### **II. The Jews and the London Bridge**

In 1290, Edward expelled the Jews from England. Many were robbed and killed on boats provided for them. Legend has it that one group saved enough money to charter a vessel of its own. They were tricked by the captain, however, and were drowned in the Thames. Some say the captain was regarded by the King. Others say that he was duly hanged. There are some people, even today, who feel that the turbulence of the Thames, especially near the London Bridge, is that of the ghosts of the Jews venting their ceaseless rage.

### **III. The Ghost of Pond Square**

In 1626, Sir Francis Bacon was driving towards Highgate when it occurred to him that the human body might be preserved with snow. Anxious to test his hypothesis, he bought a hen from a resident, had it killed and drawn, and then filled it with snow.

Unfortunately, Bacon soon became ill and was lodged in Highgate. He never recovered from his illness which ironically was said to have been caused by cold weather. He died a few days later.

Legend has it that the hen has haunted Pond Square ever since in protest of having been killed for use in a refrigeration experiment.

### **IV. Scratching Fanny of Cock Lane**

A widower, Kent, and his sister-in-law, Fanny, took up lodging with a Mr. Parsons in 1760. They could not marry, for the law prohibited it. Fanny became Kent's mistress and bequeathed her money to him. Soon after this, she heard strange tapping noises which she took to be warnings from her dead sister. Fanny felt her own death was imminent. Parsons' small daughter, Elizabeth, was said to have heard these tappings as well.

Fanny contracted smallpox and died shortly thereafter. Another sister attended the funeral but was not allowed to view the body.

The child continued to hear the tapping noises. Parsons claimed to be in communication with the ghost of Fanny and was said to have learned that she had died of arsenical poisoning.

News of the ghostly noises spread throughout the city. Many came to hear the tappings, including such notables as Dr. Johnson, Horace Walpole, and the Duke of York. These people were disappointed, however, and the case was eventually seen as fraud. Parsons was sentenced to the pillory three times, and his wife was imprisoned.

Some years later, a boy pointed out Fanny's coffin to Wykeham Archer who was drawing in the crypt of St. John's. Archer removed the lid and found the condition of the body to be commensurate with a case of arsenical poisoning.

## **V. The Ghost of Berkeley Square**

In the middle of the nineteenth century, No. 50 Berkeley Square became empty, and neighbors began to hear strange noises emanating from the house. Eventually, people came to believe that the house was haunted by a malignant spirit. One theory maintained that the ghost was that of a violently insane member of an aristocratic family who had been locked in a room and fed through a slot in the door.

A young baronet decided he would spend the night in No. 50 to see what would happen. He was to ring a bell twice if trouble ensued. At one point during the night, his friends heard the bell ring once; they rushed into the house only to find the young man dead with a terrible look of horror on his face.

The following are topics which the teacher may wish to research/review prior to presenting the slide show.

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|--|------------------------------|
| I. Anne Boleyn   |                              |
| A.   | The reign of Henry           |
| B.   | The Anglican Church          |
| II. Jews/London Bridge   |                              |
| A.   | Edward's reign               |
| B.   | History of Jews in England   |
| III. The Ghost of Pond Square  |                              |
| A.   | Sir Francis Bacon            |
| B.   | Medicine in the 17th century |
| IV. Scratching Fanny of Cock Lane  |                              |
| A.   | 18th century British law     |
| B.   | Horace Walpole, Dr. Johnson  |
| V. The Ghost of Berkeley Square/treatment of mental disorders—then and now |                              |

## SECTION TWO

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The second section of this unit is composed of two parts. Initially, short, oral ghost stories are considered. A transition is then made from oral works to a published ghost story. It is my hope that students will recognize folk story motifs in the published work, and that this recognition will enable them to begin to respond to a more complex piece of writing. Section II, in essence, seeks to prepare students for a truly sophisticated reading/thinking experience. (Part III *The Turn of the Screw* .)

An examination of the short ghost stories of the British oral tradition demands consideration of recurrent motifs. These motifs seem to reflect the fears, thoughts, and attitudes of those who told and heard these stories. For that matter, such motifs, dealing as they do in areas of taboo, have always and most probably will always continue to exert their influence on literature. Why has *Hamlet* endured? Isn't it probable that its underlying terror, the unnatural act of familial murder, enables the audience to look obliquely at what is most terrifying? Perhaps such a glimpse enables us to cope more adequately with the known and unknown horrors of our world.

Students should be encouraged to voice the motifs of the short stories provided here. "What societal problems are raised in these stories?" is certainly an appropriate question to ask students. "Why are they raised?" gets closer to the point. Students will probably not wish to dwell on such a question but will quickly note that justice plays a strong role in both stories. Thus even the smallest of stories has purpose, meaning, and a reactive quality.

I have provided the teacher with summaries of two short ghost stories below, but strongly suggest that the original stories be used in the classroom.

### Summaries: Short Ghost Stories

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"The Son Murdered by his Parents" (Motifs: justice/ proper burial, unnatural act of familial murder)

Two old people lived in a dilapidated house. They could no longer stay in the house for it was filled with strange noises at night, and the parson could not expel the ghost. Some years prior, their only son had gone to seek his fortune in Australia.

One day an old woman offered to sit up all night and confront the ghost. It appeared at first in the shape of a monstrous pig. When she asked it to reappear in its natural form, it complied.

A young man stood before her and stated that he was the ghost of the son of the owners of the house. He had come back from Australia to find that his parents did not recognize him. Wishing to carry off a joke, he decided not to tell them right away of his identity. As his parents were poor and desperate, they decided to kill their "lodger" for his gold and bury him behind the house.

The ghost finally explained that he was haunting the house because he desired burial in consecrated ground. The old woman agreed to see to this, and the ghost was seen no more.

"Little Rosy" (Motifs: justice/wicked stepmother punished)

Rosy, the step-daughter of a good-for-nothing and wicked woman, was killed one day doing her stepmother's work. The top of a chest fell upon her, severing her head. The evil stepmother cut up the body and served it in a pie to Rosy's father and sisters.

Rosy, transformed into a ghostly bird, returned to the family and sang a song which revealed the stepmother's doings. The father and sisters ran from the house in horror, leaving the stepmother alone. The neighbors, thereafter, would have nothing to do with her and she died "lonesome".

## Lesson Plans: Section II, Part I.

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The oral short ghost story exhibits the structure inherent in the narrative tradition. At this point in the unit, students will be encouraged to dabble in creative writing endeavors based on what they've learned through the ghost story models. Such an activity can only bridge the gap between student imagination and the arts. One hopes that this will encourage students to begin to put away their prejudices toward the written word.

The art of story-telling should be considered at this point as well. Time spent on student presentations of ghost stories may reinforce the understanding of story-structure as well as provide a communicative activity for students.

### Writing Plan for Short Ghost Stories (theme: justice)

1. Provide a chart of a typical plot outline  
(wrongdoing/murder—ghostly appearance—justice)
2. Note details to be filled in
  - a. description of principal characters before "crime"
  - b. motivation for crime
  - c. behavior of ghost
  - d. denouements outcome of ghostly appearance/behavior
  - e. change in perpetrator of crime?(Students must provide notes for a through e above.)
3. Write rough draft: using charts and notes paying special attention to chronology in writing
4. Write second draft: possibly involving changes in organization and/or the deletion or addition of details  
(Final results presumably a coherent piece of writing illustrative of a single theme.)

#### Tips for Oral Readings

1. Promote reading of favorite story. Student choice is a must.
2. Allow time for practice reading. Discuss/practices
  - a. voice modulation
  - b. dramatic gesture

Discuss/practice dialectical reading

3. Allow student manipulation of audience through setting

- a. seating arrangement
- b. lighting

The second portion of this section of the unit begins the transition from oral folk tales to ghost literature. It seems to me that the short tales mentioned previously, though involved with dark or unknowable questions, are for the most part comforting. In many cases, justice prevails. More importantly, acceptance of the unknowable seems to have been/ be the usual response to such stories. On the other hand, ghost stories conceived by individuals for publication have an entirely different feel. They are indeed metaphors for the dark diabolical side of life which haunt reader and author alike.

It is interesting to note, as M.R. James points out in the introduction of *Ghosts and Marvels*, that ghost stories appear to be popular at times just prior to upheaval. During the years leading to World War I, for example, such tales were very much in evidence. "The tale of terror was symptomatic of a cultural malaise which some historians view as a premonition of the war." <sup>1</sup> Jack Sullivan in *Elegant Nightmares* notes: "The recent American interest in all things occult and horrible may possibly grow out of a similar fetish for disaster occasioned initially by the escalation of Vietnam and Watergate: when things appear to be falling apart, supernatural horror stories provide their authors and readers with a masochistic, but relatively safe, means of fantasizing the worst." <sup>2</sup>

Sullivan also believes that the ghost story exemplifies trends of modern literature. So authors such as Conrad, Woolf, Lawrence, and Joyce deal with darkness and irrationality, chaos, and visions. <sup>3</sup> It is also interesting to learn that such notables as Yeats, Eliot, Kipling, Hardy, etc. at various points in time became involved with supernatural tales. But, all of this is an aside. The point is, such work (ghost stories) should be viewed as complex and serious.

Dorothy Sayers feels such literature has a power in and of itself. Unlike detective fiction, it provides no answers. It forever poses questions which cannot be answered. <sup>4</sup> For modern man, whose environment at times appears to be beyond control, the unanswerable questions are haunting, and acceptance of the unknowable may be fleeting.

Students should be introduced to published ghost stories soon after studying the short oral tales. They will initially be able to discern differences between the two. They will note, for example, that characters are far more carefully delineated in these works. They may also articulate a more complex response to the published stories. The teacher may wish to broach the subject of metaphorical horror at this point. An example of a published work follows in summary form:

**"Calling Miss Marker" by Joy Burnett**

Plot Summary: A bare-bones summary of this ghost story is reminiscent of those previously mentioned tales in the oral tradition. Motifs: justice/infanticide.

A woman who lived alone was time and again plagued by doorbell ringing in the middle of the night. The bell would ring at 4:12 A.M. She would answer the door only to find no one was there. The woman became increasingly upset and, at times, was close to hysteria.

During the course of the story, the reader learns that the woman was afraid of doctors for “they can deduce from the past”, and was equally reluctant to involve the police in anyway.

Eventually the woman recalled a night some years prior when she was awake at 4:12 A.M. In a state of great trepidation, she had brought a small bundle outside and buried it quite deep in the garden.

The remembrance of this incident mysteriously resulted in the woman’s death. She was found lying in the hallway. Around the entrance were cloven hoof prints in patches of mud.

*Criticism:*

“Calling Miss Marker” is ambiguous, and it is this ambiguity which makes it powerful, if not horrific. The ambiguity lies not in the final sentence of the story which poses the question: Did the devil kill the woman? Miss Marker, or was it the work of her own conscience? Ambiguity is present in the story’s first word “you”. The story is told from the second person point of view. It is unclear who the audience is meant to be. Is it Miss Marker? Is it solely the reader?

The voice of the narrator is indeterminate. It is someone who knows everything about Miss Marker’s thoughts, remembrances and reactions. Yet, it is not an omniscient narrator in the usual sense.

Who is the narrator? Is it the ghost of the dead infant? Is the bundle buried in the garden, in fact, the body of a dead child? Ambiguity is added to ambiguity. Is Miss Marker insane? Is Miss Marker the narrator, looking schizophrenically at her own story?

The story was written in 1975. Is this the dream of a woman in reaction to a scheduled abortion? Is this a dream where dreamer can take two roles; one who has committed a crime-and one who can see the outcome of such a crime?

Question leads to question. Answers are not forthcoming, and the questions get stranger and stranger. Is this story an allegory of nonbelief? Is this a picture of an immoral world where there is little reality or framework to hold on to? It is a horrific story for its unanswerable questions. It is one that reminds us of inner and outer worlds, of illusion/reality, and of chaos.

## **Lesson Plans: Section II, Part II.**

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### **Questions: Published Ghost Story**

The questions below are presented in three parts. It is necessary to review the basic plot of the story with students before going on to more complex ideas. The discussion questions are meant to address the notion of ambiguity. The level III assignment is meant to underscore the connection between oral and published works.

#### *Level I Comprehension*

1. What upset Miss Marker?
2. What is the significance of the time, 4:12 A.M?

3. What is the denouement of the story?
4. What do cloven hoofs indicate?

### *Level II Discussion*

1. What might have been contained in the small bundle that Miss Marker buried?
2. From what point of view is this story told?
3. Who is the narrator?
4. Who is the intended audience?
5. Is this a ghost story?
6. What was the author's intent in writing this story?

### *Level III Comparison*

Compare/contrast this story with the two oral works previously discussed.

## **SECTION THREE: *THE TURN OF THE SCREW***

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Readers of this unit may wonder at the outset why a project which concerns itself with British ghost stories culminates in a study of one of James' novels. It is amusing to note that both British and American scholars claim James as their own. During my undergraduate years, I noted that his major works were included in American literature course syllabi. This summer I learned that professors at the University of London see James as part of a continuum of the developing twentieth century English literature. Curious, perhaps, but easily explained away. Though James was born in the United States, and at an early age was introduced to such friends of his father as Hawthorne and Emerson, he received much of his education abroad and finally became a naturalized citizen of England. Many of his novels are set in England, as is *The Turn of the Screw*. Certainly the novel has an English "feel". However, the aforementioned is probably of interest only to me, and really is just as aside. I chose *The Turn of the Screw* because it is a suitable last step in this "introduction to reading" project which I hope will enable students to see literature as something approachable and worthwhile.

The first section of this unit attempted to engage students in the approachable, yet as it turns out, not simplistic oral tradition. The second section pointed out that the universal concerns or themes inherent in the oral ghost story are eventually developed through the particular genius of an individual writer. Individual is the key word here. With the individual's touch comes a story of complexity, ambiguity, or mystery, if you will. It is precisely at this moment that things change. Suddenly interpretation is required. One also learns that interpretations may be various and dissimilar. Perhaps the validity of individual interpretation needs to be pointed out to students. It seems to me that what makes literature interesting is its demand for reaction and analysis. Presumably, reaction and analysis teach the reader something about the author, the world, and most important, himself.



So, how do we get students to play at this game? I mean this literally. Analysis can and perhaps should be viewed as a game or a puzzle whose reward is ultimately a sense of understanding or control of a situation. This leads me to think about developing some “warm-up” exercises for students which would in some way honestly portray this process and reasons for this process. But I will include this later as I am getting too far away from *The Turn of the Screw* at this point.

*The Turn of the Screw* is the perfect culmination for this unit, for its interpretations are many and are extremely varied. Cases can be (and have been) made for all. What is most interesting from my point of view, after reading much criticism, is that while I can intellectually see the merit of nearly all of the interpretations, there is only one which I believe to be true. This colors my reading of the story as well as my view of its author. More importantly, it tells me something about myself for it fits in with my present view of the world. Yet, there’s a paradox at work here. In a sense, with my interpretation firmly intact, with my feeling being “this is the way things are”, I have resurrected a reaction that the old oral story sought to instill in its listeners. However, it should be noted here that the beauty of this “many-interpretations” story is that my interpretation is simply mine. My students may adopt entirely different views and should be encouraged to see the story as they see it.

It would perhaps be most useful at this point to provide teachers with a brief synopsis of the story as well as various interpretations of it as espoused by others. Ideas for teaching *The Turn of the Screw* will follow.

## Plot Summary:

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The novel opens on a Christmas Eve when a group of people are gathered to hear ghost stories. A man named Douglas recalls a particular horrifying story having to do with two children. He says he must find the manuscript entrusted to him by the governess of his sister’s children in order to tell the story. As it turns out, the story is the governess’ story; it describes her first employment experience. It seemed she was to have full responsibility for two children, Miles and Flora, and was not to trouble her employer, their uncle, with any problems which might arise.

Her story opens with her arrival at Bly, the country home of the children. There she is greeted by the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, who describes the children as perfect and beautiful. The governess grows very fond of the children. She soon learns that Miles has been expelled from school, but initially assumes this to be unimportant.

The story continues, and the governess appears to grow even fonder of the children. At one point she secretly wishes that her employer, with whom it seems she is infatuated, could see how well she is handling her responsibility. It is at this point that she notices a strange man standing on a tower. She later sees him again this time peering through a dining room window, and decides to discuss the event with Mrs. Grose. The conversation leads both women to conclude that the man was the ghost of Peter Quint, a manservant who had been dead for about a year.

It is not long before the governess encounters yet another ghost. This spirit, it turns out, is the ghost of Miss Jessel, a former governess to the children, who too had been dead for a year. Mrs. Grose informs the governess that Jessel and Quint had both been “too familiar” with the children, and were “intimate” with one another.

The governess concludes that these ghosts are trying to communicate with the children, and seeks to find out whether the children are indeed aware of them. She soon decides that they are, for one night she finds Flora peering out a window and Miles standing outside looking at something. It is at this point that the governess vows to protect the children from the evil forces.

The governess soon is confronted once more with the ghost of Miss Jessel. She tells Mrs. Grose that the former governess is tormented and wishes to control Flora. At this point the governess decides that, despite her employer's orders, she will inform him of the visitations and of the danger she feels her charges to be in.

Later that day the governess again sees the ghost of Miss Jessel, and asks Flora to identify her. Flora becomes hysterical, refuses to identify Jessel, and begs Mrs. Grose to take her away from the governess. The housekeeper claims not see Miss Jessel and whisks the child away.

The next day the housekeeper tells the governess that Flora has used terrible language. She feels the child has been in contact with evil, and decides to take her away to London. It also comes out that the letter written to the children's uncle was never posted.

The governess remains at Bly with Miles. She tries to talk with him about school and about Quint. That evening Quint appears. The governess forces the boy to look at him. As a result of being "dispossessed" the boy's heart fails and he dies.

#### *Criticism:*

Criticism of *The Turn of the Screw*, as mentioned previously, is vast and diverse. The novel seems to have captured the imaginations of several generations of critics; indeed, reactions have been published at nearly every decade of the twentieth century. The debate has been intense, and retractions have even been written. New ways of looking at this novel seem to be never-ending.

It is impossible to do any of these treatises justice in a paper of this length. I can only give rather sketchy versions of various critics' positions; I suggest that the teacher refer to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Turn of the Screw* or to various books and articles mentioned in the teacher bibliography of this unit to gain a clear or complete picture of this phenomenon.

#### **The Critics:**

##### *Harold C. Goddard—"A Pre-Freudian Reading of The Turn of the Screw"*

Goddard contends that the governess is insane even though the existence of the ghosts is left open; "Whether the insane man creates his hallucinations or whether insanity is precisely the power to perceive objective existences of another order . . . no open-minded person can possibly pretend to say." \*This critic points out that the governess initiates the appearances of the ghosts. She alone sees them; the housekeeper, even near the end of the tale, denies having witnessed such visions. He also points out that mention is made of the governess' unstable background; it seems that her father suffered from some mental aberration. Given the immense pressure of a new and unaccustomed responsibility, that of managing a household, it seems possible, if not probable, that the susceptible mind of this governess would "give way". The governess has repressed her love for the master of the house whom she had been forbidden to contact; what follows is a reaction to "repressed love and thwarted maternal affection".

##### *Edmund Wilson—"The Ambiguity of Henry James"*

According to Wilson, in his first criticism of *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess is disturbed, and this disturbance is of a sexual nature. Thus the ghosts are hallucinations or the product of sex repression. The governess fell in love with her employer; “her later behavior is meant to impress him”. Latent sexual repression is also seen in her too intimate attitude toward the little boy, Miles. Wilson also notes Freudian symbols such as the tower. The governess, then, is responsible for Miles’ death. She alone, frightens him to death.

Wilson was later to respond to another critic’s question: How was the governess able to describe Quint in such detail when she had never before seen him? Wilson concluded that James’ “personal and authorial blind spot was sex”. “His inability to confront, perhaps even to understand sexual feelings, was transformed into the ambiguity of the governess. In *The Turn of the Screw*, not merely the governess is self-deceived, but James is self-deceived about her.”

\*This and all subsequent quotes refer to the *Norton Critical Edition: The Turn of the Screw*.

Robert Heilman—“*The Turn of the Screw as Poem*”

With Robert Heilman’s criticism comes an entirely different view of *The Turn of the Screw*. He claims that there are ghosts which the governess can see. The ghosts are symbols of evil. The intuitive governess attempts to ward off this evil. The children are victims of this evil. Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, symbolizing as she does the “commonplace mortal”, cannot perceive the evil, well-intentioned as she is. The story embodies the “oldest of themes the struggle of evil to possess the human soul.”

Heilman’s essay makes much of the symbolic quality of the work. The children themselves are symbolic. The names have a “representative quality, Miles—the soldier, the archetypal male; Flora the flower, the essential female”. The setting is also symbolic; “there is the suggestion that this is the story of the decay of Eden”.

Heilman notes that the story is reminiscent of a Miltonic myth. This is a dualistic view of reality. How could Miles be an angel at home and a fiend at school? “By the angel-fiend antithesis, James underscores what he sees as a central human contradiction.” Miles struggles bitterly with evil. The governess, at one point, becomes a “sister of Charity”, and attempts to cure Miles. She also attempts to get Miles to confess, for only through confession will Miles gain self-will or “become accessible to grace”.

Yet, the story ends with Miles’ fall. “We have, then, a modern late-fall defeat patterned on the ancient springtide victory.” (We have, in essence, a “Black Easter”.)

Eric Solomon—“*The Return of the Screw*”

Eric Solomon reads *The Turn of the Screw* as a mystery. Murder has been committed. The motive is ambition and greed; the culprit is Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper. Solomon sees duplicity in Mrs. Grose’s statements to the governess. Much of what is said can be read with ironic meaning, once the possibility of evil in Mrs. Grose is considered. Mrs. Grose wishes to better her position. She also wishes to control Flora. She induces madness in the governess and thereby secures her position.

Solomon also suggests to the reader the possibility of Peter Quint’s murder. The motive in this case is jealousy. Quint, Mrs. Grose’s former lover, was not only intimate with Miss Jessel, but tried to gain control of the children. Mrs. Grose will not be usurped by anyone especially a social equal.

Solomon gives many examples of the duplicity of Mrs. Grose through her own ironic statements. He also

points out that the governess had initial misgivings about taking over Mrs. Grose's position. He even finds evidence in a pun. At one point the governess senses that someone is "practicing upon her"; "there was but one sane inference: someone had taken liberty rather *gross*."

### **ADDITIONAL CRITICISM:**

Oscar Cargill—"The Turn of the Screw and Alice James"

Cargill believes that James is really writing about the mental illness of his sister, Alice. James' sensibility and his admiration for his sister's courage in the face of such a disease, allowed him to write about it only in a much disguised form.

Joseph J. Firebaugh—"Inadequacy in Eden: Knowledge and *The Turn of the Screw* .

The governess destroys the innocent children by imposing evil upon them. The governess believes in the essential sinfulness of all mankind.

Dorothea Krook—"The Turn of the Screw"

Krook feels the novel shows the co-presence of good and evil. Governess and children are innocent and guilty. It is impossible to "determine the degree of innocence in the guilty and of the guilt in the innocence."

John Clair—"The Turn of the Screw, The Ironic Dimension in the Fiction of Henry James"

Miss Jessel and the uncle are the parents of Flora and Miles. Miss Jessel is mad, and is locked in the tower; Quint is her guard. Mrs. Grose controls what goes on at Bly.

Stanley Trachtenberg—"The Return of the Screw"

Douglas is Miles. He confesses an unspecified childhood guilt through the story. The whole story is a deathbed confessional.

## **Lesson Plans: Section III**

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*The Turn Of the Screw* is a difficult story for students to read on their own. Indeed, many adults find James' use of language convoluted or, at the very least, involved. As this unit is geared to the nonreader, it would be absurd for me to assume that students would or could plow through the book in the usual way. This final section of the unit, then, is dependent on a commercially prepared cassette version of the story marketed by The Jabberwocky Company of San Francisco.

This taped version of *The Turn of the Screw* is excellent, in my opinion. It includes suitable mood music and sound effects. The readers are professionals who manage to delineate character and plot in an interesting manner. The version does not favor one interpretation of the story. Rather, it encourages students to see the worth of a work that consciously employs ambiguity.

The student is provided with a "read-a-long" script. The teacher is equipped with discussion questions for each section of the "play", language and vocabulary exercises, and ideas for debate exercises involving the two

major interpretations of the story. Teachers who may wish to use this unit will be provided with the pertinent materials and/or the information necessary to procure such materials. With much of the basic material provided by Jabberwocky, this teacher has the time (and space) to develop additional and, perhaps, less conventional plans for students.

As I mentioned earlier, this section of the unit attempts to engage students in analysis and in personal interpretation. I have many times tried to lead class discussions which called for varying interpretations of particular works. All too often, having “covered all bases”, I thought, the final query of at least one student would be: “Ok, but what does it really mean? What is the right answer?” Such a question, to say the least, is disheartening. Though the student must learn that interpretation should be based on the text itself (A wild or unsubstantiated view may result in missing the point.), he must at the same time, be encouraged to find something for himself. If the student does not make a personal connection on some level, the reading experience is, to a great degree, meaningless.

The following are “warm-up” exercises which are designed to introduce the concepts of analysis and interpretation to students. The first exercise stresses observation of detail as a necessary component of analysis. Varying interpretations are expected; there is no one “correct” answer.

### **Exercise #1**

Students are briefly shown a drawing in which a person is exhibiting a particular emotion. (Example: baby crying.) They are asked to tell why this emotion is being expressed. As promised, there are many possible answers. (The picture would depict: open diaper pin, dropped toy, mother leaving the room, dog barking, etc.) Missed clues would be pointed out by the teacher, if necessary.

### **Exercise #2**

The second exercise is a more sophisticated version of the first. Students are given comic strips minus the filled in bubbles. They are asked to consider the various frames, and then write appropriate dialogue. Differing versions would be shared in class. Students might also explain how they came by their interpretations.

Analysis and interpretation are connected with one’s frame of reference (or life experiences). The following exercise serves to promote differences of interpretation and hints at reasons for these differences, as well.

### **Exercise #3**

Students are shown various abstract nonrepresentational works of art. They are asked to react to each work. (What is the artist trying to depict?) They must also give reasons or substantiate, in some way, their interpretations. (“What does the painting remind you of?” might be the appropriate question to ask students.) Presumably associations will be various. Reasons for differences might then be discussed. Reasons might include differing interests as well as differing life experiences.

### *Final Assignment: The Turn of the Screw*

As mentioned earlier, the discussion questions provided by Jabberwocky hint at (and do not preclude) various interpretations of the story. Once the teacher feels that sufficient discussion has taken place (Students understand the plot and are beginning to come to terms with the meaning of the story.), shortened sentence versions of the various critics’ views may be given to students. The teacher should ask each student to read all interpretations and choose the one that seems “right” to him. The final student project would involve an

analysis of *The Turn of the Screw* . Students would be asked to substantiate their positions with evidence from the story.

## Student Readings

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*Folktales of England* edited by Katharine M. Briggs and Ruth L. Tongue

“The Son Murdered by his Parents”

“Little Rosy”

*Thrill of Horror : Twenty-Two Terrifying Tales* edited by Hugh Lamb

“Calling Miss Marker” by Joy Burnett

*The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> M. R. James, *Ghost and Marvels* , p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares* , p.35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.36

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Great Short Stories of Mystery and Horror* , p.15.

## Teacher Bibliography

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Borer, Mary Cathcart. *London Walks and Legends* . London, England: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1981.

This book presents a wonderful compilation of legends associated with London. Clear maps are included which help the walker find marvelous, often out-of-the-way, places.

Briggs, Katharine M. and Tongue, Ruth L., ed. *Folktales of England* . Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1965.

This slender volume provides a wonderful range of folktales including: wonder tales, legends, historical traditions, and jocular tales. An index of motifs is included as well.

Coxe, Antony D. Hippisley. *Haunted Britain* . New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973.

This book serves as a guide to supernatural sites in Britain. A vast number of places are mentioned. Short paragraphs provide pertinent information. Illustrations and photographs are included as well.

James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw* . New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966.

This edition is especially fine. Background and source material is included as well as many essays in criticism. A fine bibliography of additional criticism is also available.

Lamb, Hugh. *Thrill of Horror : Twenty-Two Terrifying Tales* . New York, New York: Taplinger Publications, 1975.

Rare tales of horror have been rescued by Lamb. Many had been out-of-print. Known and little-known authors are represented.

Le Fanu, J.S. *Ghost Stories and Mysteries* . New York, New York: Dover Publications, 1975.

Interesting collection of supernatural work. Le Fanu wrote stories on folkloristic themes. The stories are a bit long for students, but provide a fine introduction for teachers.

Sayers, Dorothy. *Great Short Stories of Mystery and Horror* . London, England: Victor Gallancz, Ltd., 1934.

The introduction is particularly interesting. Fine discussion of the horror story.

Sullivan, Jack. *Elegant Nightmares* . Athens, Ohio: University Press, 1978.

Provides excellent criticism of the ghost story.

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