

B. The Unreliable Narrator

With the Act I Finale, the opera diverges strongly from other versions in that the ghosts begin to *sing*. Which means they have to be given words, with explicit content left only implicit by the author. It also means some loss of the ambiguity inherent in the book. Twentieth-century critics have pointed out that we only have the Governess's word for the appearances of the ghosts; what she presents as supernatural possession may in fact be her own sexual psychosis. James' Governess is the classic *Unreliable Narrator*; is this something that opera can handle at all?

C. Here, in My Own Room

When she finds her predecessor ensconced in occupation of her own private space, the Governess realizes that she must stay to defeat her adversaries and save the children. We watch as this decision leads inevitably to tragedy.

Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, complete opera

Glyndebourne 2011; Miah Persson (Governess), Susan Bickley (Grose), Toby Spence (Prologue/Quint), Giselle Allen (Jessel), Thomas Parfitt (Miles), Joanna Songi (Flora); Jakub Hrusa (c), Jonathan Kent (d)

Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, opening

BBC 2005; Lisa Milne (Governess), Mark Padmore (Prologue); Richard Hickox (c), Katie Mitchell (d)

Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, opening

Brussels 2021; Sally Matthews (Governess), Ed Lyon (Prologue); Ben Glassberg (c), Andrea Breth (d)

Jack Clayton: *The Innocents* (1961), opening and lake scene

Deborah Kerr and Michael Redgrave

Ben Bolt: *The Turning of the Screw* (1999), selected scenes

Jhodi May and Colin Firth

<http://www.brunyate.com/novel-opera/>

Novel into *Opera*



6 & 7. *The Turn of the Screw*

October 27 & November 3, 2022

The Turn of the Screw

TWO CLASSES DEVOTED TO THE SAME OPERA: *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), by **Benjamin Britten** (1813–76). Its libretto by **Myfanwy Piper** (1911–97) makes a fascinating comparison to its source material, the novella of the same title by **Henry James** (1843–1916), published serially in 1898.

We will begin with the story, looking at how James frames it, and some of the devices he uses to tell it. We look briefly at non-musical adaptations in the cinema, then turn to the opera, first scene by scene, and then in more continuous stretches. In each case, we will look what prose can do that the camera or composer cannot, and what needs to be changed or indeed invented to create a taut drama that uses speech or singing in place of the author's inner narratives. *rb.*

Thursday, October 27

A. Framing the Horror

James inserts his story in a complex frame: the guests at a Christmas house-party telling ghost stories, one of them offering to read a true story from manuscript left by his sister's late governess, and his own preface in which he explained how the woman (never named) got her first position as governess to two children in a country house called Bly. We see how this framing device is handled—in part—by two film directors, and in two stage productions and one film of Britten's opera.

B. Two Twisting Themes

Although it is tonal for the most part (not too far removed from conventional harmonies), Britten based all his music on an atonal 12-note theme stated at the end of the Prologue. Each of the interludes that introduce the 8 scenes in each act is a variation on this theme, moving into progressively more remote keys. We also look at a theme first sung by the Governess to the words "O why did I come?" that will thereafter be associated with the Ghosts.

C. Contentment Curdles

The Governess is happy at first at Bly, and most early scenes begin with music that is consistently bright or serene. But each of them is cloyed by something that disturbs the placid atmosphere, changing the musical language, and often leading to a short soliloquy by the Governess—points where she comes closest to the inner monologues so characteristic of the James.

Thursday, November 3

A. Words, Images, Music

As a review of the previous class, we look at the scene with which we ended, where the Governess sees the ghost of her predecessor Miss Jessel across the lake. We hear a reading of the passage in the original, and watch its treatment in the two films sampled before. James has a characteristic division between physical description, outer action (including dialogue), and inner monologue. These three elements have different meanings for the filmmaker and librettist, demanding considerable adjustment and invention.