Class 6: Turning the Screw

A. Framing the Horror

1. Class title 1: *The Turning of the Screw* on stage
2. Some novels by Henry James

Henry James (1843–1916) published *The Turn of the Screw* in 1898, on the cusp of what is generally considered to be his final period. Published serially in *Collier's Weekly*, it is a novella of slightly under 100 pages. It comes shortly after a very similar novella, *What Maisie Knew*, that contains many of the same themes, but is more overtly sexual in its context; if you don't know it, you will find it makes a fascinating comparison to this one.

How many people have actually read the James? If there are enough of you, what can you remember of how it begins, and how did that strike you?

3. Section title A: Framing the Horror
4. Narrative frame of *The Turn of the Screw*

James really takes his time to get going. Reading the book for the first time, I felt this opening was fusty and old-fashioned, an impression I had a hard time shaking off. And yet I think James' elaborate framing is both a careful strategy and typical of its period; Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, published the next year (1899) begins in the same way, with a group of people swapping stories. James sets up guests at a Christmas house-party telling ghost stories, one of which involves a child. Douglas, the only one of the party who is named, ups the ante by offering a story of *two* children. He reveals that it comes from the manuscript of a lady, now dead, who once was his own sister's governess, and hints that she did what she did because she was in love. The guests are eager to hear more, so he sends off to London for the manuscript, which arrives two days later. That night, he gives the background of how the lady came to be appointed the governess to two children at a country estate called Bly, and hints that she was in love with her employer, whom she must never contact again. Why do you think he created such an elaborate frame for the story?

5. Films by Jack Clayton and Ben Bolt

Wikipedia says that *The Turn of the Screw* has been adapted 28 times, far more than any other work by James. There have been a number of films and television productions. I own copies of two of them: the classic 1961 black-and-white movie *The Innocents*, directed by **Jack Clayton** and starring **Deborah Kerr**, and a 1999 television adaptation directed by **Ben Bolt** and starring **Jhodi May**. I was interested to see that neither of these (nor any other adaptation I know of) starts with Douglas and the house-party, but all begin with that interview between the Governess and her Employer. I am going to play you three

minutes from the opening of each, back-to-back *for you to compare*. I start the Clayton after the credits, but give the whole credit section of the Bolt. The two Uncles are **Michael Redgrave** and **Colin Firth**.

6. Clayton: *The Innocents*, opening
7. Bolt: *The Turn of the Screw*, opening
8. Michael Redgrave and Colin Firth

What did you think? Although I have cut both scenes before the end, it is clear in each case that the Governess is in love with her employer; both directors have cast his role with actors with a quite similar suave charm. But both films begin before this scene—as James does, but differently. Clayton takes a moment from later in the story, when the Governess already feels caught in a position were she can either save the children or collaborate in their destruction. Bolt goes in the opposite direction, with the back-story of Miss Jessel's presumed suicide.

9. Britten and the Pipers

Benjamin Britten (1913–76) burst upon the operatic scene with his *Peter Grimes* of 1945. Coming just after the end of World War II, it seemed to herald a new era for British opera. Largely for economic reasons, he followed this with two chamber operas, *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and *Albert Herring* (1947). He went on to write two large-scale operas for Covent Garden, *Billy Budd* (1951) and *Gloriana* for the Queen's coronation in 1953, but when the commission came to write an opera for the Venice Biennale in 1954, he once again turned to the chamber form: six singers and 13 instruments. Given his abiding interest in the innocence of the young and threats to it—the theme of nearly all his operas—he chose *The Turn of the Screw*. To adapt it he approached a woman whom I consider one of the great librettists of the century, **Myfanwy Piper** (1911–97), the art-critic wife of his long-time designer **John Piper**. She too includes a prologue based on Douglas's description of the young Governess's interview with the children's Uncle, but leaves it unstaged; the text says simply: "The Prologue is discovered in front of a drop curtain." Indeed, rather than getting into any kind of spookiness up front, as both these films do, Britten emphasizes it narrative function by accompanying it only with the piano.

Nevertheless, most directors (myself included) cannot resist showing something other than a mere narrator during this sequence. I shall play you three versions. First, a 2021 production from Brussels by **Andrea Breth** that keeps the idea of Douglas reading, but sets the whole thing in a surreal world. Then a 2005 film made for the BBC by **Katie Mitchell**, who does not show the Uncle at all, but lets her camera wander all over the estate at Bly with decidedly disturbing effect. And finally, the opening of the production that I'll go on to show complete, from Glyndebourne in 2011 directed by **Jonathan Kent**, where we do indeed have a narrator, a very genial one, though no Governess. We'll discuss all three.

10. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, La Monnaie, opening
11. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Mitchell film, opening
12. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, opening
13. Stills from all three of the above

What did you think? More specifically, what do you think of the operatic setting, and how do you react to each of these interpretations?

B. Two Twisting Themes

14. Section title 2: Two Twisting Themes

At the end of each of these three excerpts, you will have heard the full orchestra—the remaining 12 instruments—come in over a jagged theme played in the piano. Britten was writing in the 1950s, at a time when many composers were turning to the **serial music** pioneered earlier in the century by **Arnold Schoenberg** (1874–1951). Followed strictly, this technique involves the abandonment of traditional key, in which some notes are more important than others, and replacing it with mathematical permutations of what he called a **note row**, comprising all twelve notes of the octave, all of equal importance. Britten is by no means willing to give up traditional key, as I'll show you in a moment, but this opening theme is indeed such a row, as you can see if I color each note on the keyboard as it is played.

15. Screw theme, piano demonstration
16. The theme in vocal score

Here is the theme in my own piano score. Don't worry if you don't read music; I am demonstrating things *graphically* only. You will see the annotations for each instrument to be added to the mix—timpani, horn, harp, double bass, &c—until all twelve are playing together, all twelve notes of the scale, the greatest discord imaginable. The sound at the beginning is the horse from the Mitchell film.

17. Screw theme, orchestral demonstration
18. The theme written out

As a brief aside for those who do read music, here is the theme written out. One thing you may notice is that any group of four notes is in fact *almost* in a traditional key; four white notes, followed by four black ones, and so on. And going back to the graphic mode, look what happens to the theme if you just make a couple of small switches: **it looks like a screw**, doesn't it?

19. Scene breakdown in *The Turn of the Screw*

James's novella is in 24 chapters, each giving the screw a further twist, as the Governess becomes more and more convinced of the presence of the ghosts and the danger to the children. Myfanwy Piper's libretto is also divided into short scenes, though she has only 16 of them, plus the Prologue. I think it very unlikely that this idea was Piper's alone. Almost certainly Britten suggested the short-scene structure, and they brainstormed about what each was to contain. I say "almost certainly" because the guiding principle is a musical one: eight scenes in the first act, each centered on a particular key, A major at the beginning, rising by step to G-sharp at the end of Act I, then cycling back in Act II to reach A again. It must have been Britten's idea also to separate the scenes by orchestral interludes, each of which is a variation on the theme just heard; I will point out a few of them as we watch.

20. On the way to Bly

The first scene is very simple, just the Governess's thoughts as she travels to Bly—by carriage in the original, but in the Glyndebourne production a train. The hoofbeats of the carriage are created by a

constant pattern on the timpani, not specifically synchronized to the singing. At the end of the scene, though, she bursts into impassioned song; listen for it; I'll discuss it later.

21. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, theme and The Journey
22. Score page from the above

The line I was talking about, "A strange world, for a stranger's sake," sticks out because it is the first time the soprano gets out of the lower part of her voice—singing, rather than talking. And the phrase after it, "O why did I come?", sticks out as the first time she sings melismatically, with more than one note per syllable. It is a theme that will later become associated with the Ghosts; Britten's task is simply to ensure we notice and remember it now. Here it is again, with the soundtrack from the Mitchell movie.

23. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, demo of the "Why did I come?" theme
24. On the way to Bly (repeat)

Let's pick from the same moment in the Glyndebourne production, and play two more scene before we take our break. Note the two interludes, fairly straightforward variations on the theme. Note the bright, generally upbeat mood, helped greatly by the presence of the two children (a boy and generally a young adult soprano). And note how, without sacrificing that brightness, Britten puts in two disturbing reminders of the "O why did I come?" theme: first on the solo violin when the Governess arrives, then more strange on the solo viola, playing at the extreme of its range, when she reads the letter saying that Miles has been dismissed from school. And the wonderful way the worry is brushed aside by the use of the children's song "Lavender's blue." The Glyndebourne production uses a wonderful mechanized set that is able to suggest a lot of things, without being a literal representation of anything.

25. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, Welcome and Letter
26. Class title 2 (still from the above)

C. Contentment Curdles

27. Section title 3: Contentment Curdles

In the second hour, I am going to play the remaining scenes of Act I, all from the Glyndebourne production, stopping short of the finale. That would be the moment when the Ghosts first sing, which is a whole other ball of wax that I will address in next week's class, when we will finish the piece and discuss it. For two of the scenes, beginning with this one, I will show little videos I made for a previous course, with me at the piano; there will be three more of these next week.

28. Scene title: The Tower

I mentioned that Britten keeps the mood light for as long as possible. The first half of this scene, the Governess' aria "How beautiful it is," is the most sheerly lyrical number in the opera, and the one most often heard in recitals. The preceding interlude is also the clearest derivation from the original theme

29. Roger at piano 1: The Tower
30. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, the Tower
31. Scene title: The Window

Scene 5, the Window, also begins with upbeat music: a vigorous march that will be used to accompany the children singing another well-known song, "Tom, Tom the piper's son." But almost immediately, the Governess sees the ghost, this time through a window only a few feet away. She questions Mrs Grose, who now tells her the back-story of the former valet Peter Quint and her own predecessor, Miss Jessel, whom Quint apparently seduced and drove to suicide. The scene is laced with versions of the "Why did I come?" theme. We first hear it as a great outburst for Mrs Grose that gradually subsides through the orchestra until it is taken up by a solo cello. Listen for other occurrences as we watch the scene.

32. Demo: Mrs. Grose's themes
33. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, the Window
34. Scene title: The Lesson

Once again, Britten and Piper follow a tense scene with one of charm or even jollity. This is a distinct change from the novella. Once James has us in the grip of the Governess and her mental hand-wringing, he doesn't let go. In the opera, we do not reach this point until Act II, and even there we get oases of charm. I think this is a wise decision to hold the audience; two hours trapped within the mind of James' Governess would surely be intolerable.

35. List of masculine nouns
36. The *malo* song

James has no equivalent of this scene, so Piper has to invent words for it. In doing so, she shows her class and generation (and Britten's and my own) of coming from middle schools that taught Latin by means of mnemonics. This list of irregular masculine nouns could be found at the back of the grammar book that I myself used at age 11. As Britten sets it, it is all great fun. But the atmosphere changes completely when Miles comes to his second mnemonic, a trick for remembering the four different meanings of the word "*malo.*" [It is a pointless mnemonic, actually, because the difference between the words has to do with the way they are pronounced, and the rhyme doesn't help at all.] But it has a chilling effect. As Britten sets it, it is suddenly a very sad, wistful song, and Miles has no idea where he got it. It will return to powerful effect at the very end of the opera. Anyway, let me say a few words about the music, then play the scene.

37. Roger at piano 2: The Lesson
38. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, the Lesson
39. Scene title: The Lake

I'll play one more scene before we stop. This is the equivalent of Chapter VII in the novella, where the Governess becomes convinced that Flora is also being haunted by the former governess, Miss Jessel. In many ways, it is like the Tower scene, with a lyrical mood suddenly curdling. But Britten and Piper have to manufacture the lyricism; they have to invent something for the children to do before the ghosts appear. Myfanwy Piper is especially charming here, writing a short aria for Flora, a lullaby that she sings

to her doll. The words are wonderfully inventive, and the charming music is simple enough for a young singer. Treasure it; it is the last piece of conventional melody you will get in the entire opera.

40. Flora's song text
41. Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*, Glyndebourne, the Lake
42. Class title 3: To be continued…

I will look a little further at this scene at the start of next week's class, then go on (with fewer pauses) with the rest of the opera, when the Ghosts become actual singing roles.