

Notes from the Stage Director, Nicholas Muni

This brilliant opera is both a complete joy and a supreme challenge to direct. It is perfectly constructed, endlessly fascinating and mixes intense theatricality with beautiful, potent music.

The main challenge is to preserve the highly charged ambiguity for which the Henry James novella is justly famous—to hint strongly enough in various directions without declaring any particular viewpoint. In short, how does a production provide a sense of “crystal-clear ambiguity”?

There are certainly enough questions begging for answers: *Are the ghosts real or the product of the Governess’ imagination? Do the children ever see or communicate with the ghosts? When Quint and Jessel were alive, what actually happened between them? How did Miss Jessel die? Was it suicide or homicide? What was the exact nature of the relationship between Miles and Peter Quint—and was it a sexual one? What causes the death of Miles? Which character “turns the screw” in this piece?*

The first question on this list—and probably the most famous—was made much more challenging when Britten and Piper, unlike James, decided to give the ghosts an active voice. We feel strongly that it is vital to preserve the possibility that the ghosts are all in the mind of the Governess—a manifestation of her own fears, desires, etc. Therefore, in this production she is present whenever the ghosts sing, leaving the audience free to infer that she is imagining what the ghosts are saying and doing.

A more basic but elusive question is: who is the real antagonist in this opera? The obvious answer is the ghosts. But James never settles for the obvious. Could the real antagonist be the guardian of the children, their own Uncle? Though his character is only referred to in both the novella and the opera, the Uncle exerts a dominating influence in his absence, almost like a ghost himself. He is not evil or abusive. In fact, in the novella, he is first described as “kind.” His crime is that he is neglectful of the children. He wants nothing to do with them. And it is this neglect, in combination with his wealth and decadent lifestyle, which leaves the children vulnerable to abuse and corruption. This idea is conveyed through a brilliantly simple dramaturgical stroke: he agrees to hire the Governess on the sole condition that she does not contact him for any reason whatsoever, but deals with whatever problem may arise on her own.

In this production, we have chosen to include this unwritten character in a silent scene during the Prologue. His influence is further represented in visual terms by the enormous room in which the entire opera is set; his room, the master’s room. Through its architecture, scale and sumptuous décor, his character remains a force throughout the piece. We also include a large staff of servants, befitting an estate of this magnitude, with 40 maids and footmen. Wealth is a co-conspirator to neglect in this world, and the

master's maniacal demand upon his staff to "see and hear nothing" creates a pervasive atmosphere of fear, paranoia and repression.

A final point the authors force us to consider is whether it is the "untried and innocent" Governess who, despite her loving intentions, "turns the screw" through her obsessive pursuit of obtaining a confession from the children, ultimately destroying them. Is James perhaps suggesting that unconditional love, in and of itself, is sometimes not adequate in the quest to heal deep trauma in children?

Then again, it could all be just a good ghost story.

Hierarchy of servant staff in Victorian England

It is important to understand the hierarchy of the servant staff in Victorian England to fully appreciate the compartmentalized structure of an upper class estate.

BUTLER

HOUSEKEEPER

(Mrs. Grose)

LADY'S MAID VALET

(Peter Quint)

COOKS

THE GROOMS

THE FOOTMEN

HOUSE MAIDS

KITCHEN MAIDS

SCULLERY MAIDS

DAIRY MAIDS

NANNYS & NURSERY MAIDS

THE GOVERNESS

(Miss Jessel)

It is interesting to note that the Bly Estate has no Head Butler, which would have been very unusual. Also unusual was the Master's choice to leave his Valet in charge of the house instead of travelling with him. It is telling that it is Mrs. Grose, who is elderly and operating far outside her responsibilities as well as her abilities, is in charge of the house at the start of the opera.

Considered **the most senior servant, the Butler** existed as "Mr. Jennings" to the servants and "Jennings" to his employer. He presided over the male staff and would oversee the setting of the table, trimming candlewicks, filling lamps with oil, and cleaning the silver. A Butler would earn about \$750 a year.

The senior female servant, the Housekeeper supervised the hiring and firing of the female staff. Referred to as "Mrs." whether married or not, she looked after the household accounts, purchased supplies, cured, bottled, and preserved food. She would have earned \$300 a year.

The Lady's Maid, called "Miss" whether married or not, was often chosen for her looks and youth. Her main responsibilities consisted of attending to her Ladyship's grooming, dressing, packing and laying out her clothes, washing and repairing undergarments, and fixing her hair in the latest fashion. She would have earned \$150 a year.

A Valet would look after his master's clothing, ensuring his wardrobe remained in good order. Sometimes referred to as a gentleman's gentleman, his job consisted of laying out clothing, keeping shoes and hats clean and in good repair, standing behind his employer at dinner, running his bath, and traveling with him. He also had the precarious responsibility of shaving his master with an open cutthroat razor. He would have earned \$300.

Many **Cooks** supervised large staffs to produce three sometimes four elaborate meals a day for the Family and to impress guests. In addition, the Cook would be required to provide food for nursery meals, cricket teas, picnics, and dinner parties. Only extremely rich families could afford to hire a male cook or the ultimate status symbol, a French Chef. In 1872, a male cook would have earned \$500, a female cook \$350.

The Groom oversaw the care of the horses. If no Coachman served on staff, he would also maintain and drive the carriages. He earned \$300.

The Footmen had duties in and outside the estate. Responsible for carrying coal, cleaning silverware, announcing visitors, and waiting at table, He would earn \$150 a year.

Housemaids kept the estate immaculate, bedrooms supplied with water for washing, bathing, and insured fires continued to burn. They scrubbed and emptied chamber pots, drew curtains, turned down beds, dusted and polished, cleaned bedrooms, and tidied the public rooms. They performed grueling monotonous labor as the floors had to be scrubbed by hand, fireplaces cleaned out daily, grates polished with black lead, and water lugged from the kitchen and then carried room-to-room. They earned they earned \$100-150.

A Kitchen Maid's first job was to prepare the breakfast trays for the Upper Servants and to assist the Cook in preparing the Family's breakfast. All her time is spent in the kitchen or her room. She earned \$75-100 a year.

The Scullery Maid, considered the lowest servant in the house, worked eighteen hours a day. She must empty all chamber pots of the female staff and assist the Lower Servants in preparing breakfast for the Upper Servants. A dinner for five utilized 180 separate pieces of porcelain, silver, and crystal, each item needing to be washed and safely stored away. Allowed upstairs only once a day for compulsory prayers, it is the only time she would see her employers. In 1872, she would have earned \$50-75.

Dairy Maids churned butter into milk, made clotted cream, butter, milked the cows and delivered it up to the estate, turn curds into cheese and kept the dairy clean using only sand and hot water.

Laundress was in charge of cleaning clothes and household washing. Smaller homes had their laundry sent out.

Nannies cared and dressed the younger members of the family. Took children on excursions to get plenty of fresh air and would be assisted by nursery maids. In larger establishments, a footman would be assigned to the nursery. Nanny slept in the nursery in a separate room next to her charges.

The Governess taught children until the boys left for boarding school. The girls remained in the schoolroom. Although a Governess would have the demeanor and deportment of a lady, usually educated, cultured, properly mannered and well-bred as well as young and fresh faced, they were treated as servants. Because of this, they were often very lonely. Their lady-like deportment often created romances in the family.

Latin

The use of Latin in this piece is interesting and it has been suggested that it functions as a mechanism to suggest the corruption of the children, especially in terms of the possible exposure to inappropriate levels of sexual awareness in both children and even of the homosexuality of the young boy. In the lesson scene, Miles recites from memory a list of masculine nouns many of which have double meanings, or slang meanings, referring either to private parts of the human anatomy, images of death or to images of arousal or orgasm.

amnis	stream, torrent
axis	axle (phallic symbol)
caulis	the stalk of a plant (phallic symbol)
collis	a hill or mound (suggestive of female genitals)
clunis	anus
fascis	a bundle of sticks (phallic symbol)
crinis	hair (suggestive of pubic hair)
follis	a pair of bellows (slang for scrotum)

ignis	fire
orbis	globe
ensis	sword (phallic symbol)
panis	loaf of bread (phallic symbol)
piscis	fish
postis	a post (phallic symbol)
mensis	month (female menstrual cycle)
torris	a firebrand (phallic symbol)
unguis	nail of a finger or toe
canalis	a groove or channel (slang for vagina)
vectis	a strong pole (phallic symbol)
vermis	worm (slang for penis)
natalis	birthday
sanguis	blood
pulvis	dust; ashes of the dead
cucumis	a cucumber (phallic symbol)
lapis	large stone; a tombstone
casses	hunting net, spider's web
manes	ghosts, corpses
glis	to swell up, burst out(slang for erection and orgasm)

Sexuality: James, Britten, Quint

Much has been made of the notion that *The Turn of the Screw* is a coded attack on homophobia and it should indeed be noted that James wrote the novella around the time of the trials and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde and that during the period Britten wrote the operatic version, homosexuals were much persecuted in England. Given those facts, there may be some merit to that theory and in viewing the Governess as representing the homophobic element in society. On the other hand, the text implies with equal force that Quint was bi-sexual, that he was “free with everyone. He was free with her too, the lovely Miss Jessel, and she a lady so far above him.” It may then be that Peter Quint represents a much more anarchic force, more of a libertine who respects no class or gender bounds. In any case, it is well known that Britten was a homosexual and that James was very likely of that preference as well.

Children: James, Britten, Miles

Another focus that James and Britten shared in their artistic output is that of children, especially in terms of exploring the loss of innocence and the psychologically complex process of coming of age and relationships with older adults. James was also very well versed in child psychology, influenced by his older brother William, a well respected psychologist of the day, and by the contemporary work of Freud and Jung. In this light, it is interesting to explore *The Turn of the Screw* in terms of trauma, repression and catharsis involving the children, especially in connection to the role of the Governess. It is

her unwavering pursuit in trying to “save” the children that serves as a double-edged sword—and ultimately results in their demise. Had she been a more mature individual or someone with therapeutic training, she might not have pushed them so hard. But perhaps that is another of James’ points: that with all the best intentions, it is possible to abuse and even destroy children through ignorance or lack of skill when working in the treacherous waters of the psyche.

Homosexuality and the Law in England

Sodomy (or buggery as it was called at the time) first became a civil offense, punishable by death, in 1533 when Henry VIII issued a formal decree on the subject, The Statute of 1533. Except for a short period in the 1500s, sodomy remained a capital offense in England until 1828. Throughout the remainder of the 1800s the act of sodomy was a felony punishable by imprisonment.

In the 1600s and into the 1700s, the term "sodomite" applied to a practitioner of any form of non-reproductive sex, whether between members of the same sex or not. Despite the threat of the death penalty, sexual acts between adult males and adolescent males and females were commonplace and--during the 1600s--generally socially accepted. About 1700, gender lines and cultural expectations regarding sexual preferences became more rigid.

In the 1880s "the social purity movement"--a loose knit coalition of early feminists and social conservatives--set as its goal the containing of male lust in all its many forms, from adultery to prostitution to pornography. In 1885, the social purity movement succeeded in pushing through a major revision of England's laws regulating sexual behavior. Prior to 1885, indecent assaults on persons over the age of thirteen were not punishable. But the new law made any indecent assault punishable by proposing an amendment that would make "gross indecencies"--regardless of the age of the victim--punishable as a misdemeanor. The vague words of this law were later interpreted more broadly than its originally intended purpose and in 1895, a London jury found Oscar Wilde guilty of violating Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. For his crime, Wilde spent two years in prison.

Private consensual acts between adults, including same-sex sodomy, were decriminalized in England in 1967.