

The Haunting of Helen Walker

US TV : 1995 : dir. Hugh Whitmore : Rosemont : 90 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Aled Roberts](#); [Florence Hoath](#)
 Valerie Bertinelli; Diana Rigg; Elizabeth Morton; Tricia Thorns; Aisling Flitton; Flip Webster;
 Michael Gough; Paul Rhys; Mark Longhurst

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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TV Quick review:

“Yet another version of the Henry James ghost tale *The Turn of the Screw*”, this time starring Valerie Bertinelli as the young governess hired to look after two children (Aled Roberts and Florence Hoath) in an idyllic country house. However, this ideal life is soon threatened by dark malevolent forces from the house’s past. It’s a well-made and atmospheric chiller that

also stars Diana Rigg, Michael Gough and Paul Rhys. *** ”

“Thriller. An American governess gets spooked on a lonely English estate. *** ”

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001" or "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]

This makes the fifth version of Henry James’ “The Turn of The Screw” known to the archive, discounting “**THE NIGHTCOMERS**” (72), which purported to deal with the events preceding the story’s opening – or: *Peter Quint: the Early Years*, if you will.

It’s a straight retelling of the narrative in every respect, but with, as one would expect of the morbidly-obsessed 1990’s, a stronger emphasis on the suspicion that the children, and especially Miles, have not merely been debauched by Quint, but sexually invaded by him (“I’ve looked into those eyes, Mrs Gross. That man was capable of *anything!*”). This is one occasion, however, when the original text *will* bear that inference, and the topical “child abuse” angle is not overplayed. Also, when one might expect a by-the-numbers feminist re-tooling of the story, this version does not airbrush out the destructive neurosis of the governess herself, which is fundamental to the story’s ambivalence.

Diana Rigg stands out as housekeeper Mrs Gross, a far more formidable woman than Megs Jenkins in “**THE INNOCENTS**”, but Bertinelli is weak in the title role, simpering too much over the children in the early scenes, while Aled Roberts is no better playing Miles. Though he grapples manfully with an upper crust English accent, his performance boils down to a great deal of sly smiling, and conspiratorial whispering with sister Flora, who is better in a less showy role. If the central thesis is that here’s a young boy corrupted by Unspeakable Depravities, our only evidence for that is one passionate kiss he plants on the suitably appalled governess.

A telltale symptom of the film’s US TV origin lies in the overlaid sound cues which herald every spectral apparition, as though a ghost cannot show itself without a menacing fanfare and a raucous snuffing out of candles. The TV remake of “**STEPHEN KING’S THE SHINING**” pulled the same stunt, demolishing what little atmosphere it succeeded in generating.

The irony of James' dénouement remains intact – Walker's grim determination to "salvage" Miles results in his death ("You're safe at last, my darling boy!") The operation was a success, except that the patient died – his shade presumably consigned to join those of Quint and Miss Jessel in an eternity of spectral depravity. Nice going, governess! Which brings us to the choice of title, because of course it is *not* Helen Walker who is being haunted, but the stately grounds of Bligh. She insinuates herself into that haunting.

The book's enigmatic title is so impenetrable that acres of academic prose have been written on its buried meaning. Was Quint intended as a caricature of Oscar Wilde (_ SC_R * W _) ? Was governess Helen Walker meant as a parody of the Victorian women's leagues, bent on "saving children from vice"? Was Miles in fact an innocent dupe of Quint, or rather a willing student? Whitmore's bland direction sheds no new light on these conundrums, and by inviting us to fill in the gaps for ourselves as to what actually went on at Bligh under Quint's stewardship, we become complicit in the heroine's frustration-fed fancies. Rumour and gossip are still all that we know of Quint, and that allows us to furnish him with whatever sins appal us best. Perhaps that too was part of Henry James' purpose. If so, it's a message no audience today is likely to take on board – we cultivate the few precious prejudices we're still allowed to hold like delicate hothouse blooms.

Nothing else is known of Aled Roberts, but Florence Hoath went on to play Elsie Wright in "**FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY**" (97), one of the two Victorian girls who baffled the spiritualism-fascinated world with seemingly unfaked snapshots of fairies in their garden.

See also "**THE INNOCENTS**", the 1959 "[Ford Startime](#)" TV production with Ingrid Bergman, the (hideous) Benjamin Britten opera version, and "**THE TURN OF THE SCREW**" (UK/France 1992), and see subject index under **DEATH / DYING CHILDREN**, [GHOSTS / HAUNTINGS](#), [NANNIES / GOVERNESSES / DOMESTIC SERVANTS](#), [ORPHANS / ADOPTION](#) and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**. For an adaptation of a different Henry James work ("The Pupil"), see "[CE QUE SAVAIT MORGAN](#)" ("What Morgan Knew", French TV 73).