

Another View on *The Turn of the Screw**

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Professor Edward Lobb in his essay "*The Turn of the Screw, King Lear, and Tragedy*" has drawn attention to a striking similarity between Henry James's story and Shakespeare's tragedy by pointing to "six 'nothings' in four lines of dialogue" (31) in these two works. The possibility that James may have had Shakespeare's drama in his ear or mind presents itself and with it the question of what this means in terms of intertextuality and how far it may carry. Professor Lobb thinks that "there are a number of ways in which *The Turn of the Screw* parallels *King Lear* quite closely" and believes "that James makes allusions to suggest those parallels" (32). In the course of his interpretation he suggests similarities in themes, such as the desire to be assured of love which develops into a possessiveness and confusion of self-delusion or blocked insight which results in the death of the beloved person. These are thematic aspects in the two works and yet they belong in the large field and general pattern of love, true or misguided. One may wonder, therefore, whether they are sufficient evidence to prove that James had *King Lear* in mind when he wrote the story and that Shakespeare's tragedy served as a model.

"Tragedy" in the title of his essay and frequent reference to tragic aspects in events and persons serve to reinforce an interpretation which takes its cues from this genre. I would like to take issue with this interpretation, as I am unconvinced that the governess is "A genuine tragic heroine" (35) or that the story can be seen as a classic tragedy as Professor Lobb maintains: "*King Lear* not only provides a

*Reference: Edward Lobb, "*The Turn of the Screw, King Lear, and Tragedy*," *Connotations* 10.1 (2000/2002): 31-46.

clue about the theme of James's story, then, but a framework for interpretation of it as a classic tragedy of belated insight" (35). James's most popular story *The Turn of the Screw* since its publication in 1898 has received a great number of interpretations producing a great variety of insights. It may therefore be allowed to add another attempt to unravel its complexity, an analysis which starts in skepticism of its presumed tragic nature. Can the governess really be seen as a "genuine tragic heroine" (35) when Prof. Lobb at the same time discovers "overt suggestions" of her "depravity" in the later part of the story (38)?

The terms "tragedy" and "tragic" have come to be used in a wide and loose sense, but if they are to remain at all meaningful in literary discourse, they should still refer to a fall from a high position in a fateful contest with powers and values. The difference between the stringent literary form of tragedy and *The Turn of the Screw* is strikingly apparent in narrative tone and structure; it is ultimately rooted in a difference of genre, more precisely a number of genres which James took up and united in a mood of playfulness and freedom from conventions. In his Notebook, his letters, and in the Preface to the New York Edition, Henry James has commented on his aims and manner in writing this story and in doing so referred to a variety of genres: to write a ghost story (106),¹ to have written a potboiler (112), "a tale of terror" (115), "I cast my lot with pure romance" (121), and he thinks of "some fairy tale pure and simple" (119). Furthermore, in the Preface to the New York Edition, that is after the publication of the story, he confesses to a singular playfulness in writing: "allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand" (118), to have "the imagination working freely," and "to improvise with extreme freedom" (119) are only a few of his expressions indicating delight in writing a "flower of high fancy" or an "irresponsible little fiction" (117). Even if not all of these comments have to be taken at face value, a freedom in the use of literary rules and conventions may be expected in the story.

With improvisation "breaks bounds" and the wish "to improvise with extreme freedom" (New York Preface, 119), James in *The Turn of*

the Screw boldly and freely takes up genres and joins a hybrid form of narration combining the ghost story and the detective story² with what may be called the "governess story." Of the three, the story of the governess is made central. As a subgenre and a characteristic invention of English literature, it depends on a class-structured society in which aristocratic, genteel or wealthy families, living in their country seats employ a governess to take care of their children, usually a woman from a middle-class, respectable but impoverished background, who is educated, conscientious, and eager to provide the best care for her wards. James's unnamed governess conforms to this type as the daughter "of a poor country parson" "out of a Hampshire vicarage" (4). At one point in her report she remembers the paragon example in English literature, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which in her words deals with "an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement" (17). There is a mystery in the two works which are otherwise very different, except for a dominant if disguised theme: the ultimate desire to save. *Jane Eyre* finally becomes savior to a maimed and helpless Rochester, while James's governess is defeated in her ambition to save Miles and Flora.

In her duty to care for and protect the children the governess serves as a kind of guardian, a character close to James's interest and important to his writing.³ In this story it is, uncharacteristically, a female guardian who accepts this role in a fervent commitment, enhanced by an infatuation with "the splendid young man," her employer (6). The employer, uncle of the two orphaned children Miles and Flora is actually their legal guardian, in effect, however, a non-guardian as he categorically rejects his responsibilities. "A man of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits," (5) he delegates all his duties to the governess; although he is aware of Miles's dismissal from school, he instructs the governess "never, never: neither appeal nor complain and to meet all questions herself" (6). Although physically absent from his country seat, he remains a negative, even evil influence on the events at Bly, often discussed by the governess and Mrs. Grose as well as by the children who desire his presence and help. It is the

"seduction exercised" (6) by him and a continuing erotic attraction which entices the governess to "find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism" (28) of the responsibilities imposed on her.

The task which she faces presents itself as a challenge and provides the detective part of the story: to solve the mystery why Miles's school finds it "impossible to keep him" and considers him "an injury to others" (11). His dismissal from it without a reason given convinces her that there is an element of mysterious evil doing or influence attached to the boy, which at this point is not a "delusion" of the governess but something she is responsible for dealing with. It is in this context that the ghost-story part is integrated into the governess's tale. On various occasions the ghosts of her two deceased predecessors appear to her, representing or projecting her apprehension of an evil influence of Quint and Miss Jessel, the "demon spirits" and a "haunting pair" as James calls them in his Preface (122).

Here again, James made use of the freedom of imagination and improvisation he claimed in his Preface (120). The ghosts which are seen by the governess may be taken as mental creations of her suspicion, while at the same time her description of their clothes and physical appearance is recognized by Mrs. Grose as identifying Quint and Jessel. Furthermore, Mrs. Grose links Quint closely to the absent guardian. The apparition of Quint, she thinks, wears his master's clothes, and she tells the governess that he was "his own man, his valet, when he was here" (24), "the master believed in him," thereby casting another dark shadow, even a taint of guilt on the Master guardian who emerges from behind the scene as the villain of the drama. Although in his Preface James stressed that he did not intend to write a ghost story of the "new type [...] the mere modern psychological case" but a story of "the disquieting sort" of bad servants and "haunted children" (118) he has given his ghosts a psychological function and meaning in defining the governess. The ghosts express her apprehensions and at the same time suggest their own nature and role in nineteenth century England: they are the "ghosts" of the then unmentionable facts and problems of sexuality.

At this point the drama and theme of the story is put forward in its full extension and significance as all three genre elements come together. The ghosts point to the detective task of the mystery to be solved, which, taken up by the governess develops into a contest between her and her wards. This contest is the most serious, most original, and also the most haunting part of *The Turn of the Screw*, in other words, exactly the additional turn of the screw. If there is a "tragic" ingredient in this contest it is to be located on the children's side, not the governess'. As the governess narrates the story we have to rely on her point-of-view, her perceptions and restricted, perhaps even biased knowledge of her wards. It is Miles who by initiating a discussion with her gives us an insight into the children's feelings, desires and predicament, revealing at the same time that their problems to the very end are not really understood by their governess.

While "Walking to church on a certain morning"—not a child's favorite entertainment and the governess feeling "like a gaoler with an eye to possible surprises and escapes" (54)—Miles takes the initiative with the blunt question "when in the world am I going back to school" (55). This and further requests are somewhat condescendingly—or awkwardly—phrased by addressing her as "my dear": "you know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady always—!" (55). He makes clear in the continuation of their discussion that he "wants to see more of life," cease to lead "a life that is so unnatural for a boy," that he wants his uncle to know about him (57). As these wishes not only challenge the governess's government but defeat her in all she has been hoping to achieve, she is ready "to give up the whole thing" (59). There is, however, another dialogue in which Miles again challenges her with "the way you bring me up" (62) and repeats his desire "to get away" (63) and have his uncle come "completely to settle things" (64) with her, presumably as ersatz parents. Yet all the while to the very end the governess in Protestant single-mindedness, insists on "being told," bringing into the open the presumed evil of his past misdemeanor,—which by this time she, as well as the reader, should

have guessed, and she should perhaps have considered how to deal with it.

Here is a pubescent boy, unhappy in an all-female company, fatherless, asking for the help of his only male relation, who fails him. He reveals precociousness in his way of talking to the governess, a precociousness which may be traced to Quint and what he learned from him: a knowledge in the bare facts and workings of male sexuality. As a matter of fact, sexual information at this time was more often passed on from "downstairs," the servant level, than from the "upstairs" of genteel parents. Being pressed by the governess, Miles admits that he "said things," which he discussed with other boys: he told them "to those I liked" (88). They in turn told them to others: "They must have repeated them to those they liked! But I didn't know they'd tell" (87). Obviously this proliferation of information was reason enough to send him away: "They thought it was enough" (86). James in *The Turn of the Screw* has written a sad story of children, "orphaned" in more than one aspect, growing up and left alone with sexual problems in an Age which refused to speak of and deal with adolescent puberty. The governess obviously does not even dare to think about them, as, even when writing her story, she has not solved the mystery, while she should have guessed already in reading the school official's letter the nature of Miles's "unmentionable" misdemeanor.⁴

One is reminded of a famous incident in American intellectual history. Jonathan Edwards, minister and philosopher, the most eminent intellectual among American Puritans, was dismissed in 1750 by his congregation for his overzealous handling of a minor scandal. A group of adolescent parishioners had gotten hold of a midwife's handbook and had somewhat freely discussed its information. The true nature of this scandal was also unmentionable: in his *Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards* (1765) Edwards's disciple Samuel Hopkins, himself a minister and Puritan philosopher, merely speaks of "books" which promoted "lascivious and obscene discourse."⁵ The governess in her moral fervor and determination to excel in fulfilling the task imposed on her is also incited to overact.

She continues the relentless interrogation of Miles which now reveals a possible involvement of Miss Jessel in his sexual education. Without any sensibility or consideration for the boy's qualms and mortification she has by this time turned her frantic effort to solve the mystery of a suspected evil into an exorcism which is bound to go wrong. At the end she is "stupefied" rather than "deluded" nor is there "a belated insight" rather a failure of insight. A parson's daughter, she remains a victim to Victorian prudery; she has not gained any insight, leaving her detective task unsolved. Her conviction that Quint "has lost [Miles] for ever" (88) is only true in the sense that Miles loses his life within the mental turmoil of his ordeal. If there are tragic aspects in this story they have to be assigned to him.

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NOTES

¹Quotations from the text of *The Turn of the Screw* and comment on it are taken from the Norton Critical Edition. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1966).

²The presently reigning "Queen of Crime," P. D. James in a "Fragment of Autobiography" which she called *Time to Be in Earnest* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999, 169-70) has briefly discussed *The Turn of the Screw* as detective fiction.

³Winfried Fluck, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit: Der amerikanische Realismus 1865-1900* (München: Fink, 1992) has discussed the role and importance of the guardian figure in James's work.

⁴An interpretation along similar lines is suggested by Mark Spilka, "Turning the Freudian Screw, How Not to Do It," *Literature and Psychology* 19 (1963): 105-11.

⁵The biography is reprinted in David Levin, ed., *Jonathan Edwards: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969). The quotation is on p. 53.