

Tragedy in *The Turn of the Screw*: An Answer to Ursula Brumm*

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In her thoughtful response to my article on *The Turn of the Screw*, Professor Ursula Brumm challenges my reading of Henry James's novella in two ways. She first questions whether the term tragedy is applicable, then provides, as her title suggests, an alternate interpretation of the story. Professor Brumm's account is based on the idea of "the governess's government" of Miles and Flora, which develops into "a contest between her and her wards" (95). The adversarial relationship between the governess and the children derives, in this reading, from "the then unmentionable facts and problems of sexuality" (96), notably the possibility that Miles learned the facts of life from Quint and passed the information on to other boys at his school. This is an inferential but certainly plausible explanation of the reason for Miles's expulsion from school, and it forms one thread of the perennial Freudian readings of *The Turn of the Screw*, which began in the 1930s with Edmund Wilson's famous essay, "The Ambiguity of Henry James." The governess, unable to deal with sexual matters and no doubt unaware, at least consciously, of what she is trying to repress, becomes the unwitting censor and oppressor of the children, and Miles dies from "the mental turmoil of his ordeal" (97).

Since Professor Brumm's account of the novella provides an alternative reading rather than criticizing the details of mine, we must simply agree to disagree. In some ways, however, her interpretation is not at

*Reference: Edward Lobb, "The Turn of the Screw, King Lear, and Tragedy," *Connotations* 10.1 (2000/2001): 31-46; Ursula Brumm, "Another View on *The Turn of the Screw*," *Connotations* 11.1 (2001/2002): 91-97. Subsequent references to the article and the response will be made parenthetically.

all incompatible with my own. I, too, feel that the governess is oppressing the children, and I acknowledged the possibility of the Freudian view in my article: "Quint and Miss Jessel [...] may, as Freudian critics have argued, 'menace' Miles and Flora with information about sexuality—information which threatens the pre-adolescent world of the nursery and the governess's hold over the children" (43). James is of course always interested in psychology, including the psychology of sex, but he is equally interested in its practical consequences in the relationships among people. If I agree, then, that Professor Brumm's Freudian reading is tenable, she seems to agree with me that the *dramatic* issue is the governess's failure to recognize that her conscious desire to protect the children masks a subconscious desire to control them. Whether this subconscious desire stems from a hysterical fear of adult sexuality or—as I argued—from the governess's need to be loved seems to me a *relatively* minor—though not, of course, unimportant—issue. James was a profound psychologist, and sex and love are fundamental aspects of human development; there is no reason that both cannot be factors in a work as many-layered as *The Turn of the Screw*. My only quarrel with Freudian critics is that, like their master, they too often insist on the primacy of the sexual and ignore other, equally deep, human needs and motivations.

One issue on which Professor Brumm and I differ irreconcilably, it seems, is the question of the governess's final self-awareness. I believe that the governess attains, after the events she recounts, a genuine self-knowledge which accounts for her exemplary character when Douglas encounters her years later, and explains the self-accusing allusions in her narrative; Professor Brumm asserts that she "remains a victim to Victorian prudery" and "has not gained any insight" regarding the real issues in her conflict with the children or, presumably, her own subconscious motives. And this brings us to the question of tragedy as James conceives it.

Professor Brumm argues that if the term tragedy is to remain meaningful, it must be strictly defined, and her own definition is a traditional one: "a fall from a high position in a fateful contest with powers

and values" (92). If this definition applied to all the tragedies commonly considered great, it might well disqualify *The Turn of the Screw* from consideration, since neither the governess nor her charges can be seen as occupying a high position in society. Since the revival of tragedy in the Renaissance, however, there has been no general agreement about its salient features; the debate has involved many of the most eminent English and Continental critics and dramatists, and the focus has changed according to the needs and prejudices of the age and the writers involved. The details of these disagreements need not concern us: the point is that there was and is no agreement on what constitutes tragedy apart from its involving misfortune. Tragedy involves a fall, certainly, but that fall need not be from a high social position and can sometimes be construed, especially in modern works, as primarily psychological.

If we look at the work of Shakespeare, which is obviously seminal in modern English and Continental thought on the subject, we see immediately that he wrote several different kinds of tragedy. There are tragedies of revenge (*Titus Andronicus*), tragedies of love, circumstance, and fate (*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Romeo and Juliet*), and problematic tragedies which test any definition of the genre (*Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*). Working with whatever came to hand, and concerned with filling the theatre, Shakespeare often combined tragic modes to create as broad a dramatic appeal as possible. In what are generally acknowledged as his greatest tragedies, however, there is a central pattern which can be summarized as tragic choice, disaster, recognition, and recovery. The protagonist makes a wrong decision (through some error or frailty, Aristotle would say), the effects of which bring misfortune down on many heads and ultimately threaten the entire society. At some point late in the play, he recognizes his error, accepts responsibility for it, and in doing so is reintegrated with the moral world he has violated. This point can be precisely identified in *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, while *Hamlet* is an exception to virtually all rules and patterns. The protagonist in each of these plays accepts his own impending death as the consequence of his own

actions; Othello even serves as his own executioner.

It is this kind of tragedy—to which high position is irrelevant—that seems to me to retain its validity in our time and in non-dramatic genres. Few people today believe in fate or the whim of the gods, but most believe in choice and recognize that we can make disastrously wrong choices because of ignorance, evil impulses, or personal demons. The consequences of these choices are often irrevocable, and our only consolation is to have learned something in an experiential way which we could not have learned from handbooks, and to amend our lives accordingly; as in the first tragedy of our culture, we eat from the Tree of Knowledge and live with the consequences. It is this unhappy (if not fatal) fall from innocence to experience, not the fall from high position, that characterizes great tragedy in the post-classical world. It is this fall which Henry James dramatized again and again, and it animates many of his most compelling works. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Washington Square*, and *The Golden Bowl*—to take just three examples which involve female protagonists—he traces the arc of characters' developing consciousness in time: the women in these narratives can truly say, as Kate Croy does on the last page of *The Wings of the Dove*, "We shall never be again as we were!" In *The Turn of the Screw*, James gives us the immensely moving spectacle of the governess narrating, from a later perspective of full knowledge, the errors of her youth.

Although the governess's story is strictly neither Greek nor Shakespearean in its development and resolution, it shares with its forebears an awareness of the tragic nature of knowledge itself; it is tragedy *mutatis mutandis* for a secular age, as I suggested in my original conclusion (42-43). Contemporary critics have written on the role of tragedy in the Victorian and modern novel, and have addressed, among other issues, the question which concerns Professor Brumm—that of the protagonist's social position. Jeannette King, for example, notes that "the novelist [...] who chooses to make his hero a common man is faced with the problem of finding compensating factors for the loss of the (symbolic) values that derive from the hero's identification

with the fate of his people."¹ The more perceptive Victorian critics gradually came to understand, however, that "the absence of [tragedy's] traditional majestic qualities was due to the underlying philosophy of the realists" (7) and that "honour can belong to the hero not only by birthright, but by achievement" (6). The absence of finality in many novels could also be seen as a deliberate choice on the part of modern fiction writers: "The cathartic resolution was rejected because it alleviated the horror of the tragic experience," and "the suggestion that it was life, not death, that is tragic" became an acceptable one (13). Serious novelists were "trying to bring together traditional formal concepts of tragedy and contemporary tragic experience, the stylised and the real, the form and the feeling," (13) and this was especially true of James.

I tried to show in my article that the verbal, situational, and thematic allusions to *King Lear*, while not conclusive in themselves, form part of a series of references and structures which define *The Turn of the Screw* as a tragic drama of choice, recognition, and ultimate redemption. Professor Brumm sees the novella as "a hybrid form of narration combining the ghost story and the detective story with what may be called the 'governess story'" (93); she cites James's declaration in his "Preface" that he wished "to improvise with extreme freedom" and takes this as evidence that the novella is incompatible with "the stringent literary form of tragedy" (92). Like Professor Brumm, I see *The Turn of the Screw* as a hybrid (43-44), but find a different significance in the fact. I see it as proof that James, like Shakespeare, was not confined by rules and could combine various genres within the pattern of tragedy to create a work unique in literature.

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NOTE

¹Jeannette King, *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel: Theory and Practice in the Novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James* (Cambridge: CUP, 1978) 4.