THE TURN OF THE SCREW *BY HENRY JAMES- A NOVEL BASED ON A FREUDIAN STUDY OR A GHOST STORY?*

Otilia SIMION
"Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Tg-Jiu

Abstract*: Oscar Cargill's " Henry James as Freudian Pioneer," is an astonishing paper on Breuer and Freud Studies in Hysteria, in particular "The Case of Miss Lucy R.," which is clearly a source for The Turn of the Screw. Some people say there is no evidence that James read Studies in Hysteria, and they're right, but only if they ignore many clear signals, both internal and external, that he did.*

Keywords: *Freudian Story, ghost story, reliable.*

According to his thesis, the governess is a neurotic case of sex repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the hallucinations of the governess. The children deny seeing them, and Mrs. Grose denies it, too. Of great significance, surely, is that James did not include *The Turn of the Screw* with his other ghost stories in the New York edition; rather, he included it in volume 12, with stories of quite another kind, *The Aspern Papers.* Second, the governess said the other servants thought her "too proud for my position, and they united in intriguing against me and told the guardian of the children all sorts of things about me." However, what if the governess is "reliable"? What if in *The Turn of the Screw* those are *real ghosts*.? Quint and Miss Jessel actually lived there, on that estate, and they really damaged real children, and the damage of their presence lingers. The governess didn't *make that up*--unless she made everything up--in which case she is Henry James.

Contemporary records indicate that in the 1840s--the period in which 'The Turn of the Screw' seems to be set-governesses accounted for the single largest category of female patients in English asylums for the insane.

We should look at the emotional state the governess is in just before the ghosts appear to her. Prior to seeing Peter Quint, she finds herself "under a charm," "lifted aloft on a great wave of infatuation and pity So in her fantasy she projects a "bad" master. She hates and fears what she desires, and the figure embodies her double feeling.

According to Edmund Wilson in his famous essay"The Ambiguity of Henry James",the "thread" of this screw is mental disorder. Wilson says, "there is never any real reason for supposing that anybody but the governess sees the ghosts." The children deny seeing them, and Mrs. Grose denies it, too. Wilson adds, "Observe also from the Freudian point of view, the significance of the governess's interest in the little girl's pieces of wood": the governess says that Flora "had picked up one which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast." Wilson notes, "the male apparition first appears on a tower and the female apparition on a lake."

Most compelling,too, is Oscar Cargill "Henry James as Freudian Pioneer," an astonishing paper on Breuer and Freud *Studies in Hysteria*, in particular "The Case of Miss Lucy R.," which is clearly a source for *The Turn of the Screw.* Some people say there is no evidence that James read *Studies in Hysteria*, and they're right, but only if they ignore many clear signals, both internal and external, that he did. As a conclusion,

BDD-A5646 © 2008 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:04 UTC)

Professor Cargill's says that Edmund Wilson was profoundly right in his characterization of the governess: there are no 'ghosts' in the story--the phantoms are creations of an hysterical mind, they are hallucinations." To think that way is, to my mind, to miss completely the power of the story. Is the governess "reliable"? Of course she is. If you don't believe in ghosts anymore how do you read that talkative apparition in *Hamlet*, if he isn't the "ghost" of Hamlet's father? In *The Turn of the Screw* those are *real ghosts.* Quint and Miss Jessel actually lived there, on that estate, and they really damaged real children, and the damage of their presence lingers. The governess didn't *make that up*--unless she made everything up--in which case she is Henry James.

However, James did not include *The Turn of the Screw* with his other ghost stories in the New York edition; rather, he included it in volume 12, with stories of quite another kind, *The Aspern Papers*. Second, the governess said the other servants thought her "too proud for my position, and they united in intriguing against me and told the guardian of the children all sorts of things about me."

It has also been argued that Miss Jessel and Peter Quint are not really ghosts at all; they are good fairies. Their business is to protect the children from the evil figures in the real world--the original parents who went off to India, the uncle who wants no word whatsoever about them (poor Mrs. Grose is right when she says, "He ought to *be* here--he ought to help"), the headmaster who expels Miles for "saying things." The governess is not set off to madness by nothing; if she finally comes to madness, it is through her passionate response to deep trouble in the real world.

The young woman proceeds to fight the invading evil in the name of hothouse purity and domestic sainthood. That she destroys the children in saving them is understandable: her contemporaries were doing so all around her, and would do so for the next six decades." The governess lives in the romantic castle of Bly, the Victorian fantasy, besieged by sex ghosts in the Victorian nightmare. In the prologue to the tale a woman asks, "And what did the former governess die of?-so much respectability?" Exactly. With no experience, no training, the governess is charged with a huge responsibility, and she cracks--but she cracks under pressure that might crack us all.

The Turn of the Screw can also be considered a familiar tale, a mystery novel or detective story about the murder of a child: As in all detective stories, the crime is not uncovered until the end. But in contrast to the classic mystery novel plot, this crime is also not committed until the end: paradoxically enough, the process of detection here precedes the committing of the crime. The self-proclaimed detective ends up discovering that he himself is the author of the crime he is investigating. The story has the classical neatness of tragedy. Richard Chase reminds us that a careful reading of the tale convinces us that the ghosts may really be there, marvelously adapted to but finally independent of the governess's fantasies. The governess is not a lunatic. Her version of reality is only in degree different from the false but precious and jealously guarded version we all form in our minds. In its desperate sensibility and intense cultivation it is particularly like the imagination of Henry James. The governess's great duty is to protect the children from evil, and she commits precisely the crime she wanted to prevent. But that does not make her unreliable--save in the sense that we all are.

BDD-A5646 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:04 UTC)