

THE "HALLUCINATION"

THEORY OF "THE TURN OF THE SCREW"

The 'hallucination' theory of the "The Turn of the Screw" is best known in the discussion of it by Mr. Edmund Wilson in "The Triple Thinkers", though he disclaims having originated it. He states it as follows: "according to this theory, the young governess who tells the story is a neurotic case of sex repression; and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the hallucinations of the governess." This theory has been argued with such persuasiveness that it is time to refute it, and it can be refuted both by internal and by external evidence.

Mr. Wilson analyses the story at length, in the interests of his theory, so it will be well to provide an analysis of the story on its face-value.

In the prologue one Douglas introduces the governess's manuscript. He makes it clear that he completely believes in her story, and regards her as a person of the greatest distinction of mind and character. She is the daughter of a clergyman; in answer to an advertisement she comes up to London, and is offered a post by a rich, young bachelor who wants a governess for his orphaned niece and nephew. The conditions attached to the post are that she is to take complete responsibility, and never to bother the guardian about his wards. She accepts; it is admitted that she has fallen in love with her employer. She goes to Bly, his house in Essex, where Flora, the little girl has been left with the house-keeper, Mrs Grose, and some servants.

She learns that the boy, Miles, has been expelled from his school: no reason is given. She also learns from Mrs Grose that the former governess, Miss Jessel, went away, and died; Mrs Grose is obviously unwilling to pursue the subject.

In his analysis of this part of the story it is hard not to feel that Mr Wilson has been slightly disingenuous, in his attempts to shew the morbid mind of the governess. "The boy, she finds, has been sent home from school for reasons into which she does not inquire but which she colors, on no evidence at all,

with a significance somehow sinister... She learns that the former governess left, and that she has since died, under circumstances which are not explained but which are made in the same way to seem ominous."

After a period of halcyon days, when the children are at their most charming, and when the governess thinks all that is needed to complete her felicity is the presence of their guardian, approving her endeavours for them, there comes a change actually like the spring of a beast."

The figure of a man appears on one of the two towers of Bly, first taken by her for the master, and then seen obviously not to be he. Later he appears at the outside of a ground-floor window. She observes that he is wearing smart clothes, not his own. Mrs Grose at once identifies the description: he is a valet of the master's, Peter Quint, who had once been left in charge at Bly, and used to wear his master's clothes - Quint was dead. Mrs Grose also reveals that he was a bad character, and that he was "too free" with Mikes, and "too free" with everyone. The governess believes that he has come back to haunt the children, and that it is her duty to protect them.

Soon afterwards the governess is sitting by the side of the lake, and Flora is playing near her. She becomes aware of a third person on the other side of the lake. Flora has her back to the water: "she had picked up a small, flat piece of wood 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 and make the thing a boat. This second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place." The governess looks up and sees a handsome but evil woman in black, whom she concludes to be her predecessor. Mrs Grose confirms that Miss Jessel was "infamous", reveals that she had an affair with Quint, and implies that she went home to have a child by him, and died in consequence. The governess believes, encouraged in this belief by Mrs Grose, that the children know of and connived at the affair between Quint and Miss Jessel, and had been in some way corrupted by them; she further believes that they know that their dead friends haunt Bly.

At this point Mr Wilson states, correctly, that there is as yet no proof of anyone but the governess having seen the apparitions. He also calls attention to the Freudian imagery: the little girl's symbolic game with the pieces of wood, which so

held the governess's gaze, and the first apparition of the male spectre on a tower, of the female by a lake. These points will be considered later.

The only circumstance he admits as contradictory to his hypothesis that the ghosts are hallucinations, is the fact that the governess's description of the first ghost is identified by Mrs Grose as Quint, of whom she has not yet heard. With great ingenuity he tries to shew that she has built him up out of a chance hint from Mrs Grose that there had been someone else in the place, other than the master, who "liked everyone young and pretty." However the description of Quint is so circumstantial that it cannot be so easily explained away. Furthermore, Miss Jessel is also seen distinctly before the new governess has any details about her, and she is convinced of her "infamy", although the worst Mrs Grose had ever hinted was that she was not sufficiently "careful" in some matters. Before her appearance behind the lake, nothing was known to her successor of Miss Jessel's affair with Quint; we are expressly told that there had been no servants' gossip. But the chief objection to the "hallucination" theory is the character of the governess herself, so carefully established in the prologue, and maintained throughout the story, as that of a girl keeping her balance and courage in the most frightful circumstances.

After a second, brief, halcyon period "there suddenly came an hour", the narrator tells us, "after which, as I look back, the affair seems to me to have been all pure suffering." There is a third appearance of Quint, and the mysterious conduct of the children convinces the governess that they are in touch with the ghosts. "They're his and hers... Quint's and that woman's" she tells Mrs Grose. "They want to get to them." Quint and Miss Jessel are coming back to keep the children safe for Evil. Mrs Grose wants the governess to write to their uncle, but she decides that she must keep to her pledge, and not bother him.

The children keep up the fiction that their uncle is coming to see them. Miles asks his governess when he is going to school again, and says that he will get his uncle to come down to Bly. This plunges her in an agony of indecision, and she is tempted to run away from the situation, but decides that she must not desert her post. Mr Wilson states at this point: "she is now apparently in love with the boy" — but this is not apparent on a natural reading of the text.

There follows the second appearance of Miss Jessel, and a

curious manifestation in Miles's room, where Mr Wilson admits that the supernatural element can only be explained away by throwing doubt not only on the governess's explanation of her sensations, but also on her record of the sensations themselves. "She has felt a 'gust of frozen air', and yet sees that the window is 'tight'. Are we to suppose she merely fancied that she felt it?" We shall see later the value of this admission.

Flora, having been lost, is found by the side of the lake. The governess for the first time names the ghosts: "where, my pet, is Miss Jessel?" she asks. The dead governess appears, dreadfully, across the lake. "She was there, so I was justified, she was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad:" (The first person to examine, and to reject the hallucination theory is the governess herself). Mrs Grose does not see the apparition, and Flora denies that she sees it, turning in a violent reaction of hatred against the living governess. She continues in this state, and is sent up to London with Mrs Grose.

Miles and the governess are left alone together. She presses him to tell her why he was expelled from school, and he confesses. He "said things", to "a few", to those he liked, and they must have repeated them "to those they liked." "It all sounds very harmless", is Mr Wilson's extraordinary comment. It is hard to imagine anything much more harmful: the little boy of innocent even angelic appearance, with a mind filled with the abominations of Quint and Miss Jessel, spreading his dirty secrets round the school. In a moment the governess has seen an even more dreadful possibility: "there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent." He might have been the innocent carrier of the germs of corruption, ignorant of what he carried, and unjustly punished for carrying them.

This is the moment of the governess's victory, when Miles's soul is purged by confession, and there is complete confidence between them. Quint makes a last attempt against him; the boy does not see the apparition at the window, but the governess cries: "no more, no more, no more!"

"Is she here?" asks the boy, and names Miss Jessel. Mr Wilson comments, in direct contradiction to the text: "He has, in spite of the governess's efforts, succeeded in seeing his sister and has heard from her of the incident at the lake." We have Mrs Grose's word as well as the governess's that the children

have not met — but Mr Wilson is bound to go to this length if he is to keep his theory.

The governess says that it is not Miss Jessel. "It's he?" asks Miles. Whom does he mean by "he"? she enquires. "Peter Quint - you devil."

She holds him in her arms, shews him that the figure has vanished. He gives a cry, and dies in her arms. On the "hallucination" theory she has frightened him to death. On a natural reading he dies, worn out by the struggle between good and evil, in the moment of triumph, like Morgan Morcen in *The Pupil*.

The "hallucination" theory can then only be held

(1) If we disbelieve Douglas's estimate of the governess's character.

(2) If we give a very strained explanation of her description of Quint.

(3) If we believe that she is deluded about the very sense-data experienced in Miles's room, not only in her interpretation of them.

(4) If we believe, on no evidence, that Miles had got into touch with Flora after the scene by the lake.

But the chief objection is one of general impression: this is not what the story means, and only perverted ingenuity, of a kind which has little to do with literature, could have detected the "clue." This is the ultimate answer to all such theories, from the Shakespeare — Bacon controversy to Verrall's brilliant perversities about Greek tragedy. In this case, there is a desire for a "scientific" explanation, an unwillingness to make the necessary "suspension of disbelief" in ghosts, which is utterly opposed to the spirit in which the book should be read. It is only because the theory has received the support of a critic of Mr Wilson's importance that it is worth proceeding further to its final refutation.

Mr Wilson cites the preface to "The Turn of the Screw" as external proof of his theory.

(1) Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not "ghosts at all, as we now know the ghosts, but goblins, elves, imps, demons as loosely constructed as those of the old trials for witchcraft."

(2) Henry James speaks of "our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and absurdities."

dities — *by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them; a different matter...*" (Mr Wilson's italics). Mr Wilson says of the words in italics: "these words seem impossible to explain except on the hypothesis of hallucination."

But if we believe "our young woman's" record of the actual happenings to be crystalline clear, it is on that alone extremely difficult to accept the hypothesis of hallucination, as I have already shewn. Moreover the preface itself shews us how we can doubt her explanation of the happenings, without supposing her to be the victim of hallucination. She clearly believes that she sees the spirits that once animated the earthly bodies of Quint and Miss Jessel; we can believe that she did indeed see *ab extra* apparitions, that another person with the right vision could have seen, without accepting her view of their eschatological status. They are not spirits of the dead, matter for psychological research, but "goblins damned", — devils that have assumed the form of Quint and Miss Jessel to tempt the children. And this is surely the clear meaning of what Henry James says in the preface.

If Henry James were trying to hint in his preface that the ghosts were hallucinations, then he was going about this in a very tortuous way; it seems rather that there alone he has provided enough evidence to discredit this theory. Yet Mr Wilson can write: "When we look back in the light of these hints, we become convinced that the whole story has been primarily intended as a characterization of the governess." If this were what he really intended, then we could only explain Henry James's references in his letters to "The Turn of the Screw" on the hypothesis that he was a pathological liar.

As he nearly always did, Henry James began to construct this story not from a character, but from a scrap of anecdote. This scrap of anecdote had been told him by Archbishop Benson at Addington: "the vaguest essence only was there — some dead servants and some children. This essence *struck* me and I made a note of it (of a most scrappy kind) on going home."

On the character of the governess, his letter to H.G. Wells is quite final: "Of course I had, about my young woman to take a very sharp line. The grotesque business I had to make her picture and the childish psychology I had to make her trace and present, were, for me at least, a very difficult job, in which absolute lucidity and logic, and a singleness of effect were imperative. Therefore I had to rule out subjective complications

of her own — play of tone &c., and keep her impersonal save for the most obvious and indispensable little note of courage — without which she wouldn't have had her data."

In short, the governess is the Jamesian observer or narrator, deliberately left *flou*, and only characterized up to the point which will make her observation plausible. The point of the story lies in the original anecdote told by the Archbishop.

Mr Wilson argues that it lacks "serious point" unless sex-frustration is the point; and he links it with Henry James's studies of spinsters in "The Bostonians" or "The Marriages." But the affinity is surely rather with "The Pupil" or "What Maisie Knew"; with the latter book, published in 1896, a year previous to "The Turn of the Screw", the affinity is particularly close — that book ends with the rescue of a small child by a faithful governess from possible corruption at the hands of two immoral step-parents.

Of "The Turn of the Screw" Henry James wrote to F.W. H. Myers: "the thing I most wanted not to fail of doing, under penalty of extreme platitude, was to give the impression of the communication to the children of the most infernal imaginable evil and danger — the condition, on their part, of being as *exposed* as we can humanly conceive children to be." This is surely a sufficiently serious point, and the fact that the details of the Evil are left to our imagination, links "The Turn of the Screw" with other stories of Henry James's where a secret is never revealed to the reader, e.g. "The Figure in the Carpet" and "Owen Wingrave."

The data given to Henry James by the Archbishop were an old house, and two children haunted by dead servants, with the design of "getting hold" of them. He has added a governess, a rich and handsome guardian, and an old house-keeper. Whence do these three figures derive? I think from "Jane Eyre". Jane Eyre went as governess to the orphaned ward of a rich bachelor (as she thought him), and had a housekeeper for company; she also was in love with her employer. When the first apparition of Quint is seen, the governess of "The Turn of the Screw" asks herself: "was there a 'secret' at Bly — a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?" It is much to say that she had been reading "Jane Eyre", as well as "The Mysteries of Udolpho"; the events of "The Turn of the Screw"

are dated about the time of the publication of Charlotte Brontë's novel. But Henry James knew "Jane Eyre", even if the governess did not, and it is hard to resist the conviction that he was here thinking of the mad Mrs Rochester.

It is from Literature, not from the abnormal psychology of Henry James or of his governess, that the relations between her and the ghosts arise.

All that is left of the "hallucination" theory after close examination, is the fact, on which it was based, of the sexual imagery in "The Turn of the Screw": the man appears for the first time on a tower, wearing the clothes of the master, with whom the governess is in love: Miss Jessel appears for the first time behind a lake: Flora plays a symbolic game with pieces of wood. This is an interesting discovery, but of limited importance, and it is dangerous to draw too many conclusions from it.

Mr Stephen Spender makes the following comment in "The Destructive Element": "The only difficulty is that if the imagery were worked out consciously, it is hardly likely that James would have anticipated Freud with such precision. The horrible solution suggests itself that the story is an unconscious sexual fantasy, or that James has entered into the repressed governess's situation with an intuition that imposed on it a deeper meaning than he had intended."

This is not, as we have seen, "the only difficulty". And fortunately a solution can be suggested less distasteful than to call (however indirectly) a great writer a "repressed governess."

The sexual imagery is of a surface nature, the decoration of the story and not the story itself — it is giving it a quite disproportionate importance to call the story a "sexual fantasy" on the strength of it. One might as well, on the strength of Miss Spurgeon's studies, say that "Romeo and Juliet" is a sun myth, because she has shown that the dominating image in that play is Light.

The imagery in "The Turn of the Screw", one need hardly doubt, comes from the subconscious of an author, who was not aware of its sexual significance. Nor need that conclusion alarm us, if we consider what his conscious intelligence was at the moment triumphantly doing — it was making a great work of art out of a diabolically dirty story, treating the theme both with candour, and with crystalline purity. If some unresolved

elements lingering in the unconscious, (one can hardly touch dirt without some of it sticking), have found their resolution in the imagery, and have added to the total atmosphere of evil, it is only another illustration of the way that everything at times miraculously works together for good, when a novelist is producing a great novel. If we are aware of the symbolism, and do not let it delude us, it adds to our appreciation of "The Turn of the Screw."

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