

The Interpretation of the “Turn of the Screw” in the Movie “The Innocents”

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Abstract

In 1898 Henry James published the novel “The Turn of the Screw”. The book, on a first glance, is a seemingly plain ghost story about a governess experiencing visions of the spirits of the previous governors, in a castle at the English countryside. However, the book has caused a lot of controversy amongst literary critics, which have interpreted it in various ways, but mostly on the grounds of a story about the sexual oppression of the governess. This theory regards the appearance of the aforementioned spirits as a result of this exact erotic deprivation. The novel has, also, been a source for various theatrical and cinema adaptations. In this paper, we chose its most famous cinematographic adaptation, “The Innocents” (1961), directed by Jack Clayton. By means of comparing the two works of art, we have drawn conclusions in reference to the way of the interpretation of the literary work by the director and the screenplay writer of the movie.

Keywords: Henry James, Turn of the screw, The Innocents, Jack Clayton

1. Introduction

The house confinement we are experiencing may be equivalent to nightmares and night awakenings with the imperceptible feeling that night visitors threaten to destroy our peace of mind. However, upon watching us wake up in terror, Henry James exclaims - perhaps mischievously- “I caught you”. And he takes out of his pocket the manuscript of the famous “Turn of the Screw”, a story of incarceration and (consequent) ghosts almost 150 years before we close our windows to mysterious - or even less mysterious - viruses.

2. The turn of the screw

2.1 Plot

“The Turn of the Screw”, one of Henry James' best-known novels, recounts the story of the young Miss Giddens, who, after a brief meeting with the charming owner of a castle in the English countryside, takes the place of the governess for his nieces (Flora and Miles) who live in that castle. Provided, however, that he is not, in any way, going to be bothered by issues concerning the two children. The house seems to be an earthly paradise until the moment when the spirits of the previous caretaker and the former governess appear. Two spirits, however, whose carnal owners, after experiencing an insane love affair, no longer belong to the world of the living. And if perhaps the heroes of the novel and -perhaps- the author himself eagerly wanted to be left in the silence of the literary paradise, for 150 years now, the analysis of the work and its cinematic and theatrical metaphor have been a favorite task of literary critics of all kinds of artists. While artistic endeavors sometimes know the laurels of success and sometimes the unintentional tartars of failure, critical approaches create academic debates at a steady - but charming - pace. With their weapons ranging from common sense to Freud and all kinds of feminist theories, here we have chosen the most important cinematic metaphor of Joyce's work, Jack Clayton's “The Innocents,” starring Deborah Kerr. By reading the book and trying to see the film with our eyes on the critical reviews of the work, we will, also, retrieve the heroes from their cinematic and literary residences to give them the touch of timeless symbols.

2.2 Interpretations

Out of the comfort of a retro armchair, Joyce created a modest, but thirsty, governess for a love affair, a good housewife and a good-natured woman, and two children, the epitome of innocence.

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Placing these heroes in the blender of voluntary confinement in a paradise castle, he creates the perfect vinaigrette for a salad with horror as its main ingredient and hidden ace in its sleeve, paranoia. So, if you have tasted the horror, the ubiquitous literary critics are here to talk to us about the hidden taste called paranoia and to turn the story into a harsh tale of immersion of madness in the mind a sexually oppressed woman." Key to *The Turn of the Screw* lies in the fact that "the governess who is made to tell the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and that the ghosts are not real ghosts but hallucinations of the governess" (Wilson, 1938). In addition, the analysis of the work focuses to the love felt by Miss Giddens towards the kid's uncle "She is still the fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicar- age who in her first interview becomes infatuated with her employer, and after confused thinking about him at Bly, discovers her first apparition, the figure of a man on a tower". At this point, it would also be useful to refer to a similar case cured by Freud in 1891 "'The Case of Miss Lucy R.'"²⁷ A victim of "chronic purulent rhinitis," Lucy R. came to Freud late in 1891 for a treatment that lasted nine weeks and resulted in a complete cure. Lucy R. was the governess of two children, the daughters of a factory superintendent living in the suburbs of Vienna. She was "an English lady of rather delicate constitution" who was suffering from "depression and lassitude" as well as being "tormented by the subjective sensations of smell," especially the smell of burned pastry." "James's governess experiences what Freud defines as a traumatic experience similar to the rebuke of Miss Lucy- shortly after coming to Bly. After accepting the post with both trepidation and hope, she passes two sleepless nights in London, is possessed by anxiety on her way down to Bly, is unable to sleep the first night there, and then has a "second [really a fourth] sleepless night." While she is in this exhausted condition, she receives from her employer an unopened letter which announces Miles's dismissal from school. But the unopened letter reveals to her not merely her employer's indifference to the orphans in her care but to herself." (Cargill, 1963). There is no way of reaching knowledge as to the possibility of Joyce knowing about this case, however, another fact which reinforces the theory is this of his sister's, Alice's Joyce, "This woman, of whom the novelist was so fond, lucid and brilliant most of the time, was subject to "violent turns of hysteria," the first attacks occurring in 1867 or 1868 (or earlier), when she was nearing twenty." (Cargill, 1963). Consequently, he may have been influenced by the personal story of mental illness in his family and ended up in writing a story containing elements of it.

3. Comparing "The turn of the screw" to "The Innocents"

From the beginning of the story, our book places us in the universe of a meeting of the future governess with the children's uncle, where a discreet - but one-sided - erotic thunderbolt seems to take place. When the uncle's ice-cold attitude towards the young woman is strictly respected, the children's previous innocence will give way to the voluntary concealment of ghosts. But two ghosts that sealed their earthly presence with a passionate love. And, as much as the imagination of the governess conceives ghosts, they threaten to entice the innocence of children into their unscrupulous reality. Two children, of which Miss Giddens seems to be ultimately generously offering her maternal wings to the young boy. So, perhaps, turning her sexually repressed into ghostly hangouts, Miss Giddens is gradually but steadily lead to paranoia.

And if, after all, the book seems to frighten, not only because of unexpected ghosts but, above all, because of the unexpected consequences of sexual oppression, the film remains faithful to the author's suggestive footprints. In fact, at first glance, it seems to follow the story step by step, introducing quite a few new facts, which, however, do not change substantial parts of the narration of the book. Firstly, we should note the fact that there are other servants in the house besides the housekeeper. There is also the young Flora who often plays with a turtle during the movie, but not in the book. Moreover, in the movie, before the expulsion of Miles from his school, Flora has predicted that he would be sent home, whereas in the book, nothing of the sort happens. In the literary work, a letter arrives announcing the expulsion without the interference of the girl or any other prediction for this fact. In addition, in the movie, we have more references to the family of Miss Giddens. For example, in the beginning of the movie she receives a letter from her sister with a photo of her family which seems to have many members. In the book, "we are given, only, a number of oblique glimpses into the young woman's home and early environment. They all point to its stifling narrowness. From the confinement of her provincial home this young and inexperienced woman comes up to London to answer an advertisement for a governess (Goddard, 1957). This photo shows that the family plays an important role for the young governess. When the young boy, Miles, arrives, in the book Miss Giddens asks him nothing about the reasons of his expulsion, whereas in the film she persists in knowing about his behavior at school. Furthermore, in the cinematic version, young Miles seems to feel neglected by their uncle.

In the book, no reference to their feelings towards the uncle is implied. As far as the behavior of Miles is concerned, in the book, he seems to have a constantly good relation with his sister. However, in the films he accuses her of lying, and they also quarrel a number of times.

Miles, in the film, seems to have a love towards horses, whereas this love is not stressed out in the book. We should, also, note, that, in the cinematic work, Miss Giddens, before seeing the spirit of Quint, the previous governor, finds a photo of him in the attic. In the book nothing of the sort takes place. In the contrary, the governess sees his spirit without having any contact to his figure and physical appearance. During the movie, we also have more scenes of the governess teaching the two kids, and of them playing a game of dressing up, whereas these scenes are not included in the book. Concerning, the relationship and death of the former governor and governess, in the book, the housekeeper refers to a love affair filled with passion. In the film, the cinematic character of the housekeeper talks about a relationship filled with violence and perversion. Moreover, in the book, the housekeeper does not know how the ex-governess died, as she died at her house. In the movie, she implies that the ex-governess committed suicide because of loving Quint. Finally, in the movie we have more religious references. Crosses and holy books seem to appear as Miss Giddens seems sure that the children are possessed. In the book, the religion does not appear as a possible solution.

However, recalling the cinematic characters for a second reading, behind the clear images of the various relations, there seem to be facts that have to be stressed out, which could lead to a specific reading of the scope of the film. Firstly, in the various critics of the book, there are references to the nature of the relationships of Miss Giddens and Miles, "one could "prove" that she is afflicted with pedophilia erotica and is therefore attempting to seduce little Miles". "The governess obviously prefers Miles to Flora; in fact, she admits that she "throws" herself upon him". She encourages him to address her as "my dear" and tells him that she is remaining at Bly primarily for the pleasure of "his company." She admits that his "secret precocity" makes him seem like an adult, as accessible as an older person". And she persuades Mrs. Grose to take Flora away so that she will be left alone with the boy. Having succeeded in this design, the governess reflects that she and Miles resemble a shy "young couple . . . on their wedding-journey"; and she asks him if he does not recall the night when she sat on his bed and told him that "there was nothing in the world" she would not do for him. To the reader she confesses that Miles has been for her "a revelation of the possibilities of beautiful "intercourse", a phrase loaded with Freudian ambiguity. (Jones, 1959)

In the film, the nature of the relationship between the governess and the young Miles is also portrayed in a special way. Miles, pays compliments twice at the governess for her beauty, the first time he sees her, and at a second instance when he says that she is very pretty to put spectacles. Compared, to the references made in the book, the film seems to portray the relationship in a way which the little boy acts as the corruptor and Miss Giddens as having more motherly sentiments. However, she finally sends out the little girl and stays on her own with young Miles. Consequently, she ends at being "corrupted" and succumbing to her hidden feelings. In both versions, he, finally, becomes her favorite and only protected, in the midst of personal crises and spiritual raids. Meanwhile, the sexual relationship between the two former servants seems to be gaining ground in the cinematic version with references to a relationship of violence and unbridled passion that led to the suicide of the former governess. In the literary work, the housekeeper, refers to a passionate love affair without including facts about violence and perversion. Moreover, in the book, according to Joyce himself "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; if not, more pleasingly, fairies of the legendary order, wooing their victims forth to see them dance under the moon. (Reed, 1949)

Summarizing, both versions, the literary and the cinematic, share most of their elements in common. The movie made, based on the novel, follows faithfully its narration with differences which point to its interpretation by the director and the screenplay writer. So, the basic differences concern Miss Giddens's relationship with young Miles, who is regarded as the corruptor, and the revelations concerning the nature of the relationship between Quint and Miss Jessel which is portrayed as containing violent and perverse aspects. Based on these facts, the movie seems to read the book in the scope of Miss Giddens being sexually oppressed and falling in love with the uncle. Her arrival at the house will trigger her nervous breakdown, while she is trying to indulge to heroic movies in order to save the children and prove to the uncle that she was competent for the job. Moreover, as Miles seems to pay her compliments, she somehow sees in him the face of the uncle she can never be loved from. Finally, the love affair of Quint and Jessel is portrayed more harshly in order to stress out the sexual oppression of Miss Giddens who sees the spirits of people who have not only fallen in love, but have experienced the dark side of sexual desire.

4. Conclusion

A literary horror text and a 1961 film adaptation using the means of a thriller movie allude to telling the story of a woman on the verge of collapse. A woman whose innocence will turn into a painful realization of long deprivations and will eventually take the form of sinking into paranoia. So, as probably Joyce would say, do not be afraid, for Casper and the unclean spirits of all kinds do not exist. But be afraid of all that burden of fear that accompanies the great passions and the eternal repulsions.

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