

**The Turn of the Screw: Henry James and Contemporary  
Psychoanalysis**

By

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It is no secret that Sigmund Freud's ideas have been roundly attacked during the last 20 years, however I believe that his contribution has been roundly misunderstood. While Freud's work does hold a number of issues that merit criticism, his central and, I believe, irrefutable contribution will stand the test of time. Freud's central enduring conceptualization is that human thought, feeling, and behavior are motivated by non-conscious forces, within the human mind, which are entirely outside of human awareness. This idea is such an enormously important step within the advance of our self knowledge that it ranks with the

Copernican notion of the heliocentric galaxy and with Darwin's ideas of natural selection and its evolutionary outcome.

All three of these thinkers, Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, have each in his own way assaulted the idea that humankind is master of the Universe. Copernicus, through his heliocentric view, implied that earth, i.e., humankind, is not the center of the universe. Darwin similarly implied that humankind is merely another link on the evolutionary chain rather than the center of God's creation and master of all that is upon the earth. Freud's contribution was the final insult. He suggested that we humans are unaware of the powerful forces that motivate our lives and therefore we are not even masters of our own internal homes. It is easy to see how these ideas have been experienced as an assault upon humankind's exalted ideas about itself.

Before I engage James' work I feel obligated to tell you something about my particular theoretical biases. In that effort I will speak briefly about the Vienna born, Chicago psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, and The Kohut Memorial Fund, one of the sponsors for this seminar.

As I just said, Freud was the first explorer of the interior of the human psyche. His primary concern was defining the nature and qualities of the unconscious mind. As most of you know, Freud believed that the motivating elements of the unconscious mind flowed from what he considered to be the two basic drives or instincts of human life, a sexual instinct and an aggressive instinct. Freud saw the expression of the sexual instinct in the child's wish to join sexually with the parent of the opposite sex and he saw the expression of the

aggressive instinct in the child's unconscious wish to murder the parent of the same sex. For Freud, the Greek tale of Oedipus, the son who kills his father and sleeps with his mother represented the unconscious enactment of the drives.

Heinz Kohut had another idea about the unconscious elements that motivate human thought, feeling, and behavior. Rather than considering the dual drives, sex and aggression, to be the central unconscious concerns of humankind, Kohut, writing in the early 70s, felt that the wholeness of the self, the unconscious wish, need, and sometimes drivenness to feel emotionally knit together, was the core concern of the unconscious mind. For Freud, castration anxiety and anxiety due to unconscious guilt were central features of humanness. For Kohut, the anxiety that comes when one's emotional existence is dismissed by an important other and the anxiety one has when one's self is crumbling are the central human anxieties. Sadly, we don't have time to discuss the ramifications of Kohut's theories but suffice it to say that his mode of thought challenged the then established psychoanalytic thinking and is responsible for many of the new psychoanalytic ideas that have emerged since he published his new ideas in 1971.

The Kohut Memorial Fund was established by Kohut's colleagues, friends and patients shortly after his early death in 1981. The Fund has the mission of perpetuating Kohut's ideas through a variety of activities, this seminar being one example.

I'll begin my discussion of James' "Turn of the Screw" with some thoughts Kohut had about the psychoanalytic field called *Applied Psychoanalysis*. In an

interesting paper, entitled “Beyond the Bounds of the Basic Rule,” and published in 1960, Kohut presented some important ideas about *Applied Psychoanalysis*, a field that attempts to view the myriad productions of human nature and creativity through a psychoanalytic lens. Prior to the publication of this paper, the usual psychoanalytic perspective on artistic creation viewed the artistic work through the lens of Freud’s dual instinct theory. Too often, however, the applied analysis used the work under study as a self-serving opportunity to validate Freud’s ideas and emphasized the work as an unconscious expression of the artist’s conflict over the drives. As a consequence, *Applied Psychoanalysis*, and even psychoanalysis itself, came to be viewed in some circles with the same distrust that greeted the interloping anthropologist whose arrogant attitude offended the culture he attempted to study. Ironically, I found contemporary contempt for this offensive attitude on the dustcover of a James biography written by Sheldon Novick, entitled, Henry James: The Young Man. There, one of the laudatory comments about the book reads, “It (the book) rescues America’s greatest novelist from the dread clutches of the psycho-biographers, and proves that there is no substitute for lucid, scholarly narrative.” A pithy but stinging indictment, I thought.

Kohut’s paper “Beyond the Bounds of the Basic Rule,” addresses this problem. In it Kohut quotes the German writer Herman Hesse who, in 1930, spoke strongly against the abuse of psychoanalytic understanding aimed at literary works. Hesse protested the reductionistic psychoanalytic attempt to explain the personality of an author by “analyzing” his work. Hesse wrote: “If a

patient should say to his analyst, 'My dear sir, I don't have either the time or the inclination for all these sessions, but I will give you here a package containing my dreams, wishes, and fantasies insofar as I have written them down, partly in verse; please take this material and decipher from it, if you please, whatever you need to know' – what a scornful response would such a patient receive from the doctor!" With irony Hesse poignantly raises the issue of whether a reliable analysis is possible without the lively and informative interaction of transference and counter-transference and all the rest of what happens in a well conducted psychoanalysis.

Kohut enumerates three potential problems for those engaged in applied psychoanalysis. The first relates to the qualifications of the investigator, the second relates to the subject matter and the method of its investigation, and the third relates to the validity of the goals that applied analysis attempts to achieve.

Regarding the first, the qualifications of the investigator, Kohut suggests that the investigator should ideally be proficient in two fields: the field of psychoanalysis and the field being studied. It is the rare investigator who is so qualified, although we are fortunate enough to actually have such a person with us in Bill Veeder, who is trained in both psychoanalysis and James studies. Psychoanalysts usually are amateurs in the field they are studying, yet too often they are not aware of this shortcoming and believe that with some serious effort they can become expert within the area they wish to explore. Nothing can be further from the truth, however, for true expertise requires prolonged immersion in a field.

Regarding the second problem, the worker in applied analysis faces a serious methodologic problem in that he or she is deprived the vital tool of free association and the interactive matrix that creates the analytic stage. While artistic productions do offer some of the same material as dreams, the analytic investigator, deprived of the creator's deepening and confirmatory associations, is vulnerable to wild speculation.

Finally, there is the plaguing question of the aims of applied analysis. Kohut asks, "Do we contribute anything of importance to the understanding of great men and of their creations when we apply our psychoanalytic clinical insights to this non-clinical subject matter, or do we force our methods and values upon a field where they do not belong?" (p 281 Search 1). In their applied psychoanalytic work, psychoanalysts have often been motivated, as I note earlier, by their need to substantiate Freud's ideas about the repressed unconscious and their interest in the traditional analytic concern of uncovering the contents of the unconscious. For these investigators, the work of art has importance only in that it allows access to the unconscious of the creator. It has been valued for the proof it seemingly offered for the veracity of Freud's theory.

I will heed Kohut's warning to analysts who venture into the creative meadows of humankind. I will not attempt to illuminate Henry James' personality with the light of analytic understanding since, not being a James scholar, I lack a grasp of the body of his work in a way that would create illuminating patterns for me. Furthermore, because I don't have James himself present I have neither the

transference-countertransference experience nor the string of associations that would give me the information I need to understand him in an analytic way.

What do I have available to me then, that will help me shed analytic light on “The Turn of the Screw?” I have an expertise in understanding the unconscious nature of human life and an appreciation of the dynamic unconscious processes that are set in motion when two people engage each other in any form of dialogue. Each member of this dyad brings the entirety of his or her own personal story into the interaction, whether they are aware of this fact or not. Each member of this dyad unconsciously contributes to the mix and together they co-create the unique ambiance that evolves out of their particular interaction.

I bring this particular understanding to “The Turn of the Screw” and from it I will address the form and process of this story rather than explore its content. How do I distinguish between form and content? What do I mean by form and what do I mean by content? Form is the way a story is told. Form concerns the style and manner of the story. Content, on the other hand, is what the story is about. For instance, “The Turn of the Screw” is a story about two children, and their relationships with an abandoning uncle, a governess, a housekeeper, and two ghosts. That’s its content. Many have speculated about the content. Questions have been raised about the psychological meanings and motivations of all its characters. To my surprise, a significant debate centers about whether the ghosts are real or whether they are part of the governess’ delusional system. For me, these questions miss the point in that the unique, intriguing, and even

captivating form of “The Turn of the Screw,” is what captures my attention. For me, “The Turn of the Screw” centers more about what isn’t told, about what isn’t said, than about what is. As I see it, “The Turn of the Screw” is not so much a story about abused children, a repressed governess, a neglectful uncle, etc. as it is a story about secrets.

Let’s look at all the secrets. Their number is remarkable. They begin with the children’s uncle. Who is he? What accounts for his remarkable disinterest in the children? How can he so easily hand them over to an unknown woman for their total care? We are told nothing about him. And who is the woman to whom they are given? We know nothing about her either, not even her name. James refers to her only as “The Governess.” Why is she so willing to assume the Uncle’s irresponsible charge?

Then we have the children. What is the secret that got Miles expelled from his school? What could he have done? He tells us that he said “things.” What could those “things” possibly have been? And what is the nature of the relationships between the children and the ghosts. What is the connection between Quint and Miles and similarly, what was Flora’s relationship with Miss Jessel? What do the ghosts want from the children? We are never told. And finally, there are three puzzling deaths. How did Ms Jessel die? Why did Quint, a robust man, die with such seeming ease. Why does Miles die in the end? Most perplexing of all, why did James create so many secrets, so many blank spaces, so many questions? Clearly he created a story that is as much about its form as it is about its content.



In his novella, James uses minimalist strokes, similar to those that create a Japanese print, a haiku, and even the old testament. James' style in "Turn of the Screw" provides his audience with the basic elements of the story and he then allows, even invites, his readers to fill in the blanks with elements of their own imaginations. We are told that James' novella is one of the most widely read stories in American literature and that it has stimulated a vast discussion among James scholars. I see a similarity between the vast body of literature, built upon this single text, and the rich rabbinic Midrashic tradition that has grown up around the sparsely written Mosaic Pentateuch. I see a similarity in both instances between the author's minimalist style and the readers' rich imaginative responses. Perhaps the common element between the two works lies in that aspect of human nature that abhors a narrative vacuum and rushes to fill it with creations of its own.

James actually tells us, in an essay introducing a collection of his short stories, that "The Turn of the Screw" is a fairy tale, just like those of the Brother's Grimm, and that his purpose in writing it the way he did was to tickle the imaginations of his readers into creating the story along with him.

Had James been concerned with content rather than form he would have written his story differently. He would not have created the blanks and secrets that quietly beckon us to fill them with the contents of our own imaginations. Had James been concerned with content rather than form he would have taken the same path as Truman Capote who wrote the screenplay for the movie version of "The Turn of the Screw."

In his screenplay, Capote responded to James' purposeful ambiguities by filling in the blanks and creating his own well-told and captivating story in which the children, Flora and Miles, actually are possessed by the ghosts. Capote leaves few blanks and secrets. However, by filling in these elements Capote disassembles what James had invented. He undoes the style of the story that so entices the reader's imagination. Capote's changes also render James' enigmatic title, "The Turn of the Screw" irrelevant and force Capote to choose a new title that fits the content of his new story. To make his title fit, Capote named his screenplay "The Innocents," a reference to the victimization of the children by the inhabiting ghosts. Something else, however, made the original title irrelevant? What was that?

To answer this we must reflect upon the title "The Turn of the Screw" itself. What does it mean? What did James have in mind? The phrase "the turn of the screw" refers to the 17<sup>th</sup> century thumbscrew, a torture device used to extract secrets people would not readily yield. I believe that James, in this story, intended to forcefully extract the contents of our imaginations from us. Each secret, each untold fact, forces us to fill that particular vacuum with some element from our own internal experience. In doing this James created a literary thumbscrew that forces us, since we cannot resist, to reveal elements of ourselves as we join him in the co-creation of this story. James' enigmatic title warns us that our election to enter these pages will expose us to this literary device. James knows full well that as he turns the screw we will react from the

recesses of our own imaginations and, just like Capote, we will hang our own emotional flesh upon the bare bones James provides.

For me, the major psychological ideas in this work are not related to the usual psychoanalytic concerns with sex and aggression nor with the question of whether the ghosts are real or delusions. For me, this story is about something broader

It has been said that creative people anticipate the future of a given culture. This certainly is true of James. One hundred years ago, writing at the same time that Freud presented his seminal work, The Interpretation of Dreams, James anticipated the current psychoanalytic sensibility that understands the therapeutic process as the co-creation of the two people involved, patient and therapist. In “The Turn of the Screw,” James, the author, recognizes that we, the readers, have our own subjective experiences and James seeks to engage our personal subjectivities into the frame he has created. Through the thumbscrew created by his secrets, allusions, and implications, James forces us to co-create the story with him as a product of our interactive subjectivities.

In this novella, Henry James, influenced by his philosopher brother William, presents us with the age-old dichotomies of subjectivity versus Truth and of absolutism versus relativism. What is fascinating for me is that while Freud and James created these major works at approximately the same time, they were each guided by a different world-view.

Freud, a neurologist, grew out of the scientific tradition of absolutism that reigned at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The scientific thinking of Freud's day erroneously assumed that the observer did not influence the observed and therefore, a well functioning investigator was capable of making completely objective observations.

Henry James, on the other hand, was influenced by his older brother William, an important turn-of-the-century American philosopher. Because of this influence it is worth taking a minute to explore brother William's interests. William James attempted to resolve the philosophical question of what can or cannot be known as "true." He viewed any given truth as relative, as something that differs from person to person, and as subject to change over time. His idea of diversity and changeability of truth stood in marked contrast to the objectivist idea that influenced Freud, the idea that reality was an absolute immutable unity. William rejected all absolute truths. He believed that the universe is a pluralistic reality, rather than a monistic unity. For James, it was precisely these qualities of formless diversity and risk-filled possibility that constituted the essence, and much of the appeal, of the human condition. William was concerned with the then unpopular ideas of subjectivity and relativism. These ideas anticipated the current post-modern view, a view that suggests Truth (with a capital T) does not exist, a view that suggests the observer does affect the observed and that absolute objectivity is therefore impossible to achieve.

When Freud invented his psychoanalytic method he followed the flawed absolutist scientific thinking of his time. It was an epistemologic mistake but not

one for which we should fault him too severely since we all are bound, in some form, to the elements of our time. Following the prevailing scientific zeitgeist, Freud based his treatment upon the notion that if an analyst were sufficiently neutral it would be possible to uncover and reveal the pure Truth contained within his analysand's unconscious. Freud saw a similarity between the stance of the appropriately removed surgeon and the equally neutral, unimpacted analyst who searched for Truth with the scalpel of free associations. Freud was not able to sufficiently consider the effect the analyst's subjectivity had upon the emotional life of his patient.

Although articulated differently, the current trend within contemporary psychoanalytic thinking is remarkably similar to the experience James creates in "The Turn of the Screw." James, like the contemporary analyst with his patient, invites his reader into the co-creation of a new space which, as we have seen, is the product of the imaginations of writer and reader. In psychoanalysis, this new entity that is the creation of the dyad is conceived of by some as a third element within the psychoanalytic situation. This new, co-created ambiance becomes a stage upon which unconscious processes of both participants dance and reveal themselves. However, since the purpose of the therapeutic meeting is for the betterment of the patient, it is the patient's psyche that occupies the position of centrality and the analyst's psyche is scrutinized as a source of information that aids in the development of the therapeutic process. This interactive matrix, created by the differing subjectivities of patient and analyst, is, as I have said, a co-creation. The study of this co-created matrix is known today

as intersubjectivity theory. It is an important newer development within psychoanalysis. Henry James anticipated this development by 100 years when he recognized and valued the inevitable interaction of people's subjective natures and its importance in understanding the human condition.

I will close my remarks by reading the attention grabbing opening paragraphs from a new book written by the psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden, another author who invites us to participate with him in the co-creation of his work and one of the most inventive psychoanalytic minds today.

Ogden writes:

“It is too late to turn back. Having read the opening words of this book you have already begun to enter into the unsettling experience of finding yourself becoming a subject whom you have not met, but nonetheless recognize. The reader of this book must create a voice with which to speak the words comprising it. Reading is not simply a matter of considering, weighing, or even of trying out ideas and experiences that are presented by the writer. Reading involves a far more intimate form of encounter. You, the reader, must allow me to occupy you, your thoughts, your mind, since I have no voice with which to speak other than yours. If you are to read this book, you must allow yourself to think my thoughts while I must allow myself to become your thoughts and in that moment neither of us will be able to lay claim to the thought as our own exclusive creation.

“The conjunction of my words and your mental voice does not represent a form of ventriloquism. A more complex and interesting human event is involved. A third subject is created in the experience of reading that is not reducible to

either writer or reader. The creation of a third subject...is the essence of the experience of reading, and, as will be explored in this volume, is also at the core of the psychoanalytic experience.

“You, the reader, will oppose me, deny me, perhaps humor me, but never entirely give way to me. This book will not be “understood” by you; you will not simply receive it, incorporate it, digest it, or the like. To the degree that you will have anything at all to do with it, you will transform it. You will destroy it, and out of that destruction will come a sound that you will not fully recognize. The sound will be a voice, but it will not be one of yours that you have heard before, for you have not previously destroyed me as you will encounter me in your reading of this book and the sound that you will hear is certainly not my voice since the words on this page are silent, composed as much by the white shapes around the black markings as by the markings themselves.

“...This book is a disturbance, a disruption to you. You may decide to put it down, but ... If you decide not to postpone the confrontation posed by this book, you will know something of the experience of the analyst as he begins the first meeting (and every subsequent meeting) with an analysand. The analyst must be prepared to destroy and be destroyed by the otherness of the subjectivity of the analysand and to listen for a sound emerging from that collision of subjectivities that is familiar, but different from anything that he has previously heard.”

I find Ogden’s words especially gripping when I think of them within the context of “The Turn of the Screw.” I am struck by the avant-gard nature of

James' intersubjective sensibilities. I also am struck by Britten's grasp of what James had in mind, demonstrated through his loyalty to the form and spirit of James' creation, an understanding that stands in contrast to Capote's rendition of this novella.

My praise of James' sensibilities does not diminish my appreciation for Freud's accomplishment. We owe an enormous debt to Freud for giving us the understanding that unconscious forces motivate our lives. I do wish to underscore, however, that Freud's objectivist stance, and that of many who came after him, assumes that Truth exists and that it can be found within the unconscious mind. This notion leads to the idea that one need only present Truth to one's patient, one need only to help a person have "insight" and that person will improve. I don't believe that happens.

James, a relativist, had the remarkable ability to resist the absolutist position of his day. He understood the nature of an intersubjective matrix and assumed that if invited, his reader would join him in the co-construction of his work. This remarkable ability enabled James to anticipate current trends within contemporary psychoanalysis, trends that conceive of the analyst and patient as co-creating the analytic situation rather than assuming the older, static view that saw the patient as a surgical specimen lying on the couch. In this contemporary view the patient is not "acted upon," the patient is not "analyzed." Instead, the treatment is a co-created partnership that explores the interactive matrix, the third, for the benefit of the patient.



