

TRACES OF BURKEAN SUBLIME IN HENRY JAMES' THE TURN OF THE SCREW

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss *The Turn of the Screw* by the famous American writer Henry James in relation to the concept of the 'sublime' put forward by English thinker Edmund Burke. Having always been associated with the gothic literature, this theory of the 'sublime' can be closely related with the effects of the happenings in James' novella. The curious incidents in the story, the supernatural elements, elements of terror and obscurities make such an analysis possible.

Especially, Burke's theory of the sublime can shed light on the effects of the gothic elements on the reader. The reflections of this theory on the possible effects of the story are also discussed in terms of Gothicism. In this respect, this article aims to analyze the novella in the light of Burke's definition of the sublime in many aspects.

Key Words: sublime, gothic, obscurity, awe, terror, supernatural.

“HENRY JAMES'İN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW* (YÜREK BURGUSU) ADLI ESERİNDE EDMUND BURKE'ÜN YÜCELİK TEORİSİNİN İZLERİ”

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, ünlü Amerikalı yazar Henry James'in *The Turn of the Screw* (*Yürek Burgusu*) adlı eserinde anlatılan olayları, İngiliz düşünür Edmund Burke'ün 'Yücelik' kavramı açısından tartışmaktır. James'in bu kısa romanında meydana gelen olaylar, daha çok gotik edebiyat türünün okuyucu üzerinde bıraktığı etkiyle yakınlık gösteren bu teori ışığında incelenebilir. Eserde gerçekleşen ilginç olaylar, doğaüstü gelişmeler, korku unsurları ve belirsizlikler böyle bir incelemeyi mümkün kılmaktadır.

Özellikle yukarıda belirtilen teknik unsurların okuyucu üzerinde bıraktığı etki Edmund Burke'ün teorisinin temelini oluşturmaktadır. Eserin, okuyucusu üzerinde bırakabileceği etkiler, aynı zamanda gotik edebiyat türünün eserdeki özellikleriyle birlikte, Burke'ün teorisi bağlamında ele alınmıştır. Bu bakımdan, bu çalışmada hedef, söz konusu eseri, birçok açıdan, Edmund Burke'ün yücelik tanımı ışığında ele almaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yücelik, gotik, belirsizlik, korku, dehşet, olağanüstü.

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“Traces of Burkean Sublime in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*”

Coming from a highly intellectual family, the famous American-born English novelist and playwright Henry James spent most of his life in Europe as a very prolific literary figure employing mostly Victorian realism in his works. His central focus points are generally first person narrations which are unreliable, the consciousness and psychology of the characters and ambiguous story lines which make him attractive to large numbers of readers. At certain points, James blends his 19th century social realism with modernist themes and techniques, and thus establishes a bridge between the two literary movements. Besides his realistic descriptions and subject matter and “in his intense focus on the consciousness of his major characters, James' major works foreshadow extensive developments in 20th century fiction.”¹

In his experimentation of narrative techniques, James shifts from realist themes to deeper, more complex and ambiguous stories throughout his career. Especially in his later career, he gives more importance to the consciousness of his characters, which is clearly seen in novels such as *The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew* and his most famous novella *The Turn of the Screw*. With his 1908 short story *The Jolly Corner* and *The Turn of the Screw*, James also experiments on horror fiction and ghost stories which increases the number of his readers dramatically. The latter is mostly recognized as his best horror story due to its ambiguous story line and narrative pattern which makes it hard to cope with. With these features and its gothic themes, this short narrative has been constantly studied as an example of gothic fiction. This classification is quite acceptable because the main story line follows the experiences of an unnamed governess and two little children with ghostly apparitions in an isolated setting, “a big, ugly, antique, but convenient house” with “empty chambers and dull corridors”², which gives the story an air of gloom, horror and mystery. The story opens with a narrator who, in a reading session of horror stories, reads from the account of a governess who is hired for the education of two little children, Miles and Flora, by their uncle. From the first moment of her interaction with the children on, the governess is led into a set of terrific experiences and mysteries, as the house that the two children are living seems to be haunted by the ghosts of two former employees, Peter Quint, the master’s former valet, and Miss. Jessel, the former governess. On the surface, the unnamed new governess heroically starts a struggle to free the children from the

¹ Edward Wagenknecht, *The Tales of Henry James*, Edward Wagenknecht F. Ungar Pub. Co., New York, 1984, p. 37.

² Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, Ed. Jose Menéndez, Elegant Ebooks, p. 16-17.

pest of the ghosts and solve the mystery. F. M. Hueffer evaluates the story as "the most eerie and harrowing"³, incontestably leading to an analysis of the text in terms of Gothicism.

The idea of gothic is usually associated with horror stories that bear some resemblance to the old romances with mysterious stories, action taking place in remote, abandoned medieval castles, usually with the presence of supernatural forces and ambiguities to be brought to light. Especially in late 18th and early 19th century literary romanticism, gothic literature found a way to reach the large masses of readers with their unveiling of the hidden pleasures out of what is obscure, deep and thrilling. This concept of getting pleasure out of hardship, pain and horror has always been the starting point for literary critics to link the gothic fiction to the ideas of Edmund Burke, especially his definition of the sublime. Burke, in his essay "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful", studies on the effects of literary texts on the readers and he is mainly concerned with "the aesthetic emotions"⁴ that a literary text arouses in the reader. The ambiguous and terrific nature of James' story makes it possible to be analyzed in terms of Burkean theory of sublime. Henry James employs most of the elements of the sublime set forth by Edmund Burke as a means to the end of Gothicism in *The Turn of the Screw*.

The term sublime goes all the way back to Longinus, the Greek literary critic, who resembles the effect of the sublime to a thunderbolt "to seize control of the reader, to take us outside of ourselves with its sudden intensity."⁵ For him, the sublime is an element of writing that distinguishes itself from the others with the help of "great thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement"⁶ it has. Burke, in his essay, makes a distinction between what is beautiful and what is sublime; making a detailed analysis for each constituent of the two in separate chapters. For him, what is beautiful is characterized by its "smallness, smoothness, delicacy and gradual variation" evoking "love and tenderness."⁷ On the other hand, the primary principle for the sublime, for Burke, is the feeling of terror created in the heart of the reader. He clearly mentions this in the essay as follows: "Indeed terror is in all cases

³ F.M. Hueffer, *Henry James: A Critical Study*, Martin Secker, London, 1913, p. 151.

⁴ Anthony Quinton, "Burke On the Sublime and Beautiful", *Philosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 136, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1961, p. 71.

⁵ David B. Morris, "Gothic Sublimity" *New Literary History*, Vol. 16, No. 2, The Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1985, p. 300.

⁶ Vincent B. Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Norton, 2001. pp. 136.

⁷ Audronė Raškauskienė, *Gothic Fiction: The Beginnings*, Vytauto Didžiojo UP, Kaunas, 2009. p. 17.

whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.”⁸ Thus, the greatest pleasure taken out of a writing manifests itself as a means of the feeling of terror and Burke, in his inquiry, places the emphasis on the relation between the outcome of the sublime and its causes. He takes his claim one step further:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling [...] terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the Sublime.⁹

According to Burke, there are some major elements that lead the reader to this feeling of terror, thus to the sublime. Unlike beautiful, terror is produced by what is vast, magnificent, obscure, painful and powerful. These ideas of him paved the way to a classification of certain elements that characterize a literary text as gothic fiction. Those works of fiction including “vast cataracts, raging storms, lofty towers, dark nights, ghosts and goblins, ... , dazzling light; low, tremulous, intermittent sounds, ... , immense, gloomy buildings; tyranny, incarnation, torture”¹⁰ are usually categorized as gothic literature giving out such emotions in the reader as emphasized in Burke’s theory. In *The Turn of the Screw* the gothic elements that bring about sublimity are obscurity and ambiguity, darkness and blackness, intermittent sound and loudness, suddenness, power and the supernatural. The theory of the sublime is highly applicable to James’ story, because he describes the story that is going to be told by the narrator as “for general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain”¹¹ which are the ultimate causes of the sublime.

Ambiguity is the most explicit element of the sublime observed in James’s story, as from the very beginning the readers are left face to face with unanswered questions and led into a kind of a quest for the uncertain. In Burke’s own words concerning the causes of the sublime:

To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how

⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Thomas M’lean, London, 1823, p. 75.

⁹ Burke, *ibid.* p. 45.

¹⁰ Morris, “*Gothic Sublimity*” p. 301.

¹¹ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 4.

greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings.¹²

It is obvious that James “built his tale as to make it both puzzle the reader and to horrify him, that both these elements are planted in the very structure of the story.”¹³ The puzzles begin to confuse from the very beginning of the story, because the story is narrated from the perspective of an ‘I’ who is not only an observer, but also the main character of the story. This governess is either intentionally or unintentionally left unnamed by the frame narrator and the presence of a frame tale narration doubles the effect of uncertainty, because the story may be the product of a troubled psyche of one or both of the two narrators, or the truth itself, or totally a lie. As Castello put it, the “scenes in which the governess interprets the action usually result in mystification ... concerning the purpose of the ghosts, and, more, concerning the reliability of the governess.”¹⁴ This obscurity leaves the reader in between extremes, leading to “the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity”¹⁵, as “the unknown produces the most intense experience of aesthetic terror”¹⁶ which is highly pleasurable. Besides the unknown identity of the new governess, the tension in the story is again heightened when Mrs. Grose, the maid, reports that the former governess of Bly suddenly died somewhere of a reason totally unknown. No further explanation is given about the possible causes for her death throughout the story leaving the readers alert all the time. With the new governess’s first encounter with the ghostly apparitions in the story, the air of suspense and the pleasure driven are deepened, as “gothic sublimity explores a terror of the unspeakable, of the inconceivable, of the unnamable”¹⁷ that is the source of pleasure.

The biggest question arises when the governess discovers that there is a strange relationship between the two ghosts and the children, the reason and level of which is unknown both to her and the reader. As the governess digs deeper and deeper, she falls into uncertainty and despair more and more. The reason why little Miles was dismissed from the school is another issue which raises multiple question marks in the mind of the narrator and she even gets suspicious of a

¹² Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 76.

¹³ Donald P. Costello, . “*The Structure of The Turn of the Screw*”, *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 75, No. 4, The Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1960, p. 312.

¹⁴ Costello, *ibid.* p. 313.

¹⁵ A.L. Aikin-J. Aikin, *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose*, J. Johnson, London, 1773, p. 120.

¹⁶ Aikin, *ibid.* p.125.

¹⁷ Morris, “*Gothic Sublimity*”, p. 313.

possible sexual intercourse between the children and the ghosts or a process of corruption employed upon the little children. When she attempts to question the children, especially Flora about the apparitions, she gets ambiguous and unsatisfactory answers and says: "I absolutely believed she lied."¹⁸ The key to all the mystery seems to lie in Miles who constantly postpones the answers required, and with Miles's explanations or with the things he kept for himself, the governess seems "to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure."¹⁹ The very ending scene of the story again does not offer the reader a satisfactory answer to the questions, but with this technique, James is obviously successful in keeping the tension and curiosity high and the audience alert.

Darkness and blackness is another constituent of the sublime according to Burke, because obviously in total darkness, humans are more vulnerable to outer forces and dangers, in an unguarded position not knowing where the danger may possibly come from. He considers darkness a cause of sublime since:

In utter darkness it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such a case strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he, who would pray for nothing else towards his defense, is forced to pray for light.²⁰

At the very beginning of the story, the frame narrator describes night time as "best accord with the kind of emotion on which our hopes were fixed"²¹ and with the emotion, he means obviously terror which will dominate the story from that point on. The most interesting things usually happen to take place in utter darkness throughout the story and mysteriously candles have a tendency to go out just before the appearances of the ghosts, which create high tension in terms of horror. As for the association of ghosts and goblins, Burke finds it more natural "to think that darkness, being originally an idea of terror, was chosen as a fit scene for such terrible representations".²² Before the third appearance of Quint's ghost, the governess says: "My candle, under a bold flourish went out, and I perceived, by the uncovered window, that the yielding dusk of earliest morning rendered it

¹⁸ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 71.

¹⁹ James, *ibid.* p. 146.

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 209.

²¹ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 7.

²² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 210.

unnecessary.”²³ Later on, in her second encounter with the ghost of Miss. Jessel, she “left a light burning, but it was now out.”²⁴

Besides the constant repetition of scenes of darkness, blackness is usually associated with the ghosts and thus with the scenes of terror. The governess reports the horrific happenings to Mrs. Grose after the first appearance of the ghost of Miss. Jessel to her and little Flora, by describing the apparition as “ a figure of quite as unmistakable horror and evil, a woman in black, pale and dreadful.”²⁵ As in this case, the black color is usually associated with the evil, unknown, ambiguous and horrific and this is the ultimate end of the sublime. Later on, in order to pinpoint the “haggard beauty and unutterable woe” of the ghost of Miss Jessel, the governess describes her appearance as “dark as midnight in her black dress”²⁶ associating the color with the sources of the sublime.

Intermittent and loud sound, for Burke, is another cause for sublime, because it is a part of human nature that a sudden and loud sound from an unknown origin is regarded as something terrifying. Besides, “some low, confused, uncertain sounds leave us in the same fearful anxiety concerning their causes, that no light, or an uncertain light, does concerning the objects that surround us.”²⁷ The governess in the story comes across with horrible sounds from the very beginning of her experiences till the last minute. The first day she is exposed to sounds “less natural and not without, but within ... faint and far” and “the cry of a child” accompanied by “a light footstep”²⁸ before her door. The story also touches upon doors “closing with a little bang ... louder than intended.”²⁹ Especially during the intercourses with the supernatural forces in the story, the unnatural sounds give the utmost terror to the characters. Towards the end of the story, the governess comes face to face with Peter Quint’s ghost for another time and James describes the sound coming out of the apparition as “not low nor weak, but as if from much further away”³⁰ multiplying the elements of terror. A scream, for example, is “the original and recurrent language of terror, which gothic sublimity reinvents as a wordless speech incapable of naming exactly what it fears.”³¹ The horrible sounds of an unnatural cry or scream are generally characterized by their suddenness in order to

²³ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 68.

²⁴ James, *ibid*, p. 73.

²⁵ James, *ibid*, p. 51.

²⁶ James, *ibid*, p. 99.

²⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 117.

²⁸ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 114.

²⁹ James, *ibid*, p. 85.

³⁰ James, *ibid*, p. 143.

³¹ Morris, “*Gothic Sublimity*”, p. 313.

shock the very core of the hearts of the characters in gothic fiction. For suddenness, Burke states that “in everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it.”³² That is why; suddenness adds another dimension of terror to the sublime. Suddenness usually manifests itself in the scenes when the supernatural figures show up and after the governess sees Miss. Jessel’s ghost for the first time in the story, she reports this to Mrs. Grose by saying the ghost “just appeared and stood there.”³³ The sudden going out of the candles also increases the tension leaving the characters totally defenseless against the unpredictable. Some pages later, the governess tells another adventure of hers in which she comes across with the ghost of a lady in an “instant” before she “vanished”³⁴ suddenly. Even at the end of the story, little Miles dies so suddenly that the reader is left in a highly ambiguous position. With no convincing reason for it, his “little heart, dispossessed, had stopped”³⁵, that is all, no more.

Final element of the sublime to be analyzed in this article is power, which Burke defines as “undoubtedly a capital source of the sublime.”³⁶ In gothic fiction, power is usually associated with the presence or assumption of a superior natural or extraordinary force that threatens the well-being and the order in the household. Burke describes power as a source of pain, because “pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly.”³⁷ The source of power in James’ short story is unknown or ambiguous both to the characters and to the reader. In *The Turn of the Screw*, ghostly apparitions appear several times out of nowhere and the governess feels that she is unable to cope with them, yet she heroically takes the duty on her own shoulders to protect the little children. The presence of a superior force leads to the feeling of terror or fear of pain, but the sublime observer usually gets pleasure out of this pain created by the power, because s/he “is not actually threatened; safety in the midst of danger produces a thrilling pleasure.”³⁸ Although it is paradoxical, the pleasure taken out of pain is the ultimate outcome of the sublime.

In conclusion, when all the elements above are taken into consideration, it is natural to think that Burke’s aesthetic theory of the sublime influenced many 18th

³² Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 116.

³³ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 52.

³⁴ James, *ibid*, p. 72.

³⁵ James, *ibid*, p. 149.

³⁶ Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 96.

³⁷ Burke, *ibid*, p. 86.

³⁸ Raškauskienė, *Gothic Fiction: The Beginnings*, p. 17.

and 19th century writers. As a highly prolific literary figure, Henry James obviously added a new dimension to what is now called the gothic fiction, and it was a foregone conclusion to blend the two figures together for aesthetic purposes. Jean-Francois Lyotard says “the sublime feeling is an emotion, a violent emotion, close to unreason, which forces thought to extremes of pleasure and displeasure.”³⁹ With reference to this statement, Henry James indisputably managed to force the readers’ thoughts to extremes and shake the foundations of their habits and became a respectable employer of the sublime.

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³⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1994, p. 228.

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