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Implied stories: implication, moral panic and *the turn of the screw*

Martin Scofield

- 1 In an article published in 1989, Armine Kotin Mortimer analysed the function of what she called 'second stories' within short stories, taking as her main examples four stories by Maupassant¹. These were stories within which an untold story was clearly implied or embedded, an untold story whose meaning had to be grasped before the main story could be understood. To take one of her examples: in the story 'A Million' (1882) a young couple, the Bonnins, need to produce a child in order to inherit the million francs from M. Bonnin's aunt. But M. Bonnin is apparently sterile. At the same time he has a friend, Frederic Morel, who boasts allusively and bawdily that he could 'turn him into an heir in twenty minutes.' So M. Bonnin hints to his wife that wives have often helped their husbands in their careers by granting sexual favours to the husbands' superiors. 'In life', he says, 'one has to know how to arrange things so one won't be the victim of circumstances'. This statement is followed by three questions from the narrator: 'What exactly did he mean? What did she understand? What happened next?' The narrator does not answer his own questions, but the story then jumps to Mme Bonnin's pregnancy and the birth of the child. The implication is clear, but the small twist in the story, comes in its resolution of the wife's relations with Morel. One day she says to her husband, 'in a simple tone':

I have just asked our friend Frederic not to set foot in here again, he has been improper with me.' He looked at her for a second with a grateful smile in his eyes, then opened his arms; she flung herself into them, and they kissed for a long, long time, like two good little spouses, very tender, very united, very honest.

- 2 So a story that could have ended with unhappiness all round, ends, so the narrator implies, happily.
- 3 Perhaps a better term for this kind of device might be 'implied story', to distinguish it from explicit 'second stories': those, for example, which are simply embedded within a main story (like the story within Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter', told by the rival professor Baglioni, of the Indian Prince who sent a beautiful but literally poisonous

woman as a present to Alexander the Great), as an analogue or parable of the main story; or those which are added to the main story as an indication of context (as in the historical narrative which opens 'My Kinsman Major Molineux'), or as a kind of epilogue which may explain what has gone before (as in the story of the dead letter office at the end of Melville's 'Bartleby'). Whatever we call it, the device Mortimer is describing depends on implication, which depends in turn (as she points out) on the activation of certain shared frames of reference, or of cultural codes, in the manner variously analysed by Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish and others². In 'A Million' the reader (the 'implied reader' indeed) is assumed to be aware of the facts of marriage, childbirth and above all of 'the ways of the world.' From the manner in which the story is told, it is also assumed that the reader will be ironically amused and indulgent rather than shocked.

- 4 In this story, the 'implied story' is an unambiguous one: without the reader filling in the story of wife's affair with the friend the story would not makes sense. But what of a story where the implied story or stories are unclear or ambiguous? What kind of effect is achieved here, and for what reason or to what ends might such a device be employed? My example here is Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw*. In James, I shall argue, the implied story is left unclear for three reasons (and by 'reasons' I mean both intentions and non-intentional causes): for the reason James explains in his Preface, that he wanted to arouse the maximum sense of horror by setting the reader's imagination to work; secondly because the material of the implied story was too shocking for contemporary readers; and thirdly and most importantly because James himself is perhaps unable to face the implications of his story. I also want to explore the way leaving an implied story unclear leaves it particularly open to ambiguity and hence variety of interpretation. Leaving something implicit but ambiguous sets up a particular problem for readers, the question, What frames of references are called into play here? What cultural codes are being activated? These questions can become particularly anxious and urgent where a story, like this one, activates fundamental uncertainties about large frames or codes, those of psychological processes and of moral and religious values. When the level of interpretative anxiety is high enough, we have what could be called (borrowing a recent term from sociology) a critical moral panic³.
- 5 *The Turn of the Screw* is of course a notorious mine, and minefield, for interpretation. Amid the plethora of readings, there are of course two main schools: that which sees the story as an 'old-fashioned' story of evil ghosts, locked in a battle with a virtuous and clear-sighted heroine; and that which sees the story as one about the governess's neurotic 'sex repression' (to use Edmund Wilson's term, from the essay which first really started to put this view on the map)⁴. In the latter view there are no 'real' ghosts and it is the governess who is the destructive figure (in many versions of the reading it is she who, albeit unintentionally, kills little Miles at the end of the story). There are countless variations within these different positions⁵, but most fall into one of these two categories. Either the ghosts are real and the children have been (or are in danger of being) corrupted; or the governess is mad, and the children are most in danger from her. There have also been readings which stress the feminist or political and social implications of one or other of these readings – but they too generally have to take sides with regard to the primary division. Only a few essays – most notably Shoshona Felman's⁶ – question the whole process of trying to achieve a univocal, 'mastering' interpretation.
- 6 What is the 'implied story' in *The Turn of the Screw*? Firstly it is the story of what happened before the governess's own story begins, which, it has to be stressed, we learn about

almost entirely from the narrative of the governess herself (with the exception of one or two details we get in the 'introduction' from the second narrator, Douglas – who has himself got them from the governess). The governess is told explicitly, by Mrs Grose, that the two children, Miles and Flora, were tutored by Peter Quint and Miss Jessel (whose 'ghosts' the governess sees); and that Quint died falling at night on an icy path. We are also told by Mrs Grose that Quint wore the Master's clothes; that he was 'too free', 'too free with everyone'; and she was afraid of him, afraid of 'things that man could do' and that she 'couldn't bear' him being in charge of Miles (202). We also, enigmatically, learn (from Douglas) of 'the great awkwardness' of the death of Miss Jessel (179). We learn from Mrs Grose that Miss Jessel 'was infamous... They were both infamous'; and to the governess's 'Come, there was something between them [Quint and Jessel]' she replies 'There was everything'. 'He did what he wished', Mrs Grose goes on. 'With her?' the governess queries. 'With them all'. Mrs Grose replies (208).

- 7 From these and other hints and suggestions we gradually infer an implied story about the past: that Quint was a sexual libertine and that he and Miss Jessel were lovers; that they in some way corrupted or damaged little Miles and Flora; and also that Miss Jessel (probably) committed suicide. These supposed facts also help us to interpret the implied story about Miles's expulsion from school. The governess tells Mrs Grose of the letter from the school saying it was 'impossible to keep him', and interprets this as having 'but one meaning': 'That he's an injury to others' (185) (This is, of course, itself the drawing out of a supposed implication). Later the governess learns from Miles that he 'said things'. When asked to whom, he gives 'a sick little headshake' and says '...only a few. Those I liked.' (264). The stories' earliest critics were not inclined to speculate further or to draw the implication out, and the most recent have perhaps taken it for granted, but the implication would seem to be that Miles made sexual, perhaps homosexual, remarks to his friends at school and that these were (rather surprisingly, one might think) taken as signs of great depravity in a small boy of – what? ten? (We are told that Flora is eight – changed from six in the earliest published version – but we never learn the precise age of Miles). We could further speculate that Miles had sexual relations with other boys, but unless we read James as signalling such things in the only way current sensibilities would let him, this is perhaps more meaning than James's words will bear. Either way, the implication is that Miles had been 'corrupted' by Quint, either by homosexual seduction or by being involved in some way in the affair between Quint and Miss Jessel (as a witness? as a sexual participant?). The governess also clearly believes that Flora has also become corrupted too – Flora refuses to admit she sees the figure of Miss Jessel on the other side of the lake, and turning on the governess, becomes at the same time 'hideously hard' and 'vulgarly pert', her face 'dreadful' (250). Mrs Grose later tells how she has heard 'horrors' from Flora. 'On my honour, miss, she says things.' And a few moments later: 'Really shocking... About you, miss – since you must have it. It's beyond everything for a young lady; and I can't think wherever she must have picked up –' 'The appalling language she applies to me? I can then,' the governess interjects. And Mrs Grose adds: 'Well, perhaps I ought to also – since I've heard some of it before!' (254-5)
- 8 So the implication is – again, from the point of view of the governess – that Miles and Flora have been victims of what today is called child-abuse: have been involved in some way with Quint's and Miss Jessel's sexual relationship, perhaps simply as witnesses, perhaps even as participants, and that this has destroyed their innocence and is now affecting their behaviour – is the subject of their secretive conversations, lies behind

their mischievous teasing of the governess⁸. And then of course, in the 'explicit' story, as told by the governess, the malign influence of Quint and Jessel continues in the haunting by their ghosts.

- 9 So far, so – fairly – straightforward. But the view of Edna Kenton, Edmund Wilson and others added, of course, the crucial idea that the 'ghosts' were simply figments of the governess's overheated imagination. A host of variations on this reading have followed, so that one can fairly say it has carried the day. Here the implied story becomes quite different, and countless small ambiguous details (which I needn't retail) are adduced to support it. The reading appeals to a frame of reference which includes modern secular thinking and in particular, of course, Freud and psychoanalysis, ideas of repression, the unconscious etc. – as opposed to what one might call a largely 'Victorian' frame of the idea of childhood innocence, female purity, the 'unspeakableness' of sexuality; and an even older or more traditional frame of a cosmos in which the powers of evil battled against the powers of good (as, for example, in the echoes in the story of the Biblical idea of the fall of man, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, etc.)
- 10 Can one establish what in all this was intended by James himself? Despite the perils of 'intentionalism', we can say a little about this because of the Preface to the story which James wrote some nine years after the story first appeared⁹ – a little, but not much. For James speaks there with teasing obliquity and periphrasis. And his main point about the 'implied story' is that it is hinted at, but deliberately left a blank. He says nothing directly of the possibility that the governess is mad – all his explicit remarks confirm the objective reality of the ghosts. Indirectly, however, there are remarks that could be taken to point to the other reading. For instance, he speaks of giving the governess 'authority' and 'the general proposition of our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many anomalies and obscurities (which in itself points to a 'traditional' reading), but then he adds: 'by which I don't mean her explanation of them, a different matter' (which leaves a foothold for the psychological reading). What did he mean, too, by describing the story as 'an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught'? – simply a story to catch the imaginations of even the coolly sceptical reader? Or a more complex trick of ambiguity to disguise a psychological case study as a ghost story? He gives no other hints in this direction, and spends much of the Preface discussing what kinds of ghosts are at issue here (they are more like 'goblins, elves, imps, demons' than the 'attested' ghosts of 'the today so copious psychical record' (7))
- 11 But more importantly, from my present point of view, is the way he talks about the implied story of Quint and Jessel, and what happened to Miles and Flora – the 'evil' of the story. And here the point is the implications are deliberately left 'a blank'.

What, in the last analysis had I to give a sense of? Of their being, the haunting pair, capable, as the phrase is, of everything – that is of exerting, in respect to the children, the very worst action small victims so conditioned might be conceived as subject to. What would *be* then, on reflection, this utmost conceivability? – a question to which the answer all admirably came. There is for such a case no eligible *absolute* of the wrong; it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination -- these things moreover quite exactly in the light of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience. Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself – and that already is a charming job – and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications. (8)

- 12 This then is the essence of the matter. The reader's imagination is to be prompted by hints and suggestions towards 'the very worst actions small victims so conditioned might be conceived as subject to'. What are these? Well, to every reader their own horror. In the light of twentieth century real life horrors it might not be too difficult to speculate. But one might note that the essential *frisson* is not directed towards cruelty, sadism, murder – the 'very worst' things, one might think – but towards unspeakable sexuality. This is the real lure: the implied story is a blank surrounded by suggestive details which prompt readers to create their own fantasies. 'My values are positively all blanks', wrote James, 'save so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness... proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures.' (9)
- 13 It is the technique of the creator of a 'moral panic' – that calling up of fears and bugbears, goblins and 'folk-devils' – which are not specified but merely gestured at to create the maximum anxiety – whether (how laughable these seem now) about rock 'n' roll, or mods and rockers; or about sex in the cinema; or (not laughably) about AIDS or (close in theme to James's story), child pornography, 'satanic abuse' or whatever. The topics are serious ones but they are typically approached by the creator of a moral panic with that characteristically human mixture of morbid curiosity, sensationalism and genuine moral concern; sometimes for political reasons, and (for some) the desire to sell newspapers. The 'ambiguous implicit', as one might call it, is the ideal breeding ground of 'moral panic', particularly, of course, in the area of child abuse. In recent cases (the Cleveland controversy of 1987 in Britain or the McMartin nursery-school case in the US in 1983)¹⁰ the moral panic has turned, precisely as in the critical controversies over *The Turn of the Screw* on the question of whether certain things have happened or have been 'hysterically' imagined by the accusers and (sometimes) the victims. The debate in Freudian studies over actuality versus fantasy in the 'primal scene' and over actuality versus fantasy in so-called repressed memory syndrome is perhaps the theoretical *locus classicus* of this debate. In the Cleveland case the doctor who diagnosed the cases of child abuse was attacked – rather as critics have treated the governess – for having an unhealthy, or perhaps in the doctor's case a politically motivated – obsession with child abuse which affected her judgement. Ignorance, partial information and rumour feed the mills of moral panic in the media, just as they do in stories of 'obscenity' in the cinema (It is a striking fact that in the controversies over Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* and over Cronenberg's *Crash* a large number of people – including one M.P. in the latter case, called for the banning of the films, even though they had not actually seen them: unspecified implication was enough to fuel moral panic).¹¹
- 14 James is curiously equivocal in his remarks about the story, as if its great success is something of an embarrassment to him. 'Child-abuse' was, it might be remembered, the original 'germ' of the story – an anecdote James heard from no less a figure than the then Archbishop of Canterbury, E.C.Benson, about the corruption of children by evil servants, who then return to haunt the children from beyond the grave. One might point out that this element remains a 'given' in the story, whether or not we see the ghosts as 'objectively' there or as a figment of the governess's imaginings. It is the heart of it. James was once told by a young lady at a dinner party that she had read the tale with excitement and a mounting sense of terror – though she did not fully understand it'.
- 15 The novelist, speaking slowly and quietly, said: 'My dear Mildred, no more do I. The story was told me by Archbishop Benson. I have caught the impression his [sic] mystery made

on me and I have passed it on to you – but as to understanding it, it is just gleams and glooms'.¹²

- 16 There is something slightly comic here about James's seeming desire to bolster the respectability of the story by mentioning its provenance from the archbishop. If he had thought through all the implications of his own story in any conscious way, one can understand him not wanting to get involved in a discussion of child-abuse (or the sexual fantasies of governesses) with a young lady at a fashionable dinner party.
- 17 But there seems also to be an uneasiness here, as there is in the general ironic tone of the 1908 Preface. James writes of wanting to rouse 'the dear old sacred terror'. The ambiguity of that is echoed throughout the tone of the Preface which steers between ironic detachment (as if to say this is after all only a ghost story), and what seems to be the serious talk of 'evil'. But should James be so patronizing towards 'sacred terror', and can he successfully combine the sense of an 'amulette', a plaything, with genuine evil, with what Douglas speaks of as 'general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain' (176)? It is a balancing act of the utmost precariousness, and one has to admit that James manages it brilliantly and chillingly. But a number of critics have felt uneasy with the story (most notably F.R. Leavis, otherwise a champion of James's novels as an essential part of 'The Great Tradition', who speaks of a 'morbidity' in the 'preoccupation with indefinite evil').¹³ The ambiguous implicit is a perilous device when it comes to these matters, and one often used by much less reputable practitioners. Perhaps James himself got it right (albeit in a tone of charming self-irony) when he described *The Turn of the Screw* in his Preface as 'This ... irresponsible little fiction.' (3)¹⁴
- 18 The story certainly aroused a kind of moral panic in some quarters when it first appeared. *The Independent* of 5 January, 1899, described it as 'the most hopelessly evil story that we have ever read in any literature'; and it went on: 'The feeling after perusal of the horrible story is that one has been assisting in an outrage upon the holiest and sweetest fountains of human innocence, and helping to debauch – at least by helplessly standing by – the pure and trusting nature of children. Human imagination can go no further into infamy, literary art could not be used with more refined subtlety of spiritual defilement'.¹⁵ And in 1942 a group of critics, including Mark Van Doren, Allen Tate and Katherine Anne Porter gathered in New York to discuss the story on the CBS Radio Network in a series entitled 'Invitation to Learning'.¹⁶ There was, in the discussion, clearly an anxiety, among some of the participants, to hold on to the idea of the Story being about Good versus Evil in some absolute metaphysical sense without questioning too closely what kind of evil it was likely to be; while others were persuaded by the at that time still fairly novel idea that the story was about the governess's madness. The latter reading has of course been supported with very convincing ingenuity: but looked at another way, it is a rather convenient way of avoiding what would have been still, in the 1940s, the taboo subject of child abuse. The story can be seen to raise a debate about the whole question of childhood sexuality and innocence (in what sense are children 'innocent'? is childhood sexuality compatible with this?). On the other hand it has raised questions about the existence of supernatural or transcendent evil. (This issue is particularly fuzzy, because of course religious believers might want both to affirm the fact of evil as a supernatural force, and deny the existence of ghosts or supernatural beings). It also raises questions about class taboos (Quint is emphatically 'not a gentleman' but Miss Jessel was clearly a lady: is that the reason his transgression with her is seen as so dire?), female sexuality and repression, and the validity of Freudian theories. In its widest implications it raises questions (albeit again

cloudily) about the conflicting validity of religious and scientific frames of reference. In all, the ambiguous implicit is a seductive lure for the critic, the psychoanalyst, the film director and the general reader to rush in to fill its blanks with their theories. If the implication is charged enough and the specifications are ambiguous enough it is, whatever else, certainly a recipe for popular and critical success.

NOTES

1. . In Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellen Clarey, eds., *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1989.
2. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, Hill & Wang, New York, 1974; Stanley Fish, 'Literature in the Reader', in *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins, Baltimore 1980.
3. See for example Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1972; Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics*, Routledge, London, 1998.
4. Edmund Wilson, 'The Ambiguity of Henry James' in *Hound and Horn* 7 (1934), rev. and repr. in *The Triple Thinkers*, Oxford U.P. New York, 1948.
5. For useful collections of articles see Roger Kimbrough (ed.) *The Turn of the Screw*, Norton Critical Edition, New York and London, 1966; Peter Beidler (ed.) *The Turn of the Screw*, Macmillan, London 1975; Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren (eds.) *The Turn of the Screw*, 2nd Norton Critical Edition, New York and London, 1999.
6. Shoshona Felman in *Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)*, Cornell U.P., Ithaca, 1985; excerpts repr. in Beidler and Esch & Warren, op. cit.
7. 'The Turn of the Screw' in *The Ghost Stories of Henry James*, ed. Martin Scofield, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, 2001, p.201. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
8. A recent article discusses the suggestions of child abuse in the story from the perspective of the psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok's theory of the 'phantom', or the idea of being haunted by 'the gaps left within us by the secrets of others'. See Alan Lloyd Smith, 'A Word Kept Back in *The Turn of the Screw*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 24, 1998.
9. The Preface is part of James's Preface to Vol. XII of the New York edition of the Novels and Stories, New York 1908-9. It is reprinted in Kimbrough, Beidler and Esch & Warren, op. cit., and also in *The Ghost Stories of Henry James*, op.cit.
10. The latter, and other similar cases, are discussed in Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: changing concepts of the child molester in modern America*, New Haven and London, 1998.
11. See Kenneth Thompson, op.cit. p. 134.
12. Quoted in *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, Rutgers's University Press, New Jersey, 1949, p. 435.
13. F.R.Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1962, pp. 230-231.
14. He also described it in a letter to Louis Waldenstein (October 1898) as 'That Wanton Little Tale'.
15. Reprinted in Kimbrough, see note 5.
16. The discussion is printed in Gerald Willen, ed., *A Casebook on Henry James's The Turn of the Screw*, Crowell, New York, 1969.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article traite de l'idée d'histoires implicites (ou comme le dit Armine Mortimer d'"histoires secondes") en s'appuyant, pour commencer, sur quelques exemples tirés de Maupassant, Hawthorne et Melville. Son objet principal est, toutefois, d'analyser plus longuement le cas de la nouvelle de Henry James "The Turn of the Screw". Dans celle-ci, l'histoire seconde contenue dans l'intrigue principale est tout particulièrement ambiguë. James utilise l'implication imprécise pour ne pas se placer sur un terrain moral. Ce sont l'ambiguïté du personnage de la gouvernante et la question du mal qui ont suscité et suscitent encore de si nombreuses interprétations de cette nouvelle.

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Martin Scofield is a Senior Lecturer in English and American Literature at the University of Kent. He has published books on *Hamlet* and on T.S.Eliot, and, in the field of the short story, articles on Chekhov, Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff. He has also selected and introduced "The Ghost Stories of Henry James" (Wordsworth Classics, 2001). He is currently working on a book on the American short story to be published by Cambridge University Press.