

Laura C. Bourgeois

Dr. Moore

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Edna Pontellier and The Governess: Tragic Heroines

In the reading of Henry James's The Turn of the Screw and Kate Chopin's The Awakening, a number of similarities come to light between the experiences, literal and symbolic, of the Governess and Edna Pontellier. Through a critical consideration of these experiences both characters emerge as tragic heroines. A discussion of Aristotle's elements of tragedy serves as the basis for this conclusion; then a comparative discussion of the elements in relation to both characters and works.

Among Aristotle's recommended characteristics for tragic protagonists, first and foremost is to have a greater significance among people, although the exact nature of the significance is open to wide interpretation. "Aristotle makes two different observations on the characters in the tragedy. The first is that they should be 'superior' people . . . Other renderings are: 'of high value,' 'important,' 'serious,' 'of merit,' good.' . . . It is confined neither to moral excellence nor to worldly rank and can be taken in the present context as referring to people whom we regard as of some consequence, without examining the motive for our regard." (Brereton 37)

These "superior" people are, especially in the cases considered here, significant in great part due to what happens to them in the course of the stories. In a tragedy, Aristotle said, the experiences of the tragic hero must remain within certain boundaries in order to retain the trust of the audience/reader: "' . . . first, decent people must not be shown passing from good fortune to misfortune (for that is not fearful or pitiful but disgusting). Again, vicious people must not be shown passing from misfortune to good fortune (for that is the most untragic situation possible -- it has none of the requisites, it is neither humane, nor pitiful, nor fearful). Nor again should an utterly evil man fall from good fortune to misfortune (for through a plot of that kind would be humane, it would not induce pity or fear -- pity is induced by undeserved misfortune and fear by the misfortunes of normal people, so that this situation would be neither pitiful nor fearful). So we are left with a man between these extremes:

that is to say, the kind of man who neither is distinguished for excellence and virtue, nor comes to grief on account of baseness and vice, but on account of some error. . .'" (Brereton 38)

The tragedy itself involves the important elements of pity (for the victimized hero), which facilitates sympathy for the hero and fear for the situation, culminating in a relieving catharsis. "... tragedy purges or relieves an excess of pity and fear (considered as burdensome emotions) in the spectators. It evidently does so by exciting those emotions and bringing them to the surface of the psyche whence they are discharged, on the analogy of a physical purge or an emetic. The spectator is finally left with a relaxed sensation of appeasement." (Brereton 28)

One of the most fascinating of Aristotle's elements of tragedy when considering the Governess and Mrs. Pontellier is the "tragic error," often the turning point of the story. When it happens, the hero(ine) has consciously taken an action, but has made a *small* step as far as she is concerned. She has no idea of the importance of the consequences, the fact that her life is forever altered.

"Aristotle's word is *hamartia*, an 'error' or 'false step' which the tragic hero commits consciously, but without intending an evil result. . . . Professor Kitto writes: 'The word *hamartia* means 'error,' 'fault,' 'crime,' or even 'sin'; literally, it means 'missing the mark,' 'a bad shot.' We exclaim, 'How intellectuallist the Greeks were! Sin is just 'missing the mark'; better luck next time! . . . *Hamartia*, 'A bad shot,' does not mean 'Better luck next time'; it means rather that a mental error is as blameworthy, and may be as deadly, as a moral one.'" (Brereton 39-40)

The action of the tragedy is in itself an important element. The importance of the story lies in what happens to the characters: the "Being and Doing" of the story. "Aristotle (says) 'Tragedy . . . is an imitation not of men but of doings, life, happiness; unhappiness is located in doings, and our end is a certain kind of doing, not a personal quality. It is their characters that give men their quality, but their doings that make them happy or the opposite.'" (Brereton 42)

The natural concluding element in the Aristotelian tragedy may certainly not be a happy ending. The unhappy ending has been inevitable from the time the tragic error occurred and is a direct result of the suffering that begins at that same point, and the reader certainly sees it, if not the hero. "... Aristotle believed that a tragedy should involve a final disaster or 'misfortune.' His 'error' is

comprehended in our 'unforeseen failure' . . . our 'misery and emotional distress' is the 'suffering' . . ." (Brereton 47) There could be no pity without suffering, and so it is a necessary element. The suffering does not have to be physical. "Every sane man respects physical pain, but what constitutes mental or emotional suffering depends largely on a point of view. . ." (Brereton 47)

To begin an examination of Edna Pontellier and the Governess as tragic heroines, a further requirement of Aristotle's for the tragic hero will be elaborated upon. It is the requirement that the hero(ine) act in accordance with her character. That is, a potentially riveting scene might easily be deflated by a hypocritical action, obvious to the reader. Both Mrs. Pontellier and the Governess fulfill this requirement, especially in light of the fact that sometimes extreme and unprecedented actions are called for. That is to say, Mrs. Pontellier's actions might have been unlike her former self, but perfectly "natural" in light of her "awakening." "Superficially, these are the struggles of the will to assert itself against a deeply-rooted impulse. But if one inquires for the source of the will, one can only conclude that it also proceeds from the man's nature. The impulse to go 'against nature' is as 'natural' as the impulse to go with it. Since the process of its emergence may be painful, it can best be compared to childbirth. A woman who gives birth to a personality distinct from her own is not for that reason a hypocrite. Neither is she unrelated to it, nor has she betrayed the integrity of her own personality as it was when she was childless." (Brereton 45)

We are presented with Mrs. Pontellier as a person who is "superior," or significant, according to the elements of a tragic hero, by virtue of her experiences, brought on by her thoughts and sensibilities. Edna Pontellier alone, of all the people at Grand Isle and in the Pontelliers' Creole neighborhood, is experiencing the "awakening" that exhausts her tolerance for keeping up appearances. "It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world." (Chopin 537) Mrs. Pontellier's illusions have deserted her, and not just about romance. "(her children's) absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her."

(Chopin 507) She stands out in the crowd, along with Mlle. Reisz, whose tolerance was exhausted long ago and who has become jaded to the possibilities and consequences of individuality. Edna Pontellier's significance, her superiority, is related to the revelations she has, that happen to her, in the course of the story.

After Edna indulges her awakened passion with Arobin she is led into a "languorous sleep, interwoven with vanishing dreams." "These are the very dreams of which life's 'promise' is made, as we are explicitly told later by the bookish and wise Dr. Mandelet. Mandelet, after seeing how agitated Edna is after watching the agony of Adele Ratignolle's *accouchement*, recognizes that Edna is on the verge of despair over her own role as sexual being and consequently as mother: 'The trouble is,' sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, 'that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race.' To this explicit statement of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of sexual love, Edna replies, 'Yes . . . The years that are gone seem like dreams -- if one might go on sleeping and dreaming -- but to wake up and find -- oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life.' 'Precisely,' would say both Dr. Mandelet and Arthur Schopenhauer. Understanding the illusion is the first and necessary step to finding the peace of mind that comes from denying the will that creates the illusion in the first place." (Canfield 13)

In her quest to slough off the pretenses of her life and pursue her passions, to achieve her individuality, Edna Pontellier fulfills the Aristotelian model. She is the kind of person who certainly is not "distinguished for excellence and virtue," nor does she come to grief on account of "baseness and vice." She acts in accordance with her character, as her true character emerges in the course of the story.

Henry James's Governess also meets these qualifications. From the very beginning, we know her to be "superior." We have the word of Douglas that she shows courage in the face of daunting conditions of employment. Despite her inexperience (and an obvious crush on the handsome employer), she approaches the prospect with common sense.

"Necessary danger to life? Douglas completed my thought. 'She did wish to learn, and she did learn. You shall hear tomorrow what she learnt. Meanwhile, of course, the prospect struck her as slightly grim. She was young, untried, nervous; it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness. She hesitated -- took a couple of days to consult and consider. But the salary offered much exceed her modest measure, and on a second interview she faced the music, she engaged.'" (The Turn of the Screw 336)

The Governess' role as tragic hero is related to, but not entirely dependent upon, which interpretation of the story one believes. We find there is not just the ghost story, not just the possibility of the Governess' insanity (which are not mutually exclusive), but deeper interpretations emerge as the story progresses. "I think we've got to take it that way and the other way too -- both at once -- and perhaps if we take it both ways, we've got to take it in a third way which will explain the fact that the story is a unified thing, a single thing which is neither psychological wholly nor a mere naive attempt on the part of this governess to protect her children." (A Radio Symposium: Tate 162)

"(Critic Edna Kenton said) 'The children hounded by the prowling ghosts -- this is the hard and shining surface story of The Turn of the Screw. . . . As a tiny matter of literal fact, no reader has more to go on than the young governess's word for this rather momentous and sidetracking allegation. As a rather large matter of literal fact, we know, with but a modicum of attention paid to her recital of these nerve-shattering affairs at Bly, that it is she -- always she herself -- who sees the lurking shapes and heralds them to her little world. . . . There are traps and lures in plenty, but just a little wariness will suffice to disprove, with a single survey of the ground, the traditional, we might almost call it lazy version of this tale. Not the children, but the little governess was hounded by the ghosts who, as James confides with such suave frankness in his Preface, merely 'help me to express my subject all directly and intensely.'" (Reed 190-191)

The Governess' adherence to her own character seems absolute to the reader no matter which interpretation chosen. If it is she who is haunted, or if it is the children, her motivation remains primarily to save the children, even when her panic becomes an impediment to reason. When she,

through delusion or not, insists on their part in the evil, her goal is to remove them from it. "She is no such creature as a story-teller makes his victim when he wants to deal in mere delusion. She is not ridiculous or trivial. As a matter of fact, she becomes tragic." (A Radio Symposium: Van Doren 166) She has the dual characteristics of the tragic hero(ine), she is neither base nor excellent and virtuous. As some critics believe, a part of her motivation centers around getting back to the attractive uncle. ". . . no force has ever acted through either a saint or an evil person that wasn't somehow directed to further the ends and the ambitions and the hopes of that person, which makes me feel that the instrument is not altogether so innocent and so helpless as we have been saying." (A Radio Symposium: Porter 166) This adds to the Governess's credibility as a tragic heroine, as it does not distinguish her for excellence or virtue.

The reader of The Awakening begins to feel apprehension as soon as the parrot screeches "Go Away! For God's sake!" Even though the image of Mr. Pontellier alone on the porch while his wife approaches from the beach with another man is presented innocently, the inevitable implication is planted in the reader's mind. Pity for the future victims builds, and our catharses come with the progress of Edna Pontellier's awakening. The readers' catharses occur throughout the story, with actions that relieve Edna along the way of her awakening. The tension (fear and pity) builds with her feelings of isolation and emptiness, and some relief is achieved as Edna experiences a physical release when Mlle. Reisz plays; when she has revelations about her attitude towards her family; as she moves toward claiming her individuality. As the final tensions in the story build, the reader is prepared of the final, soothing and terrible catharsis.

It is a relief to find, as the book unfolds, that her awakening, and our catharsis, is much deeper than physical passion. "Her awakening desire gives her the power of subjectivity and that subjectivity frees her from masculine control. Consider, for instance, Chapter XXVII, in which Arobin, in trying to seduce Edna, realizes that she in fact is making choices, that her thoughts are independent. He wants to flatter her into passivity; she tells him, 'Spare yourself the effort.'" (Canfield 19)

Edna has awakened as a person of more abstract sensibilities than her husband. She finds that she requires the freedom to be with whom she chooses, someone more like herself, and the freedom to be

herself. It is a freedom fraught with terrible risks, a freedom Robert is not capable of pursuing with her in the end. Through her efforts to achieve her individuality, to reclaim her spirit -- neglecting her Tuesday social obligations, visits to Mlle. Reisz, finally, leaving her husband's house -- she grows in magnitude as a sympathetic character. "... It remains unclear, however, in this reading, whether Chopin is pessimistic about the possibilities for women in general, or whether the novel is to be read as a sympathetic analysis of one woman's struggle and failure." (*Rev. of English Studies* 433) Either way, the effective sympathetic analysis that The Awakening offers of her experiences is makes Edna Pontellier a tragic heroine.

The Turn of the Screw is fraught with the characteristics of a proper Aristotelian tragedy. Pity and fear are the meat of the story, catharsis and sympathy the inevitable result. Given the readers' apprehension at the peculiar conditions of the job and the foreboding questions about Miles' dismissal from school, the Governess's situation gets downright terrifying when she sees Peter Quint. James lets us know clearly that evil is afoot. "He (Quint) never changes his expression. I recall something that James says in his preface to this book about the presentation of supernatural creatures in fiction. We must remember that neither Quint nor Miss Jessel ever does much of anything; they just appear, they just stand there and look -- and there mere appearance is enough to set all this machinery of horror into motion." (A Radio Symposium: Tate 164)

There is another fear for the Governess that comes out. If she doesn't see the ghosts, she will lose all credibility. "She has a momentary doubt of a certain kind ... toward the end ... if Flora goes out into the world and people come in from outside -- for example, her employer, the uncle of the children -- and look at the situation and find that the apparitions don't visually exist, then she will have to say: 'Where am I?'" (A Radio Symposium: Tate 161)

Whether the ghosts appeared to anyone but the Governess, the fact is that they do appear to her. James must have perceived the potential for evil of this kind in life, in nature. "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life." ("The Art of Fiction" 141) His brother, William James, suggested that a scientific analysis of such a phenomenon might prove impossible. "The rigorously scientific mind may, in truth, easily overshoot the mark. ... "We all,

scientists and non-scientists, live on some inclined plane of credulity. The plane tips one way in one man, another way in another; and may he whose plane tips in no way be the first to cast a stone!" (James, W. 319-320)

The Governess does remain a sympathetic character throughout, because of her determination to be strong and brave and save the children, even though she may have to "cut off their noses to spite their faces." "The very fact that the governess is biased becomes a dramatic factor. The bias becomes a part of the story." "Yes, and because she has no understanding at all of her real motive, she gives herself away completely and constantly." "Constantly. There are two levels: the level at which she sees the action and the level at which the reader can see it, and this creates an irony of which the governess is not aware." ... "Yet the governess all along has wanted to spare the children. Indeed, her declared intention was to protect, to shield them. Here she is forced by the irony of her character and fate to torture this little boy into confessions which he doesn't want to make, which he doesn't even know how to make because he has nothing to confess." (A Radio Symposium: Tate, Porter, Van Doren 168)

The tragic error, the point of no return which the hero(ine) commits consciously but with no conception of the consequences, occurs in The Awakening when Edna discovers she must pursue her own life. Not only is it going to be more complicated than satisfying physical passion, but the scope of the repercussions is staggering. The most painful of these is the absence of a companion as brave as she. Her isolation, in this life, would be likely to continue despite her liberation.

"Edna cried a little. ... It was only one phase of the multitudinous emotions which assailed her. ... Above all there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. {This would have interfered with her validity as a tragic heroine} There was a dull pang of regret because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips." (Chopin 558)

She regrets only that the experience would have been fuller with love. Her attitude, very progressive for her time, is completely comfortable to us. It is essential, however, to remember that the

tragic implications of Edna's "error," her awakening, have everything to do with the social and cultural limitations of the time. For her to succeed in the end would have also disqualified the story as a tragedy.

"Chopin is recruited to the ranks of the politically correct, as she has often been since her work ceased to be an object of scandal and became instead (with the advent of proper attention to writing by women) a venerated icon. . . . Davis ascribes Edna Pontellier's failure to succeed in her bid for independence to her inability to develop a modified or 'feminine' version of the 'masculine' economic and personal aggression which surrounds her in the story." (*Rev. of English Studies* 433)

The tragic error in *The Turn of the Screw* comes when the Governess is in such a desperate mental state that she sees no alternative but to blame the children to try and effect their rescue. The evil, thereby, is allowed to come through, and the children are corrupted by ^{her} ~~she~~ herself, according to several critical interpretations. "She has been so hard pressed that she feels she must build the case herself even at the expense of the children. That is the sinister note which enters the second half of the story." There is no going back, and the real suffering of the children, the only actual suffering of the children that the reader witnesses, begins. The reader sees the wheels set in motion, spinning to the tragic end.

" . . . Well, their simplest and most natural acts are interpreted by the governess as being of a suspicious nature, even when they got up in the night and went out to look at the moonlight , and that sort of thing. The governess constantly attempts to draw the children into her orbit of evil and force them to share it and prove them guilty. She transfers her guilty motives to them, making them accomplices to justify herself. But it seems to me that their conduct is perfectly simple and intuitive. They surmise the purpose and the enormous threat to them . . ."

" . . . as we read along we're not explaining anything to ourselves at all. We're not saying: Well, a dreadful, dreadful thing is happening, yet we know the reason. In a very important sense we don't know the reason. Something is loose here in the world, if only in the mind of a woman. Something is loose in the world which is very powerful and beyond the control of any human being." (A Radio Symposium: Tate, Porter, Van Doren 161, 164-165)

The action, the "being and doing" in *The Awakening* is in the revelations that present themselves to Edna Pontellier, and the subsequent actions she is moved to take. From the moment Mlle. Reisz's playing elicits tears from her, we know she is in thrall to her awakening. Her passions are illustrative of the end of her life of illusion, and all the action occurs along those lines. When the action is nearing a climax, at the dinner party in chapter XXX, it is clear something is happening to Mrs. Pontellier from her attitude in general. Her state of mind, while bewildering to her and the other characters at times, is exemplified in this description and fits the tragic heroine:

"The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. . . . There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone." (Chopin 561-562)

The "being and doing" in *The Turn of the Screw* is amazingly handled by Henry James. The reader becomes mesmerized by the Governess' frantic narration. " . . . in reading it we tend to forget that the governess is telling it; we think we are actually participating." (A Radio Symposium: Van Doren, Tate 167) This interpretation fits the Aristotelian image of the tragic hero: "We fear and even suffer with the actors because we identify ourselves with them." (Brereton 29) In addition, "(Aristotle writes): 'Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action of high importance, complete and of some amplitude; in language enhanced by distinct and varying beauties; *acted, not narrated*.'" (Brereton 28)

In "The Art of Fiction" James talks about the "immense sensibility" of experience. The extremely effective way he is able to relate the experience of the Governess makes the first time reader accept her story without question and makes the critic look to ever deeper layers for an explanation of the story. "If it were merely a story of what she thought, of what she could fool herself into seeing, she wouldn't have the power she has over us as readers; she wouldn't be able, as you say, to project Quint and Miss Jessel to great distances, across lakes; to the tops of towers, and so on." (A Radio Symposium: Van Doren 165)

The final elements of the tragedy, suffering and the unhappy ending, foretold by the tragic error, are quite evident in both books. In the examination of these endings, some remarkable

similarities come out. While Chopin is often accused of “ambivalence” by her critics, James is often accused of “ambiguity.” The Governess has turned on the children as consorts of evil influences and Mrs. Pontellier regards her children as adversaries. The nature of Mrs. Pontellier’s state of mind is not completely explained, nor is the nature of the evil affecting the Governess.

At the end of The Awakening, Edna Pontellier walks into the sea, unable to reconcile her self awareness with the limitations of her environment. Her suffering comes as a result of her isolation. Robert’s inability to join her in her new incarnation, her awakened self, is more than she can take. The consequences of her enlightenment have become all too clear. “The strength of (Ewell’s) essay lies in (her) grasp of Chopin’s perception of the simultaneous yearning towards and unavailability of the Emersonian ideal of individuality for a woman. She rightly stresses the ambivalence of the novel’s conclusion, without feeling it necessary to impose the resolution of a single reading upon it.” (Rev. of English Studies 433)

True to the Aristotelian elements, the ending has been foretold. Even before the “tragic error,” the reader knows why Robert Lebrun abruptly goes to Mexico. This might make us wonder, even with an affirmation from Mrs. Pontellier; would he have the courage to defy propriety for love? When Mrs. Pontellier has her dialogue with Dr. Mandelet, the end is clear. She is going to live without illusions, even if it means her suffering and destruction.

Her choice is intertwined with her persistent revelation that desire alone couldn’t bridge the boundaries of her emptiness. “Edna’s problem, if it is one, is that she cannot transcend desire without renouncing the consequences of her actions in the world she only partly wishes to transcend. This is where, I believe, Chopin’s fundamental ambivalence comes in.” (Canfield 20)

“She had said over and over to herself: ‘To-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Leonce Pontellier -- but Raoul and Etienne!’ She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children.

“ . . . There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and

the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days.” (Chopin 581-582)

The last images in Edna Pontellier’s mind are ironic and certainly tragic. Her father’s voice, her sister Margaret’s, the barking dog, clanging spurs, bees and the odor of “pinks” paint a sentimental portrait of the world she is rejecting. “She is pulled back to her attraction to individual and beautiful phenomena. In leaving us with these images, Chopin seems to be challenging the adequacy of Idealism as consolation. Indeed, she seems to endorse emotional involvement over aesthetic contemplation regardless of her intellectual efforts to argue otherwise.

“She, in fact, may not have been able to see that the prudery of her Idealism was nowhere nearly strong enough to mask her delight in nature broadly and sexual desire in particular. While her Doctor Mandelet may speak for her consciously directed belief in aesthetic withdrawal; her vitality, even in grief, is transparently present.” (Canfield 20-21) The vitality of the tragic heroine is, even in death, transparently present.

The tragic ending of The Turn of the Screw follows suffering brought about by the corruption of the children, by the haunted (not haunting) Governess. The suffering is all the more ominous as we feel some sinister details are left out. The exact nature of the threat is never known, but is certainly present. The urgency of the Governess’ manner, her apprehension that turns to panic, propels us toward the bitter end. “ . . . it seems to me that the fame of this story among all of James’s stories is justified by the fact that the evil in it somehow remains pure and general, remains undefined. All of the attempts on the part of the governess to find out what it is, after all, are frustrated. There is never any danger that evil will shrink here into vice, into misdemeanor.” (A Radio Symposium: Van Doren 169)

The inevitable is first foretold when the Governess starts to blame and suspect the children. Very near the end, she speaks of Miles and the “collapse of mockery” on his face signifying her triumph. She believed she had ceased communications between Miles and Peter Quint, won the spiritual battle. Miles still doesn’t see Quint, however, and as the Governess says “I have you . . . but he has lost you forever,” (Chopin 402) the reader knows that Miles is lost to all.

James knew the importance of the ambiguous ending, and his notes on the story only serve to tease the reader. "I am only afraid," wrote James to Dr. Louis Waldstein, 'that my conscious intention strikes you as having been larger than I deserve it should be thought.' And yet, a little later, 'But, of course, where there is life, there's truth, and the truth was at the back of my head.'" (Fagin 159)

In both The Awakening and The Turn of the Screw, circumstances arise, circumstances that, given the interpretation of their tragic heroines, emerge as tragedy. Edna Pontellier and the Governess gain the sympathy of the reader, excite fear and pity. They are truly "people whom we regard as of some consequence, without examining the motive for our regard." (Brereton 37) At the point of their tragic errors, the readers know what is to come in the bitter end. Our heroines act on, in accordance with their inescapable characters. In their roles throughout these stories, and in their final catharses, they are tragic heroines of whom Aristotle would approve.

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