

The relationship
between incident and
character in 'the turn
of the screw' and 'b...



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'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?' - Henry James

It can be argued that a person's character and individual nature is affected by exterior incident. This occurs in both Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss*, however each protagonist's experience differs. For Bertha Young in Mansfield's short story, the incident -discovering Pearl's affair with her husband -does not change her character; her nature is the only thing that remains the same, whilst the outward circumstances continue to change. In James' short story, the governess is so affected by the incidents -seeing both the ghostly figure of the man in the tower and the woman by the lake -that she struggles to identify between an outward incident and one conjured by her own mind. Her character changes indefinitely, only adding to the horror of the incidents. Therefore, it is difficult to provide a definite argument as to the relationship of incident and character. For the governess, the reader witnesses the effects of the incident; for Bertha, we merely see the beginning of the end.

Within *The Turn of the Screw*, many of the governess' actions are determined by the supernatural incidents she encounters, fuelling her supposed insanity. The reader is only introduced to the governess as a character when she arrives at Bly, and we are given little information about her life previously. Therefore, the reader can only judge her on the behaviour we witness, which is of her character being consumed by these incidents. The governess describes the lasting effects of her encounter with the apparition, Peter Quint:

They are in my ears still, his supreme surre'nder of the name and his tribute to my devotion. ' What does he matter now, my own? -what will he ever matter? I have you,'...

James' use of the adverb ' still' emphasises a constant presence, suggesting that whilst the encounter is over, their voices refuse to leave her head.

These prolonging effects begin to suggest that perhaps even the governess herself is possessed. This incident also seems to provoke possessiveness in the governess. Whilst it is understandable that she would be concerned for Miles, the italicised emphasis ' I' suggests a need to almost own the child, beyond necessary emotion. Therefore, the effects of this incident do not seem to change the governess' character, but bring to the surface a possessive nature that was perhaps long forgotten.

For the governess in *Turn of the Screw*, the incident provokes a reaction that involves others, and determines her relationship with the children. In Mansfield's *Bliss*, Bertha discovers her husband's affair, but then is completely detached from others in her reaction; she discovers and laments the downfall by herself:

' Oh, what is going to happen now?' she cried.

But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.

This cry of desperation is placed directly after the revelation of the divorce.

This creates a stark contrast between the ' lovely as ever' pear tree and Bertha's human downfall. It also works to highlight her isolation; throughout the short story, the tree has been representative of strength and beauty, yet

now it bestows none of this on Bertha and refuses to collectively suffer.

Mansfield commented she ' had moments when it has seemed to [her] that this wasn't what [her] little kingdom ought to be like.'[2] And this echoes Bertha's expectations perfectly. She claims to have ' everything' (p. 115) in her ' little kingdom', yet her way of life is tarnished as she is left asking a question that no-one answers. This tragic epiphany seems as if it will indefinitely shape Bertha's character, yet as readers we are limited to this scene, and do not see the consequent actions. Therefore, incident in both short stories shapes the protagonist's, not only in their own characters, but in how they react to other mediums, whether human or nature.

Rohrberger comments that: ' Mirrors serve to reflect reality as it is or as the character wants it to be.' Mansfield uses a mirror to present Bertha's new reality; the image she sees changes her character, and pre-empts an incident that will happen. In this instance, the change in character occurs before the incident: She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror- but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes [...] waiting for something...divine to happen...that she knew must happen...infallibly. (p. 115) Despite Bertha's action of looking in the mirror, the image is given back to her, removing her agency from the action. Through this, Bertha is able to truly see the woman she has, almost subconsciously, become, ' a woman radiant with smiling, trembling lips'. This sensual imagery suggests an anticipation of her own metaphorical blossoming; her sexuality is awakening and she is sure something will happen, just not quite what. Her lack of agency is once again emphasised by the suggestion of God in the ' divine' act; the incident, whatever it will be,

will occur and she is helpless to stop it. Furthermore, the repetition of ellipses emphasises this agonising prolonging and sense of mystery; the reader is delayed in the reading of Bliss, as Bertha is in the knowledge that a 'divine' incident must happen.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, there is a similar ambiguity in an incident as the governess sees Miles on the lawn: '[the] moon made the night extraordinarily penetrable [...] The presence on the lawn -I felt sick as I made it out- was poor little Miles himself.' (p. 176) Again, nature seems to provide the clarity that the human mind cannot; the night is 'extraordinarily penetrable', yet the governess still describes Miles as a 'presence'. This suggests a supernatural element to the young boy's identity, presenting confusion between the human characters and the apparitions. It could also further suggest the governess perceives for the first time the 'reality' of Miles' character; is he a young boy possessed or simply wanting to be seen '-for a change -bad!' (p. 179)? To conclude, these identified incidents change a character's nature in a way that is unexpected; Bertha sees a new version of herself, as the governess sees Miles in a new light.

As established, an incident can work to determine the character of a person. However, both short stories also present the idea that mental thought can influence. The governess experiences the incident where she sees Flora in the garden, and the memory of this experience then changes as she continues to think about it: 'Two hours ago, in the garden' -I could scarce articulate- Flora saw! '[...] there are depths, depths! The more I go over it the more I see in it, and the more I see in it the more I fear. (p. 157) She is

obviously becoming obsessive, going over it until she sees more than she
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perhaps ever originally witnessed. With such a strong assertion primarily existing as thought, the governess struggles with this conversion to speech. This separation is illustrated by the punctuation ‘-’; this physical break in the text equates to the difference between the spoken and the mental. Rawlings observes that: ‘ Bly seems to offer the governess a new space of possibility, making room for the pleasure of the fictional, the improvisational...’ This therefore suggests that the so-called incident was not Flora’s apparition, but the move to Bly, and this has affected her thought processes. This idea of the ‘ improvisational’ is continued in the governess’ combination of thought and sight, as if the more thought she dedicates to it, the more she ‘ sees’ in her memories. Furthermore, the governess actively displays an unreliable narration, leading the readers to question what is the truth, and what she improvised.

Whilst the governess’ actions are determined by her own thought, Mansfield’s Bliss exhibits a character that is dictated by the thoughts of other people. Mansfield seems to mock this superficial and modern lifestyle, embodied in the character of Eddie: ‘ I think I’ve come across the same idea in a lit-tle French review, quite unknown in England’ (p. 119). The use of italics suggests that Eddie chooses his words and emphases to suggest his own high level of education. His tone also becomes increasingly patronising – ‘ lit-tle French review’ –suggesting that he thinks himself over the others at the dinner table. His exclusivity of information, what is ‘ quite unknown’, determines him as a character of power through knowledge. However, this aestheticism – ‘ a [concept] of life committed to keener experiences of aesthetic sensation and perception’– encourages self-absorbed traits that

seem irrelevant to others. This 'aesthetic sensation' and carefully shaped rhetoric replaces emotional sensation; when Bertha's learns of Harry's affair, Eddie is capable of reciting 'Table d'Hôte' but fails to offer emotional support. This perhaps makes Bertha conscious that a life full of 'modern, thrilling friends'(p. 115) who live their lives based on other's thoughts and opinions is temporary and unfulfilling. This shows how powerful one's own thoughts are to the individual, but seemingly powerless when directed, as Eddie does, at others unnecessarily.

Throughout both the short stories, there are events where characters seem to influence incidents. Yet, it is more interesting to consider how, in *Bliss* and *The Turn of the Screw*, incidents attempt to control a character and thus fail. In both texts, an incident occurs and we, as readers, expect a certain reaction. But the characters lack understanding, and therefore they are not influenced by the incident, as they should be. Bertha cannot comprehend her new-found, ardently emotional consciousness and the governess struggles not with the apparitions themselves but their purpose of appearing. This creates a tension between what should have happened, and what did happen in the after-math of pivotal incidents. To conclude, the focus is perhaps then on not how the incident influenced a character, but how it did not.

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