

A Jungian and Historical Reading of M. R. James's Ghost Stories

The major research questions of the thesis

In approaching the literary territory of M. R. James for my Master's thesis, I began to appreciate that there has never been a full-length study of M. R. James's ghost stories. In gathering the sources for the study of the thesis, I also began to realise that there was also a very limited amount of primary sources, such as the four biographies, by Dr Richard William Pfaff, Michael Cox and Gurney Lubbock , James's own autobiography *Eton and King's*, and Gwendolen McBryde's published *Letters from James*. The secondary sources that were available were mostly chapter length studies included in studies of the ghost story form, such as Dr Andrew Smith of Sheffield University, examining the area of James and Modernism, Dr Darryl Jones of Belfast University writing a new introduction to yet another issue of James's collected ghost stories, and Dr Luke Thurston of Aberystwyth University, concentrating on the semantic possibilities of the stories. They were part of the many offerings that have come out recently.

On the internet there were more recent up to date studies, such as the ghosts and scholars site, run by the indomitable Rosemary Pardoe, which featured a lengthy in depth look at all of James's stories, his scholarly work, and descriptions of the films based on these stories.

In reading the material available I noted that there had never been an attempt to read James's ghost stories from a Jungian perspective, the nearest attempt had been a few short paragraphs by Christopher Booker in his study on mythic storylines *The Seven Basic Plots*.¹ This was an obvious gap in the canon, as it soon became apparent that reading James from a Jungian perspective demonstrated that James suffered from a particularly Jungian malaise, an un-individuated personality or a personality that has not united it's ego and id successfully enough, in the first stages of personality development that usually takes place in the first stages of childhood, but also is continuously renewed throughout a lifetime.

Therefore I had certain research questions to answer in the thesis,

1 There had never been a full length critical appraisal of M. R. James's ghost stories this was to be the first full length study. The introductory chapter outlines the Methodological and theoretical approach i used when writing the thesis, why I used both historical theories and Jungian approaches to the James's ghost stories; I then outlined that the focus of the PhD thesis is both on James the writer and James the person.

¹ Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots* (London : Continuum, 2007),p.451

2 In this chapter, I outline my Jungian approach to M. R. James's ghost stories, arguing that the psychoanalytical approach taken by Jung, when used to read literary texts, can uncover psychodynamic relations between the characters' selves, especially those drawn from the Jungian individuation process, aspects of neurosis and psychological imbalances, and more severe forms of psychological imbalance and psychopathology.

3 In this chapter I examine the question of why James avoided being ordained into the church, when it was obvious that his Christian faith was extremely important to him. This ambivalence generated an interesting divided reading in his ghost stories, many of which include a church undermined by paganism, and figures in the church that were less than holy, and what we might call 'the unseen'. This divided reading was also indicative of an interrupted individuation process in James the author, as I argue in this chapter and in the conclusion.

4. The monsters or revenants in James's fiction are actually Darwinian devolved specimens with features that come straight from the theories espoused by Charles Darwin, and Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso who were influenced by the degenerative theories of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. The antiquarian men who invariably encounter these revenants then demonstrate Kristeva's theory of abjection, when their nervous reactions to the pursuit render them incapable of functioning on a conscious level.

5 That the critical consensus that James avoided the inclusion of sex of any type in his ghost stories was actually a misnomer, as there is a certain type of sexual activity underlying many of the stories, a dark sexuality that can be uncovered by a psycho-biographical reading of James's own cloistered sexual psyche, and the world in which he lived, and applying this to the narration and plot-lines of the stories. Guilt is a trigger for many of James's characters, and it leads to an interrupted individuation process through the rejection of the anima or animus. The rejection of the anima results in a regression to the egoic stage of union with the shadow, which is then reduced to a shadow projection

6. How James's fiction is not one particular type of story, but actually evolved across the times that he was writing it, from Victorian, to Edwardian, and in particular the ways in which he could be considered a gothic-modernist.

7. Conclusion here I include a summary of chapters and which areas of research I would consider fruitful in the future and which I did not cover in this thesis, i.e. eco-criticism, Steampunk and colonialism.