

GIRL WITH THE PEARL EARRING

American Psychoanalytic Association Winter Meeting

New York

January 19, 2006

© **Merton A. Shill**

Email: mertshil@umich.edu

TELEPHONE: 734-662-0294

FAX: 734-769-8066

**924 Baldwin Avenue,
Suite C**

Ann Arbor

MI 48104-3523

GIRL WITH THE PEARL EARRING

A.O Scott in the *New York Times* suggests that Vermeer's plight as depicted in this film is the well-polished lament of the married philanderer: "My wife doesn't understand me." *I could not disagree more*-- not because of a quibble about when is a philander a philander -- recall Jimmy Carter's *Playboy* confession that he had "committed adultery in my *heart* many times" emphasis added--Jimmy Carter, interview in *Playboy* (November 1976), but because I suggest that *Girl with the Pearl Earring* is instead a poignant, resonant coming-of-age story. It about light, the light of knowledge, the pursuit of enlightenment, curiosity and ultimately irresistible immersion in the universal and peremptory questions of childhood: what are those noises in the night from my parents' bedroom? Where do babies come from? It is about the awakening of sensuality, the blossoming of sexual curiosity and desire—and, as children are wont to do, it is about playing with fire.

In the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates speak of the essence of things and he suggests that all the senses have their essence contained within them, except one:

Socrates: Sight being, as I conceive, in the eyes, and he who has eyes wanting to see; colour being also present in them, still unless there be a third nature specially adapted to the purpose, the owner of the eyes will see nothing and the colours will be invisible.

Glaucon: Of which nature are you speaking?

Soc: Of that which you term light.... [Plato: *Republic* (Jowett Trans., ed., VI, 507)].

Without light, we cannot see. It is hardly a revelation that seeing is a metaphor for the shedding of light, enlightenment and the birth of insight and understanding.

The fulcrum around which this story revolves is the fact that Griet's father loses his sight when he is injured at his work. So there is no light, only darkness for him. This theme of light—and its opposite--darkness or faltering is an allusion to the historical period of the movie—the Enlightenment in the Netherlands, unique in contemporary Europe because of the blazing emergence of the Dutch school of painting. This was followed by an outpouring of knowledge after the final overthrow of the burden of mediaeval submission to the canonical authority of Rome. Copernicus has already suggested that the sun and not the earth is at the center of the universe. A Dutch eyeglass maker, Hans Lippershey, invents the telescope in 1608 and in 1609 Galileo Galilei literally turns the intellectual world upside down when he invents his own telescope and confirms Copernicus' theory. Griet's world too is soon to be turned upside down by a starry light and a new vision.

Her rite-de-passage across town to the family of the Catholic Vermeer also follows the arc of the proud young independent Protestant United Netherlands, now blossoming after 80 years of war against the domination of Catholic Spain. But in going to the Catholic section of Delft, Griet is going into the camp of the enemy -- the lair of the forbidden, the place where the hated and feared "Roomse Kerk"—the Roman church-- stills controls the minds of men. So her

mother warns her: “The food may be strange..keep clear of their Catholic prayers”—so reminiscent of the Divine injunction not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden—the tree of knowledge.

However, the forbidden is also exotic, tempting, exciting and Griet falls under its spell. This religious boundary symbolizes the separation from the unconscionable and unthinkable Oedipal object—her new master--but her new surroundings include an oedipal memento: like Vermeer, her father was also a painter-- of Delft tiles and pottery—she carries one of his painted tiles with her as a keepsake from him. Merely leaving home will not allow her to escape her maturing body and her maturing passions. Geography cannot oust psychology.

There are also other divisions –besides the religious--between Griet and Vermeer: their respective ages as well as social stations. These also suggest the oedipal boundary---as Freud often mentioned, the oedipal tension and frequent sexual involvements of maids and their masters.

Her father’s accident then, catapults Griet into a seething adult world exposing her to all its lures and dangers. It is as if her father has to lose his sight—so that she can acquire a vision of the world—the world both without and especially within. Her father is a latter day Oedipus who forfeits his sight prospectively so that she can now see, understand and know. Now the dilemma: what will Griet do in this new world of the forbidden she has entered?

In this new world, life is a cauldron: living is cheek by jowl, cheek by blood, cheek by animals, by eggs, by animal carcasses, by butchers' knives; cheek by paint, by dirt, by urine, by feces, by dank canals; cheek by babies bloodily being born, by women shrieking in childbirth; cheek by leering roués, by cramped, creaky houses and by strange stirrings in the night. The head house maid shows her: "This is where the mistress and the master sleep. And have company. You'll get used to it"; and at another time, referring to Van Ruijven's escapades with a maid--: "You know what men are"--trivializing the overstimulation for the *ingénue*.

Vermeer's world though, is also a world of color, of light and shade--distilled from nature and spread onto canvass. His work shows her the light. He shows her the *camera obscura*. And she sees. It is no longer obscure. She sees so well that it becomes dangerous. His mother-in-law knows—she suspects Griet is the inspiration for Vermeer's new secret painting. The head house maid knows. It is the secret, the knowledge that no one wants to acknowledge—the way adults say: "Hush, the children might hear you". And everyone wants to keep this knowledge from Vermeer's wife. When Vermeer teaches Griet how to mix the colors for him, their hands clasp, brush and flutter. He is letting in the light for her, into his world—how to make it sensual, beautiful--recipes for radiance. He paints her. He says: "My wife need not know." Vermeer's 6 year old oedipal daughter Cornelia knows, and jealously tries to ensnare Griet by engineering the casting of suspicion on *her* for the theft of her mother's prize hair comb. But her father saves Griet by proving that *she* not Griet, was the thief and she

is punished. Never mind--that interloper *will* be gone; mother will finish the job—with her help. We see two young girls at the opposite ends of the developmental spectrum: the one fiercely guarding her proprietary claims to her father, through an alliance with mother -- her most natural rival-- against a common foe-- the other older one, who is straining away from confronting her passion with this strange, exciting man who is much like her father, her teacher, perhaps her confidante? And.... he *wants* her. And she knows this—unmistakably. Suddenly the kaleidoscope of stimulating images makes sense.

The influence of light --and its revolutionary effects is ever present in this film: In one scene, Griet opens the shutters in Vermeer's studio so she can see—suggesting that he is going to be her guide, her teacher in her new world. The light is vividly evident in many of the scenes of interiors—the light and rich color.—I assume the deliberate intent of the filmmaker. The banquet scene is particularly noticeable: the candles give the impression of being the sole source of light but most of it appears to come from concealed (perhaps overhead?) lighting. The result is that the light seems to emanate from the people themselves. The painting of Griet also has this emanating presence, a "shining outward, from within" ---the quality of being both suffused with light and glowing with it from within—signaling it seems, the dawning and radiance of the inner light of knowledge and understanding.

This is the saboteur that insinuates itself amongst the innocent. It is the enemy of family, dignity and respectability. Shades of the serpent in Genesis. For Griet has made a precious connection to someone who understands, who has helped

her understand and who reciprocates. As Vermeer's wife screams out in impotent agony--"She can't even read!"-- she shows that *she* finally feels-if not understands-- his passion for his work and for Griet—which are now one and the same. And how she is excluded and always will be from him/his life in this way. He is a dutiful husband, but no more. He keeps his wife stocked with children and pours himself into his painting until Griet comes into his life. Then he pours his passion for her into the painting. Vermeer's wife screams that his painting of Griet is "obscene." Obscene? No--it is the fantasy behind the painting that is obscene. There has been no action. There doesn't have to be.

But a norm has been violated— fantasies are what betray you, reveal your innermost secrets, never think or feel the forbidden, the longed for, even the beloved. The primary process thinking of the superego equating thought and action, even though supposedly overthrown by the emancipation from Catholic doctrine, is victorious.

But it is not entirely true that nothing has happened. Griet asks Vermeer to pierce her ear so she can wear the pearl earrings when he paints her. He does. This sweet pain of defloration occurs because of an act: the one stands for the other. The meeting of fantasy and substitute action that tells of what may yet be and also of what has been. What is wished for, what has been tasted. They feel it. His wife senses it—and she is distraught. She demands: "Why don't you paint *me*?" Then comes the wounding: "You don't understand."

He might as well have said: “You don’t see ---anything. For you, there is no light. You don’t want knowledge. I do paint you but all you do is shut your eyes and have babies.”

The contrast between oedipal/sexual knowledge and the apparently innocent seamlessness of people’s lives is omnipresent in this story. The brief glimpses of Vermeer's curly redheaded daughter Cornelia with her child-centered voyeurism looking, looking, always watching. Griet is between the daughter and the mother in age. She straddles the generations. There is also a generational divide between Griet and Vermeer’s wife. Griet is the budding child woman in relation both to the child who is sexually curious but who can go no further and the sexually mature and fertile woman. Griet is the fast maturing child woman who can see and feel the full potential of her maturing body and mind. Griet is unlettered but not insensate, unworldly but not unreceptive—tremulous but vibrant. Griet is the sister in fascinated innocence of Vermeer’s daughter. But this does not last. Griet has a body that is ripe and poised to act.

And what does she do? As soon as Vermeer has breached her barrier, she runs to her boyfriend and initiates an enactment with him of what she could not do with Vermeer. This is a masturbatory release of the passion stirred up by the encounter with Vermeer. He asks her to marry him and she doesn’t respond. Marriage to Pieter is not what she desires. She will wait, she seems to signify. For another day, perhaps for a Vermeer of her own.

It will never be Vermeer himself. She is summarily dismissed, expelled from Eden for what she knows and desires. She has aspired to what her betters know and have—and they guard their secrets and their preserve jealously. In the end all she will have are the pearl earrings, the symbols of her sexual baptism and the disavowed decoration of a desperate matron who can bear no longer to wear them.

There are many psychoanalytic themes and truths in this film. Child analysts are familiar with the connection between the forbidden nature of sexual/oedipal curiosity and wishes on the one hand, and learning and reading inhibitions on the other. The child's notion of absolute knowledge and absolute freedom is a fantasy except—as this film suggests—that the passionate union of two people is perhaps as close as we can get.

Griet is shown at the blossoming of her sexuality with the real ability and capacity to act upon it—which separate her from her girlhood and Vermeer's daughter and bring her directly into the realm of Vermeer's wife. Griet seeks to enact her central masturbation fantasy with its clear link to oedipal wishes and surrogates but she does it with a substitute object—i.e., she is seen in the story working through her burgeoning sexual desire and identity as a maturing woman. She uses her relationship with Pieter to accomplish this, thus preserving generational boundaries, social propriety and a maturing syntonicity of drive, ego and superego in the furtherance of the adolescent re-

working and integration of oedipal development and the finding of a non-incestuous love object.

So much for Griet. What about the author? I was intrigued by the relevance of some personal details about Tracy Chevalier regarding the writing of this book. She says:

“The idea for this novel came easily. I was lying in bed one morning, worrying about what I was going to write next. ... A poster of the Vermeer painting *Girl With a Pearl Earring* hung in my bedroom, as it had done since I was 19 and first discovered the painting. I lay there idly contemplating the girl's face, and thought suddenly, ‘I wonder what Vermeer did to her to make her look like that. Now there’s a story worth writing.’ Within three days I had the whole story worked out. It was effortless; I could see all the drama and conflict in the look on her face. Vermeer had done my work for me” (www.tracychevalier.com).

I wonder. I suggest these are the nascent fantasies of a young woman very close in age to the central female character in the story. Is the story the projection of this -- a happy literate union of unconscious fantasy and talent?

There is more: Chevalier describes the writing process: “I began *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in February 1998 and completed it in October 1998.... Two weeks later I had my son. There’s nothing like a fixed biological deadline to focus the mind!”

Biology, like geography, cannot oust psychology. From February to October is exactly nine months. Again Chevalier, I suggest, overlooks the probable unconscious significance—she has no choice—of this story for her. What of the timing of her pregnancy? What of her oedipal wishes? Is Vermeer the fantasized father of her baby? Is the book the baby? Is it her father's baby?

CLOSING

Perhaps we can also reflect here upon the tragic cast to Freud's place in Western thought: he is a Promethean figure who brazenly passed on the knowledge of the sexual and violent unconscious and, more even than Socrates, the tool of self-enlightenment to the world. As we know all too well from history, those who bring fire and light to the world are blamed for the inferno that results. Christian society condemns Eve and demeans her sexual curiosity as Original Sin when it should look within instead.

As you will recall, Freud said that every generation has to discover anew the truths of psychoanalysis—and will resist that revelation. Freud like Socrates and Galileo was one of the great corruptors. And this is what we face as followers of Freud's legacy: We are in fact, all of us--chained to the rock with Prometheus.

