

THE MANY TURNS OF THE SCREW: THE INHERENT AMBIGUITY OF HENRY JAMES'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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Abstract: Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is perceived as one of his most controversial pieces of literature due to the variety of critical readings that it has generated since its publication in 1898. Readings of the story range from treating it as a Gothic ghost story dealing with the age-old Manichean battle of good versus evil to psychoanalytical examination of its protagonist's experience. This variety has led to later readings that instead of insisting on a single, straightforward interpretation, attempted to explore the inherent ambiguity of the text that has resulted in such diverse readings. Since this ambiguity could be attributed to James's awareness of his readers' experience of the novella, this study primarily approaches the text using Wolfgang Iser's reader-oriented approach. In doing so, this research explores the way James's narrative technique generates indeterminacy and affects the reading process in a way to resist any attempt at a fully coherent interpretation.

Keywords: ambiguity, frame narrative, Henry James, reader response theory, repertoire, *The Turn of the Screw*, Wolfgang Iser

1. Introduction: The Question of the Reader in *The Turn of the Screw*

In his preface to the 1908 edition of *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James highlights the significance of the reader's experience as the recipient of his tale:

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. (123)

It is precisely such an awareness of his text's reader, as well as James's insistence on affecting the reader's experience, that makes *The Turn of the Screw* such a controversial piece of literary prose. This deliberate complexity and ambiguity in James's prose has long been the subject of discussion in literary scholarship, generating the term "Jamesian ambiguity" as an "uncontested critical category" among James critics (Sussman, 2014; 1). For instance, Rebekah Scott, in her "'The Dreadful Done': Henry James's Style of Abstraction," explores James's style of deliberate textual complexity and believes James practices a style of "literary abstractionism" that, not unlike painterly abstraction, it is "heavily invested in 'implication' – as 'the fact of being implied or involved, without being plainly expressed'" (2021; 942, 944). Garry L. Hagberg also asserts that while James did not "[want] a blurred, over-general, imprecise picture" in his prose, he did not "want to erase ambiguity from a fuller conception of language" either (2020; 72). This deliberate ambiguity and textual complexity often complicate the relationship between the reader and the text, prompting readers to "become involved in second-degree gap-filling, mind-negotiating processes . . ." throughout their reading activity (Álvarez-Amorós, 2020; 101). As is shown by the aforementioned James scholars, such textual complexity and ambiguity are central features of James's prose.

This signature complexity and ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw*, in particular, has prompted Wayne C. Booth to assert that the work has been "discussed more than any other modern story" (1995; 163). Booth begins his reader-response study of the text by observing that, contrary to many other significant works of literature, the readers of James's novella cannot even agree on the kind of story that they are confronted with: "I can think of no other work of art that has stimulated as many contradictory readings" (164). In the interest of simplification, Booth categorizes the different readings of James's text into three groups: straight, ironic, and what Booth terms the "mazed" readings of the text, which, he explains, are "the readings that see the story as itself rejecting any one interpretation" (ibid; 169). This study builds on Booth's ideas offered in the aforementioned study, particularly the "mazed" reading, and through a reader-response criticism of the work, focuses on the way Henry James produces indeterminacy through his narrative technique.

In Booth's classification of the text's diverse readings, the "straight" readers are those who take the governess's word at face value and approach the account as a ghost story. Therefore, their impression of the novella is "a horrifying story of how two utterly corrupt people return from the dead in the hope of possessing the souls of two helpless little children" (ibid; 169). "Ironic" readings, on the other hand, are those that

question the reliability of the narrator. Such readers scrutinize the text for subtle clues that point to the madness of the governess (ibid; 171), thus opening the door for more complex psychoanalytical approaches to the story. Such readings often build on James's own familiarity with the psychological research of his time as a way to promote such interpretations (Lind, 1970; 232). However, Booth maintains that both of these readings can ultimately be rebuffed. If a reader is to take the governess as trustworthy, the symptoms of her unreliability will soon surface as they go on reading. On the other hand, an ironic reading will be equally undermined as many of the facts in the story lend credibility to the governess's account, thereby increasing her reliability as a narrator. This is where Booth's "mazed" readers intervene; they are the ones that see the story's project as "ensuring the constant frustration of every interpreter; it leads readers a merry chase through one failed reading after another" (Booth, 1995; 173).

In these different readings of the story, the effect of the frame of the story on the reader could hardly be overemphasized. In exemplifying the "straight" readings, Booth points out how the readers that go down this route are those that take Douglas's assessment of the governess literally. To them, Douglas's positive judgment of her character gives the governess, and thus her story which follows the prologue, credibility (ibid; 169). The "ironic" readings, on the other hand, not only doubt the governess's trustworthiness but also Douglas's comments; it is not difficult to see the man's bias toward the governess and, consequently, to mistrust his judgment. The significance of the prologue and the level of complexity that it adds to the story has attracted the attention of several other critics as well. For instance, commenting on the narrative technique of Henry James, Sidney E. Lind points out that "[t]he 'frame' is contrived with such complexity and detail that it might nearly stand as a short story by itself, some three thousand words long, Douglas' tribute to the governess" (1970; 235). Michael J. H. Taylor (1982) even goes as far as devoting his entire analysis of the narrative to the unnamed narrator of the prologue, discussing the narrator's undetermined sex and its contribution to the overall ambiguity of the text. Much of the ambiguity of the text, which, according to Peter Beidler, prompted many contemporary critics to adopt "the postmodern 'we-can-have-it-both-ways' view" (1995; 135), stems from James's distinctive framing of the story by including the prologue. Therefore, studying not only the tale itself but also the frame narrative and its influence on the main tale can be illuminating in determining many aspects of the controversial ambiguity of the narrative.

2. A Gothic Tale or a Parody? Indeterminacy in the Governess's Tale

Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory offers an apt framework for exploring the ambiguity of the text and its implications for the reader, since his phenomenological approach considers both the text and the reader, instead of focusing on either one of the two. In his seminal work, *The Implied Reader* (1974), Iser asserts that a literary work consists of two poles: the artistic one, which is the text as created by its author, and the aesthetic one, which refers to the realization of the text by the reader. According to Iser, it is the convergence between the two poles that brings the literary work to life (ibid; 274–275). Since the literary work is never equivalent to the text – the artistic pole – itself, there are certain unwritten elements in the text that prompt the reader to engage with it on a creative level (ibid; 275). It is precisely the unwritten components that constitute what Iser refers to as the “indeterminacy” or the “gaps” within the text, which stimulate the reader's imagination (ibid; 283). In *The Act of Reading* (1978), Iser further elaborates on his conceptualization of the reading process. Iser views the establishment of consistency as “essential to all comprehension” (ibid; 16). In a sense, readers search for consistency in texts in order to be able to grasp a text. However, as the reading process progresses, the reader “finds himself confronted with inconsistencies; the solution to the conflict lies in some idea of reconciliation which is not formulated by the text” (Act, 1978; 48). It is in this oscillating process of seeking consistency within a text and confronting inconsistencies, which restrict the reader's interpretation, that the aesthetic experience of the reader materializes. Thus, Iser's model would offer a suitable framework for Booth's “mazed” readers, who view *The Turn of the Screw's* resistance to one fixed interpretation as an inherent characteristic of the text itself.

The reconciliation that Iser offers as the solution to confronting inconsistencies lies in the convergence between the text and the reader, and he further explicates this process by expanding on his notion of the “repertoire” of the text. The repertoire refers to “all the familiar territory within the text” (Act, ibid; 69). Once the repertoire lays the foundation of what is familiar between the text and the reader, it is ultimately up to what Iser calls the “strategies,” which are the narrative or poetic techniques utilized in the text, to *defamiliarize* the familiar (Act, ibid, 87). What is important in Iser's model is that both the repertoire and the strategies are part of the schemata of the text itself. The text itself has properties that not only stimulate the reader's imaginative activity but also impose a limit on the unwritten implications that the reader can formulate.

In his discussion of the repertoire of the text, Iser posits that the familiar elements of a text “may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged” (*Act, ibid*; 69). In the different readings of *The Turn of the Screw*, the literary allusions to earlier Gothic works have not escaped the critics’ attention. Perhaps the most notable example is the second sentence of the fourth section of the novella: “Was there a ‘secret’ at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (James, 1995; 39). The phrase “mystery of Udolpho” refers to one of the best-known classic Gothic novels by Anne Radcliffe published in 1794, and “an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement” is considered by several critics such as Oscar Cargill and Robert Kimbrough to be an allusion to *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë (Petry, 1983; 62). Iser points out that the literary allusions to a previous work not only serve to provide a referential context that is familiar to the reader but also, due to the fact that they are stripped of their original context, they can “offer a form of orientation by means of which the new meaning may perhaps be found” (1974; 79). In other words, a literary allusion has a definite meaning in its original context, but when it is removed from that context, it allows for new meanings to emerge. Iser offers the example of a parody as such literary allusion, stating that in a parody “the change of context results in a complete reversal of the original meaning” (*Act*, 1978; 93). This aligns well with Alice Hall Petry’s reading of *The Turn of the Screw* as a Jamesian parody intending to “undermin[e] the literary tradition of the plucky English governess” (1983; 61).

Petry begins her analysis of James’s parody of *Jane Eyre* by tracing the familiar ground that the two works cover:

I believe that the process of parodying *Jane Eyre* begins with the general story line of the two works: a young woman goes to a remote country estate to serve as governess. In each case, her immediate confidante and associate at the estate is a widow who functions as the house-keeper: Mrs. Fairfax and Mrs. Grose [...] . Each guardian is a man in early middle age who is understandably resentful about being forced into the role of surrogate father, in part apparently because each is something of a ladies’ man [...] (1983; 62–63)

These are a few examples of the similarities that Petry finds in the two works, the most important of which is in the behavior, personality, and the background of the governess and *Jane Eyre* themselves, which leads

Petry to conclude that “James expected his readers to perceive his governess as modeling herself upon Brontë’s heroine, and with lamentable consequences” (ibid; 64). Petry’s claim is important because it adds to the significance of the literary allusion that James consciously utilized here, not merely as a gimmick to attract the attention of the more literary reader, but as a significant element within the text with two important functions. First, it provides the familiar schemata for the reader, which starts the process of communication between the reader and the text. When the reader – albeit one who is familiar with Brontë’s most famous work, and Iser does point out that literary allusions as repertoire may not be familiar to all readers (Act, 1978; 81) – stumbles upon all these familiar elements from a previous work, they begin to see patterns of consistency which are essential to the process of communication between them and the text. However, the second function of literary allusions – which, in this case, are the elements from *Jane Eyre* – stems from their de pragmatization in a new context, that is, *The Turn of the Screw*. This de pragmatization, in Iser’s words, creates the indeterminacy that engages the reader creatively in the text: “The contemporary reader will find himself confronted with familiar conventions in an unfamiliar light, and, indeed, this is the situation that causes him to become involved in the process of building up the meaning of the work” (Act, 1978; 78). The meaning of the work, to a reader like Petry who reads the story as a parody of *Jane Eyre*, seems to lie in the distinction between fiction and reality:

That the readers of Brontë’s durable novel were somehow blurring the distinction between reality and fiction seems to have struck James’s fancy: and what better way to develop this bizarre notion than to write a parody in which the heroine confuses her own life with that of Brontë’s heroine and becomes, as it were, a flesh-and-blood parody of Jane – with horrible consequences? (1983; 62)

However, Petry is careful not to postulate that a parody was indeed James’s intention, asserting that *if it were*, “then it is a remarkably clever one [...]. if it has not been noticed for nearly ninety years” (ibid; 76). Whether Petry’s conclusion that James’s project in writing *The Turn of the Screw* was to parody *Jane Eyre* or not is not as important as her astute observation of the literary allusion’s function in generating this level of ambiguity, which, again aligns well with Booth’s “mazed” reading of the text.

3. A Second Turn of the Screw: Indeterminacy Generated by the Frame Narrative

Thanks to James's carefully worded diction and the unreliability of its narrator, the Governess's tale is a complex enough story in itself. However, the significance of the frame narrative in interpreting the Governess's story is hardly lost on the reader. The frame narrative is as important to the "straight" readers as it is to the "ironic" ones, and even more so to the "mazed" readers. Due to the intentional ambiguity of the text, which is a view that a "mazed" reader adopts, it is safe to suggest that a "straight" reader would find as much evidence in the prologue to support their reading of the main plot as a ghost story, as an "ironic" reading would highlight evidence confirming that the governess is unreliable. Here lies the relevance of James's narrative strategy, which, according to Iser, has the "defamiliarizing" function (Act, 1978, 87). Without the frame narrative, the main plot would lose not all but a significant portion of the ambiguity that makes it such a controversial piece of literature. The story, of course, as the previous section and its review of Petry's analysis indicate, could still be read as either a Gothic-inspired ghost story or a parody of it. However, without the prologue, one or two turns of the screw, specifically the existence of two *other* narrators and the very nature of the main plot as a written document, would be lost, and along with it, some of the evidence that supports either a "straight" or an "ironic" reading.

Before we meet the main narrator of the story, the Governess, James introduces us to two other narrators: the unnamed "I," who is a member of the group gathered around the fire to hear a ghost story, and Douglas, whose relationship to the Governess has not escaped the attention of many critics. In terms of this spin on the narrative, a "straight" reader would take Douglas's relationship with the Governess as a factor that lends the Governess's account credibility. The reader, in a sense, identifies with the unnamed narrator and becomes a member of the group gathered around the fire, ready to hear a ghost story. This is a familiar scene, part of the text's repertoire, in Iserian terms; not a social norm, perhaps, but a social practice that is familiar both to the readers of James's time and to the modern reader living in the 21st century. As the reader associates the scene with their own experience of such a gathering, they would feel that in hearing such a ghost story, they would be more prone to believing that it happened if its narrator vouches for its validity in the way that Douglas does in the narrative. Douglas tells his audience, the reader among them, that he himself knew the person to whom the harrowing events happened:

'She was a most charming person, but she was ten years

older than I. She was my sister's governess,' he quietly said. 'She was the most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she'd have been worthy of any whatever [...] we had, in her off-hours, some strolls and talks in the garden – talks in which she struck me as awfully clever and nice. Oh yes; don't grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too. (James , 1995, 23)

The familiarity with which Douglas describes the governess could be quite reassuring to any listener. This is not merely a person whom Douglas knows, but he seems to have spent much time with her and even admits to liking her. His judgment of her character, that she “was the most agreeable woman [he has] ever known in her position” (James, *ibid*, 23), certainly affects the opinions that his listeners – and the reader – will form of the Governess. How could such an “agreeable” person be lying about what happened to her? An “ironic” reading of the text, however, would mistrust Douglas's words as much as it mistrusts the Governess's. Douglas clearly confesses to liking the Governess, characterizing her as “charming,” coupled with the fact that the ten-year age difference between him and the Governess serves to place him at a lower level of maturity and makes him more susceptible to her charms. In an “ironic” reading, his bias toward the Governess does not offer the same reassurance that it offers a “straight” reader.

While it seems that the “ironic” interpretation so far has prevailed, as it was mentioned before, James's intentionally ambiguous text does not allow for one interpretation to take over completely. A “straight” reader would be correct in pointing out that since the main story is a manuscript, and not Douglas's recollection of it, his bias toward the Governess does not affect the account at all. After all, right from the beginning, Douglas himself points out that the story is written, the manuscript being locked in a drawer, and that “it has not been out for years” (James, 1995, 22). The written state of the text is supposed to lend further credibility to the Governess's tale, and Douglas's comment that “it has not been out for years” serves to allay any doubt that it might have been subject to modifications. In her reading of *The Turn of the Screw* as an “Autospectrography,” in which she delves into the relationship between the autobiographical form and spectrality, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou further explores the reliability of the main narrative as a written text. She first points out that the governess initially recounts the events that happened to her to Douglas orally, and then she writes them down. Nikolopoulou then proceeds to point out: “One must ask why the governess even needed to write the manuscript after having told him

the story. Did the talking cure alone not work? Did it need a writing supplement? To some extent at least, writing guarantees for the future the permanence and sameness of the original [...]" (2005; 10).

For such a carefully crafted piece of literature, the significance of the unnamed narrator of the frame and the ambiguity he or she generates in the novella should not be overlooked. The unnamed figure is brought up in a different section of Nikolopoulou's article, whose reading of the text can be characterized as what Booth calls a "mazed" reading. In fact, she is also concerned with the question of ambiguity, instead of imposing either an apparitionist – "straight" in Booth's terms – or a hallucinationist – that is, "ironic" – interpretation upon the text: "What we are dealing with here is a question that has [...] more with the unreliability inherent in [the governess's] mode of expression – the memoir. It is the unreliability of a genre based on the ambiguity of memory that James allegorizes" (2005; 10–11). The ambiguity of memory is a very important point here because, as Nikolopoulou also points out, the beginning paragraphs of both the governess's tale and the framing prologue contain the word "remember" (Nikolopoulou, *ibid*; 8). The unnamed narrator starts his account as follows: "The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be, *I remember* (emphasis mine) no comment uttered [...]" (James, 1995; 21). It is, indeed, needless to say that the ambiguity of the frame's narrator has no effect on the main plot because the narrator specifically points out that the account the reader is going to read is a transcript that the narrator has made of the manuscript in Douglas's possession: "Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an *exact* (emphasis mine) transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give" (James, 2005; 24–25). James was certainly meticulous in emphasizing the written state of the main plot, appealing to the reader's association of writing with permanence and sameness, and a "straight" reader would certainly take all the reassurances they need when approaching the story as a ghost story. However, what the "straight" reader may overlook is the fact that James takes away reassurances as soon as he gives them to the reader because, merely a few pages later, the opening sentence of the governess's tale reads: "*I remember* (emphasis mine) the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong" (*ibid*; 28). In fact, the phrase "I remember" is repeated throughout the novella in different pivotal moments. One instance is when the governess is going to ask Flora about the last governess: "I overtook her, *I remember*, on the staircase; we

went down together and at the bottom I detained her, holding her there with a hand on her arm" (James, 2005; 33). Another example happens during her first encounter with the ghost of Peter Quint in the third chapter: "It produced in me, this figure, in the clear twilight, *I remember* (emphasis mine), two distinct gasps of emotion [...]" (James, 2005; 39). James makes it quite clear that this is not a case of what Samuel Richardson terms "writing to the moment" but rather a documentation of memory, which prompts Nikolopoulou to read the story as an autobiography and to explore the unreliability of the genre as James allegorizes in the novella.

The intentional ambiguity of the novella can now be identified in the relationship between the main narrative and the framing prologue. It is true that the main narrative does contain references to its written state, as we see that in describing the first encounter with the ghost, the governess writes, "I can hear again, as *I write* (emphasis mine), the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped" (James, *ibid*; 38). However, James seems to have felt the need to add a prologue to the story that further emphasized its written state by clearly describing its form as a manuscript being read aloud to a group of people and also by including Douglas's comments on the governess to influence the audience's opinion, including the reader's. On the other hand, James also includes several references to the governess's mode of expression that increased the unreliability of her written words, in a way undermining the prologue's attempt at appealing to writing's association with permanence and reliability. However, James is careful not to affirm either position. The prologue explicitly confirms that the text is written and, therefore, reliable, but the emphasis on memory in the main narrative undermines that explicit confirmation. In a sense, the frame and the main narratives constantly undermine each other, and here lies the intentional ambiguity in the novella as a whole, which prompts the "mazed" readers to be able to interpret it both ways. In a sense, instead of an absolute interpretation, the "mazed" readers of James's fiction "must accept an 'absolute' indeterminacy" (Wrethed, 2023; 91).

4. James's *Pharmakon*: Having it Both Ways

Out of all the similarities between *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw*, a few of which were briefly mentioned in reference to Petry's article in the second section, the autobiographical form of both is of interest here because a comparison between the two showcases James's complex literary technique. The eponymous protagonist of *Jane Eyre* is writing her account to an audience, whom she occasionally addresses as the

“reader,” and when doing so, she attempts to add certain details to her narrative that correct the reader’s perception or more clearly communicate her own feelings. A number of these instances are as follows: “Reader, though I look comfortably accommodated, I am not very tranquil in my mind” (Brontë, 2000; 79); “And was Mr. Rochester now ugly in my eyes? No, reader. Gratitude, and many associations, all pleasurable and genial, made his face the object I best liked to see” (Brontë, *ibid*; 125); and “Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt! May your eyes never shed such stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears as poured from mine” (Brontë, *ibid*; 274). As demonstrated, such addresses are written in such a way as to make the reader feel as if they were the immediate audience of Jane Eyre’s account and the bond between the two is further solidified with the intimate manner in which Jane appeals to the reader’s emotions and attempts to demystify any confusion. James also presents the account of the governess in the form of an autobiography, but instead of feigning intimacy, James’s project seems to be to make the reader realize just how far removed they are from the original account. Nikolopoulou’s elaboration on James’s convoluted technique can be illuminating here:

the governess first narrated the story to Douglas, then she sent it to him in manuscript form, which he kept secretly for forty years in a drawer, which he then read to a circle of friends, which he handed down to the general narrator, who then copied it, and then rewrote it in its current version, attaching a prologue to it. This is not just a modernist exercise in self-reflection and ironic *mise-en-abîme*; it looks like a senseless children’s rhyme. (2005; 13)

The framing situation is so deliberately complex that, to borrow Petry’s interpretation of the novella, it seems to be parodying *Jane Eyre*’s technique. If Jane Eyre’s intimate way of addressing her reader is an attempt both at making the account easier to digest and at taking the reader’s understanding into consideration, James’s framing device seems to be designed to alienate the reader, reminding them that they are so removed from the original account that any attempt at fully understanding it is futile. Shoshana Felman’s deconstructive reading of *The Turn of the Screw* is in line with this reading, as it views the readers’ desire to arrive at one clear interpretation of the story to be unavailing: “The question, therefore, can no longer be simply to decide whether in effect the ‘Freudian’ reading is true or false, correct or incorrect. It can be both at the same time” (Felman, 1977; 117). She asserts that any reading of the narrative should have less to do with

fixing its meaning and resolving its ambiguity and more with “[understanding] the necessity and the rhetorical functioning of the textual ambiguity” (ibid; 119).

As previously elaborated, much of the textual ambiguity of the narrative owes to the story’s status as a written text and the frame’s reminder as to how removed the reader is from its origin: not only is the transcript we are reading a copy of another manuscript, but the author of the account, the Governess, is dead; the written text is cut off from its origin, or in Platonic terms, orphaned. In his deconstruction of Plato’s notion of writing in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Jacques Derrida elaborates on the notion of writing as an orphan. In dealing with Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, Derrida dedicates a large section of his essay to the myth of Theuth, who was an ancient Egyptian deity associated with writing, and Thamus, the King of all Egypt (Derrida, 1981; 75). Theuth’s project in visiting Thamus is to present his arts, including writing, which he claims can be “a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom” (qtd. in Derrida, ibid; 75). Thamus – who represents Ammon, the King of the Gods – experiences this *pharmakon* as a product and passes judgment on it from a position of authority similar to that of a father. Derrida elaborates that the position and power of a king are associated with speaking: “He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices,” and thus, through the Platonic association between the figures of the god, the king, and the father, the power of speech is assigned to the parental position (ibid; 76). Derrida further elaborates that the speaking subject would be the father of speech, and that speech without the father, is nothing but writing (ibid; 77). Therefore, in Thamus’s rejection of Theuth’s invention, which is writing or *pharmakon*, Derrida arrives at the Platonic association of writing with orphanhood. If speaking is indicative of the presence of the father, writing signifies his absence: “another thing held against the invention of the *pharmakon* is that it substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice, claims to do without the father (who is both living and life-giving) of *logos*, and can no more answer for itself than a sculpture or inanimate painting, etc.” (Derrida, ibid; 91–92). When Theuth presents his invention – that is, writing – he presents it as a remedy for memory, which is in line with one meaning of *pharmakon*. However, the king’s rejection is predicated upon his presupposition that the effect of writing can be reversed: it can worsen the memory, thus arriving at another meaning of *pharmakon*: poison (Derrida, ibid; 97–98). In Thamus’s eyes, as well as in Plato’s, the *pharmakon* or writing, because of the absence of its father, can only give people a semblance of wisdom and not true wisdom: “Thanks to you and your invention, your pupils will be widely read without benefit

of a teacher's instruction" (qtd. in Derrida, *ibid*; 102).

It merits attention to trace the aforementioned Platonic ideas in James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The choice of presenting the governess's story as a written instead of a spoken one opens up new instances of ambiguity because for Plato, the phonic signifier, speech, is close to the signified *eidos*, but the graphic signifier or writing is merely the signifier of the phonic signifier, the imitation of another imitation. Therefore, "it falls outside of life" because it is no longer in living proximity to *eidos* (Derrida, *ibid*; 109–110). In *The Turn of the Screw*, the very writer of the account is dead, and the reader does not even get to read her own manuscript but the first narrator's. In spite of the narrator's claim that it is the same account as the original manuscript, it is still an imitation of an imitation, and the origin, the Governess, is not present to clarify any parts of it. James's technique in presenting the story as a memoir is not new, as was seen in the *Jane Eyre* parallels, but in presenting the story as a transcript of a manuscript written by a woman who has been dead for a while, James goes out of his way to reinforce the detachment of the Governess's tale from its origin. Indeed, Jane Eyre's account is also written and thus, orphaned, giving an "ironic" reader plenty of reasons to question the reliability of the narrator and the events. However, James's technique is deliberately convoluted, intentionally drawing the reader's attention to the written status of the text. It is not there merely for the reader to question, which is the tendency of "ironic" readers, but to explore, which is in line with Booth's "mazed" readings.

It is important to point out that in deconstructing the Platonic conceptions of writing, Derrida points to the ambiguity in the meaning of *pharmakon*, which is reduced by Plato to one side of a definite binary opposition: "It is precisely this ambiguity that Plato [...] attempts to master, to dominate by inserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions" (Derrida, *ibid*; 103). *Pharmakon* could be both a remedy and a poison to memory, but Plato reduces this ambiguity to only one side. Writing, to Plato, is considered bad, external to memory, indicative of absence rather than presence, and thus orphaned as opposed to the merits of speech, its closeness to *eidos*, and its presence. However, Derrida suggests that it is this very ambiguity in *pharmakon* that enables these systems of opposition to work: "it can only be out of something like writing – or the *pharmakon* – that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring" and, as a result, it "cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws" (*ibid*; 103). And writing, as suggested by Derrida in an earlier section of *Plato's Pharmacy*, is shrouded in the same suspicions that *pharmakon* is surrounded with:

"Books, the dead and rigid knowledge shut up in *biblia*, piles of histories, nomenclatures, recipes and formulas learned by heart, all this is as foreign to living knowledge and dialectics as the *pharmakon* is to medical science" (ibid; 73). And it is precisely this ambiguity that James invokes in writing *The Turn of the Screw*, and his technique of distancing the original events of the story from the reader further solidifies the text's function as a *pharmakon*; the text can act as both a remedy to the reader's interpretation of events, reinforcing it, or weaken it as a poison. This is why many postmodern critics "felt increasingly uncomfortable asking 'either-or' questions about this story. The only 'correct' answer is likely to be 'both' or 'we cannot decide'" (Beidler, 1995;136).

In short, the uniqueness of James's *The Turn of the Screw* lies not in the fact that it is ambiguous and thus open to interpretation; in fact, many literary texts, such as *Jane Eyre*, have certain levels of ambiguity that, as Iser has illustrated, prompt the reader into a consistency-seeking endeavor and results in various interpretations. However, most texts are not so deliberately ambiguous as James's as to actively resist any one interpretation. A text such as *Jane Eyre* can be read in a number of ways and evidence can be found within the text to support each of them. However, in James's text, it seems that each detail is implemented to resist any attempt at wringing a coherent meaning out of it. In the end, as Booth believes none of the "straight," "ironic," or even "mazed" readings can truly triumph over the others (1995; 176). However, as this study has hopefully demonstrated, any reader of *The Turn of the Screw* must be as vigilant about the inherent ambiguity of the text and how it affects their experience and interpretation, as James was while writing it.

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DE NOMBREUX TOURS D'ECROU: L'AMBIGUÏTÉ INHERENTE DANS LE TOUR D'ECROU D'HENRY JAMES

Le Tour d'écrou d'Henry James (1898) est considéré comme l'une des œuvres littéraires les plus controversées en raison de la variété des lectures critiques qu'il a suscitées depuis sa publication en 1898. Les lectures de cette histoire vont de la considérer comme une histoire de fantôme gothique abordant le bon vieux bataille manichéenne du bien contre le mal à un examen psychanalytique de l'expérience de son protagoniste. Cette variété a conduit à des lectures ultérieures qui, au lieu d'insister sur une interprétation unique et directe, ont tenté d'explorer l'ambiguïté inhérente du texte qui a donné lieu à des lectures

si diverses. Étant donné que cette ambiguïté pourrait être attribuée au fait que James était conscient de l'expérience de ses lecteurs de la nouvelle, cette étude aborde principalement le texte en utilisant l'approche axée sur le lecteur de Wolfgang Iser. Ce faisant, cette recherche explore la manière dont la technique narrative de James génère de l'indétermination et affecte le processus de lecture de manière à résister à toute tentative d'interprétation entièrement cohérente.

Keywords: ambiguïté, Henry James, théorie de la réponse du lecteur, répertoire, Le Tour d'écrou, Wolfgang Iser