

THE "FRAME" OF
THE TURN OF THE SCREW:
FRAMING THE READER IN

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It would seem that by now critics must have studied every facet of *The Turn of the Screw*, but one of the most problematic parts of the text, the short "frame" section that precedes the governess's narrative, has been examined in a rather limited way. Almost invariably it has been treated as a sort of prolongation of the story, which introduces us to the setting and characters (especially the young heroine) and perhaps furnishes us with some clues for judging the reliability of the narrative that follows. The pursuit of such clues is certainly valid, but I would like to propose a different use for the "frame," and consider it not so much as an informative background to the principal narrative but as an exemplary scene by means of which James tells us how to read his tale. In this light, these opening pages of the text can be regarded as establishing a protocol for reading. This protocol will not tell us how to choose between the well-known interpretations of the tale—how to break through the deadlock produced by the Freudian and the literalist (or fantom) readings¹—but it may well tell us why we *cannot* choose, why James's story has proved so intractable to any definitive exegesis. This resistance of the tale does not derive, I believe, from any vague "richness" of content but from the deliberately complex hermeneutic structure it embodies. This structure is revealed largely through the "frame" (a term I shall continue to use until its inadequacy can be shown) and the special questions it raises, questions about the different types of narrative that exist, and about the kinds of meaning and authority that these different narrative types entail.

One of the most evident features of the "frame" is that it consists of an *oral* story-telling scene which introduces a *written* narrative. In itself, it consists of two parts: the "frame" proper, mainly direct report describing the fireside scene with Douglas and his listeners, and then a couple of

1. I am in agreement with Walter Benn Michael's recent statement that no real solution has yet been offered to the "horns of this dilemma." In general, Michael's essay is the one I have found to be most compatible with my own reading of *The Turn of the Screw*. See Michael, "Writers Reading: James and Elliot," in *Modern Language Notes*, 91 (October 1976), 827-849.

pages of "prologue" (the narrator's own term) cast largely as indirect report informing us about the governess's visits to the uncle of Miles and Flora in London and about the conditions of her contract. We also learn here about the provenance of the long written text that will follow. We are told that this text will be the anonymous first-person narrator's own "exact transcript" of the governess's manuscript, which he has received from Douglas, who in turn had it directly from the authoress.

In terms of narrative strategy, then, the main function of the opening section is to present an oral situation which explains and motivates the written text that follows. This function conforms to a long novelistic tradition and does not seem to provide any special reason for questioning the authenticity of the text that Douglas will read. The pertinent question these pages raise is not the reliability of this text in particular so much as the difference between oral stories and written texts in general. What traits of the oral story-telling scene are brought to special attention, and thereby implicitly contrasted with the traits of the written narrative that comes after it?

As one might expect, James's characterization of the oral audience is ambiguous. On the one hand, the rapid evocation of an atmosphere conducive to ghost-stories seems to be a serious setting of mood, a way of molding the generic expectations of *us*, the literary audience. On the other hand, we cannot help noticing that our counterparts within the fiction, the chiefly female audience (as it seems) gathered around the fire, are depicted as frivolous and fatuous. They indeed seem like those "merely witless" readers whom James mentions, only to dismiss them, in his Preface to the tale.² Their fatuity is recorded in the comments and questions they put to Douglas, in their way of trying to force his story to yield us answers to questions that are either premature or simply—the wrong questions. To an inquiry about the mode of Miss Jessell's death, Douglas replies: "That will come out: I don't anticipate."³ Even the narrator, who seems at times to be the privileged member of Douglas's audience, the one whom Douglas himself deems to be most apt to understand the story, is capable of making the wrong inference. When the narrator hastily assures the others that "the story will tell" with whom the governess was in love, Douglas pulls him up short: "The story *won't* tell . . . not in any literal vulgar way" (italics in original).

This last response reveals the limits, as well as the privileges, of oral narrative. The oral audience is privileged precisely because it can ask these questions, can indulge in an actual dialogue with the author (or here the

2. In *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 172.

3. *The Turn of the Screw* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966). This, the Norton Critical Edition, follows the text of the New York Edition. If no chapter number is given, the quotation comes from the novella's opening section.

transmitter) of the story, and force him to suggest the way in which it should be understood. But, try as they may, they cannot get him to reveal its secret. On the contrary, he tells them that the text will never reveal its secret in the "literal vulgar way" they demand. If their curiosity about the text is vulgar, that is *because* it is literal. Any successful interpretation, Douglas is implying, is going to have to go beyond the letter of the text. But Douglas stops far short of endorsing any particular "deep" or symbolic reading, the Freudian one or any other. The protocol for reading (or listening) that he intimates here is almost entirely negative, consisting only of caveats.

The final striking thing about this introductory oral scene is that it breaks off here, for good. When we speak by analogy of the picture "frame," we think of a border that sets off the fictional work from reality on all sides, continuously. But the "frame" of *The Turn of the Screw* is asymmetrical: it does not return at the end. Its absence at the end may seem natural to us, since we are so immersed by that point in the governess's voice that we have likely forgotten that any other voices preceded it. In fact, however, the governess does not exist as a voice at all but pre-eminently as a written text, one that cannot be questioned, one that is both a court of final appeal and (as generations of critical debate have now proved) an unsatisfying, incomplete testament. That the governess's narrative is, taken by itself, incomplete and even incomprehensible is something that the narrator has taken pains to tell us. He introduces his "prologue" with the following: "It appeared that the narrative he [Douglas] had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue." One is tempted to add that for a truly "proper intelligence" the tale would also have required a few words of epilogue. But such an epilogue, in the form of an open dialogue between oral teller and audience, is exactly what is missing. At the end both Douglas and the governess are inaccessible, and interpretations of the text must remain undecidable. Either they must run beyond the given text (as the Freudian reading does), trying to complete the governess's narrative by saying for her what she did not quite say, or they remain within her text, or short of it (the literalist reading), overlooking many signals that the text is clearly giving off.

The problem is that the governess cannot simply be circumvented; she is not merely a narrator within the tale, reliable or unreliable, whose vision can be put into proper perspective by some adjustment on the reader's part. The "frame" shows us through its incompleteness that there is no easy recourse to an author, whether implied or real, just as for the governess herself there is to be no recourse to the master, her employer. Douglas describes the "main condition" of the girl's employment in these terms: "That she should never trouble him [her employer]—but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything. . . ." Thus before the governess's

narrative begins we witness a shift of authority from the master's shoulders to her own, with the master clearly acting here as a surrogate for the author, James. Like the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, this Jamesian master arranges his players, instructs them in their roles, sets them in motion, and disappears. Only, unlike Shakespeare's Duke, he will never return.

The governess's memory of her employer, however, remains with her throughout her story, and she continually yearns for a renewed contact with him, for a repetition of that primal *oral* scene of her interview with him. But, being caught now within her own literary text, she can only *write* letters to him, and even these she can scarcely bear to send. To the finish she remains a victim of a disabling paradox, which is that she can prove herself worthy of the master only by allowing him to forget about her. The text becomes the prison within which she is entrapped, along with the other characters. The governess and Mrs. Grose, Miles and Flora, even Peter and Miss Jessel: it is tempting to see them as six characters vainly in search of an author.⁴

The dilemma of the governess is a paradigm for our dilemma, as the tale's readers. In imitation of the governess, critics have always felt the need to go to an outside authority for help: not to the master of Bly but to James himself (in his Prefaces and letters, for example) or to Freud. In a way these appeals are encouraged, even demanded, by the enticing incompleteness of the text, but at the same time the text is demonstrating that these appeals cannot really cut the Gordian knot of the story's interpretation. On the other hand, if we are tacitly told, as the governess is told explicitly, that we cannot write for outside help, this does not mean that we are given complete license to arrive at our own subjective conclusions. If *The Turn of the Screw* is an exemplary fiction for hermeneutic problems, this is not because it will support radically divergent, even mutually exclusive, readings, but because it obliges the reader to choose one reading and at the same time to see the inadequacy of his choice. The governess's choice has been to believe in the ghosts. Her dilemma, which is also ours, is that of being given an authority of which she is not really capable, but which she cannot shake off either. The result is the continual tension between her longing to escape from the text by returning to the master and her constant fall back into her imprisonment. *The Turn of the Screw* is indeed, as James said, "an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught,"⁵ but this is a riddle that teaches us something essential about the necessary dangers of interpretation.

4. For the characters' general obsession with getting in touch with the master, see for instance chapters XII, XIII, XVI, XVII and XVIII.

5. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 172.

