



How to Tighten the Screw?

—On the Three Tensions of Narrative Strategies in “The Turn of the Screw”

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Abstract

Henry James’s novella “The Turn of the Screw” is marked by its powerful narrative techniques and suspenseful artistry, which imbue the text with ambiguity and contradiction. The mental health of the female teacher and the existence of the ghost have been subjects of ongoing debate among scholars for over a century. While the interpretation of the text is diverse, an analysis from a narrative perspective reveals that part of the controversy stems from three key transformations in the narrative mechanism: manipulation, the layered narration in the introductory sections, and the narrator’s first-person perspective that establishes authority; contradiction, the temporal inversion and contradictory content in the main manuscript, which, as a limitation of the limited first-person perspective, undermines trust in authority; and blankness, the abrupt ending and unresolved questions in the text, which, though seemingly ambiguous, are actually inevitable outcomes of the narrative process.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Narratology, “The Turn of the Screw”, Textual Interpretation

1. Introduction

In 1898, Henry James published his novella “The Turn of the Screw,” which tells the story of a young woman hired by a wealthy gentleman to work as a governess at his country estate. The story begins with a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere, but soon the governess begins to encounter two ghosts, and as the frequency of these apparitions increases, the students’ behavior becomes increasingly strange. The story is filled with suspense, like a screw turning tighter, but it ends abruptly,

leaving the reader unsure whether the ghostly presence is real or if the governess has developed a mental illness. After failing in his dramatic works, James returned to the novel, and “The Turn of the Screw” not only achieved commercial success but also garnered significant attention from literary critics for its sophisticated narrative techniques and rich content [1]. For over a century since the novel was published, debates have primarily centered on three opposing schools of thought: the Freudian school, represented by Edmund Wilson, argues that the ghost is an illusion created by the teacher’s mental instability, and the novel actually tells a story of a sexual repressed individual’s pathological desires; the anti-Freudian school, represented by Robert Hermann, views the ghost as an evil symbol, with Miles and Flora representing purity and beauty, and the novel’s theme is essentially one of salvation and curse; the Lacanian school, represented by Shoshana Felman, shifts the focus from the novel’s truth to its construction, arguing that the purpose of interpreting the text is not to reach a definitive conclusion but to enrich the text’s ambiguity [2]. In recent years, scholars have offered more diverse interpretations of the novel, with research not only focusing on the novel’s truth but also examining the textual issues of women’s discourse dilemmas and ghost symbolism from gender perspectives and ghost criticism, [3] continuously uncovering aspects of the text that were previously unspoken or overlooked.

The narrative technique of “The Turn of the Screw” is undoubtedly successful, and the various contradictions and distortions in the novel continue to offer readers room for interpretation. Despite a century-long debate over the ‘truth,’ neither the psychoanalytic exploration of desire nor the feminist re-examination of power structures have resolved the fundamental controversy within the text, which is closely tied to the novel’s narrative structure. Building on previous research, this article aims to move beyond the existing interpretative quagmire of whether the ghost ‘exists, focusing on how the novel tightens the text through the three mechanisms of manipulation, contradiction, and blankness,’ leading to unavoidable controversial issues. The article points out that the layered narration in the introduction constructs narrative authority, leading readers to accept its reliability. The narrative contradictions in the manuscript, while causing cognitive shifts in readers, are inevitable due to the limited perspective. The abrupt ending and numerous blank spots in the text are methods used to maintain narrative coherence. Thus, while the novel appears to leave the interpretation of the theme to the reader, it is actually a conscious reflection by the author.

2. Control: The Construction of Narrative Authority by Dual Narrative Voices

Before analyzing the reader’s reception of the novel, it is helpful to briefly outline its narrative structure. The novel features three narrators: I, Douglas, and the female teacher. The first two narrators appear only in the prologue, where I ‘recounts how Douglas was moved during a night of conversation by the fireplace and shares the story of the female teacher. In contrast, Douglas’s narration focuses

on the events he personally experienced with the female teacher. The third narrator, the female teacher, is the sole narrator in the main body of the novel. She is introduced through Douglas's story and narrates her personal experiences to the readers, thus forming a layered narrative structure centered around 'I-Douglas-teacher. 'The concept of narrative stratification was first proposed by Genette, who noted that 'any event narrated is at a higher level than the act of narration that produces it' [4]. In other words, the act of narration occurs after the event itself; the event must first happen for it to be narrated. Therefore, the higher the narrative level, the later in time the narration occurs. The text itself is the result of the narration, and the narrative act presented in the text is perceived by the reader before the event being narrated, meaning the reader knows in advance that the narrator will recount the event, and only then can they learn its full details. In this stratified narrative phenomenon, the task of a higher narrative level is to provide a narrator for a lower one, meaning that the characters in the higher narrative level serve as narrators for the lower narrative level.

According to Genette's classification, the 'I' in the novel first describes Douglas's unusual behavior during the conversation around the fire, reasonably explaining his narrative motivation. The 'first narrator' is the real reader of the text, and at this point, Douglas is a character in the 'I' narrative. Douglas then continues to narrate his relationship with the female teacher, introducing her social background and the origins of the events, acting as the 'second narrator.' His audience includes the 'I' and all the listeners present, and the character he narrates is the female teacher. The main body of the novel then begins, narrated from the female teacher's perspective, making her the 'third narrator, 'or the innermost narrator' [4]. After clarifying the overall narrative structure of the novel, the following section analyzes how the text establishes its narrative authority and induces readers to accept its reliability through the narrative strategies used in the introduction.

The novel begins on Christmas Eve, when people gather around an old house to tell ghost stories. The narrator, 'I,' is a participant and observer of the event but not a central figure. Thus, 'I' sets the stage by focusing the narrative on Douglas. Through Douglas's absent-mindedness, his seemingly preoccupied state, and the story's suspense, the reader is led to suspect that Douglas has had unusual experiences. The original text reads:

"So far, no one has heard this story except me. It's truly a terrifying tale. "This remark naturally drew several responses, with everyone expressing their willingness to pay any price to hear the story. My friend, skilled at creating suspense, turned his gaze to the crowd and continued," This story is nothing like other ghost stories. Compared to it, all other tales are minor in comparison."
[5]

And when everyone urged Douglas to share the story, he said:

"I can't start yet. I need to send a letter to the city. "He explained confidently,"

The story has been written into a book and locked away in a drawer—for many years without being seen. I need to write a letter to my servant, include the key to the drawer in the envelope and send it along with the letter. When he finds the large envelope containing the manuscript, he will naturally send it along with the letter.” [5]

Douglas deliberately delays, creating suspense in the narrative. He emphasizes that no one else has heard this story, which adds to its mystery by having the servant fetch the manuscript. If he had told it directly, in the current atmosphere of a ghost story, people would have seen it as just another ghost tale. By retrieving the manuscript from the eyewitness and revealing it as the teacher’s final request, Douglas blurs the line between fiction and reality, leaving the audience to draw their own conclusions about its authenticity. It shifts people from questioning the truth of Douglas’s account to questioning the truth of the story itself, and in the process constructs the authority of the narrative, thus setting the stage for future revelations.

In addition to the art of suspense in narration, the narrator’s intervention and interruption of the content is also a narrative strategy. In the narrative text, even though the narrator cannot describe themselves, they have the privilege to comment on the narrative, which is an intervention. [4]. For example, when mentioning the female teacher’s manuscript, the narrator ‘I’ particularly emphasizes that the novel’s content was copied and preserved by him:

It seems that the story he promised to read aloud to us needs a bit more explanation and elaboration. Allow me to clarify: this story is a copy I transcribed long after, striving to remain faithful to the original manuscript. The content I am about to share comes from this copy. Poor Douglas, when he realized his days were numbered, entrusted the manuscript to me. [5]

The reader begins to sense the first narrator, ‘I,’ interrupting the narrative flow. In the sequence of events where Douglas is supposed to be telling a story (past time), an external time (present time) is inserted. The phrase ‘it really needs to be explained appropriately’ is the present narrator’s commentary on the already narrated content, using narrative intervention to draw the reader’s attention to the narrator’s actions. As the listener to Douglas, ‘I’ now fully exercises the narrative power as the first narrator, providing necessary explanations for the content. The manuscript exists, and ‘I’ emphasize that a copy’ as faithful as possible to the original ‘has been rewritten, indicating that the content readers will read in the main text later is genuinely derived from the teacher’s manuscript, not just a recollection of what Douglas read aloud. This narrative manipulation further adds to the narrative’s oscillation between truth and fiction.

The transition from the first narrator to the second is not obvious, and Douglas’s narrative unfolds naturally in the topic of “I”, as the original text states.

From Douglas’s account, we learn that his old friend, the young daughter of a poor country clergyman, was twenty years old and had just been hired as a gover-

ness. She had first exchanged brief letters with the employer who had advertised for her, and then, trembling, she went to London herself to take the exam.

.....

As Douglas was speaking, someone asked, "Since the former governess is so respectable—how did she die?"

Our friend immediately replied, "We'll talk about it later. But I won't say anything now." [5]

In "His Old Friend," the 'he' refers to Douglas, and this sentence is still narrated from the perspective of 'I'. The subsequent parts, such as 'She first had a brief correspondence with the employer who placed the advertisement,' and the following content, are mainly told from Douglas's perspective. This can be inferred from the interruptions by the audience and Douglas's timely responses. Thus, the details about how the female teacher entered the gentleman's country estate, the situation of the estate members, and the family background of the gentleman are all recounted by Douglas based on his conversations with the female teacher and his firsthand experiences as the first person to witness these events. The audience's reluctance to leave after hearing these details shows that they were thoroughly captivated. Here, the first narrator relinquishes his authority, transferring the narrative power to the second narrator, transforming the story from 'I' listening to 'he' speaking to 'he' reading 'she' writing. Through the transfer of discourse and the change in medium, the text transforms readers outside the narrative into present listeners, achieving precise narrative control through the stratification of narration.

In fact, the introduction constructs a story background that blurs the line between truth and fiction through narrative suspense, intervention, and stratification. It draws the audience into an eerie atmosphere and leaves them to continue reading with questions left unanswered by the narrator. This selective provision of information not only induces readers to accept its reliability but also forces them to enter the story world with a sense of suspension and doubt.

3. Contradiction: Narrative Cracks in Cognition

Douglas deliberately creates the illusion of a 'real event,' but the manuscript's multiple narrative contradictions are continually dismantled, creating tension that drives readers to question whether the ghost exists and whether the narrator is insane. However, even if the debate over the ghost's reality and the teacher's mental state continues, it has already strayed from the author's original intent. The narrator's distortion can be seen as a normal person's reaction to an unnatural phenomenon, characterized by fear and panic. Under the pressure of the environment and emotions, the contradictions in the manuscript are a natural limitation of the teacher's single narrative perspective, not a deliberate narrative flaw.

Regarding the credibility of the female teacher's manuscript, scholars have differing opinions. On one hand, many argue that the female teacher is entirely un-

reliable—and even question the authenticity of her reported ghostly misdeeds; on the other hand, some remain convinced of the teacher’s reliability. James’s own account suggests that this debate is unnecessary: the ghosts are real, and what the teacher saw was indeed what she claimed to see. Nevertheless, James’s ambiguity still places the female teacher among a group of vague and unreliable narrators. Here, Booth notes that James’s ambiguity is not intentional but rather a result of the confusion of distance in early literature, often due to irony [6].

In the manuscript, it seems that everyone has some knowledge of the ghost. However, in reality, only the female teacher clearly saw the ghost and described its detailed appearance. Flora, Miles, and Mrs. Gross’s seeing ‘was relayed by the female teacher and did not appear in their own words. The female teacher’s account led readers to mistakenly believe that all three knew about the ghost’s presence. For example, when the female teacher and Mrs. Gross said that Flora had seen the ghost, Flora was actually mute; she was just turning her back to play by the lake, but this behavior was interpreted by the female teacher as Flora’s attempt to conceal the ghost’s presence. However, when the female teacher called Flora’s name, Jekyll, Flora responded:

“I don’t know what you mean. I didn’t see anyone, nothing. I never saw anything. You are so cruel, I don’t like you!” [5]

From Flora’s words and the shock she received afterwards, it was clear that Flora had not clearly seen the ghost, and Mrs. Gross, who was present at the same time, did not see it either:

Soon, my old partner’s face turned red and he protested loudly, ignoring everything. His strong dissatisfaction came out: “Miss, you really jumped! What did you see there?” [5]

When the female teacher looked through the window in the previous ghostly perspective, she saw Mrs. Gross passing by and turning pale with fright, as she wrote in her manuscript:

However, I just want to mention one thing: I wonder why she was so scared? [6]

It’s quite common to be startled by something that unexpectedly appears. The young teacher’s confusion, coupled with the eerie events at the manor, makes readers wonder if Mrs. Gross knows something. Being ‘scared pale’ could be due to Mrs. Gross being mysteriously stared at from the young teacher’s position, or because she had seen a ghost in the same spot before, and the young teacher’s special warning makes her experience at the manor seem suspicious.

Similarly, when the female teacher saw Miles standing downstairs in the middle of the night, she thought that Miles was not really looking at her but rather something above her. Clearly, there was someone else—on the tower. The female teacher naturally assumed that Miles must be looking at a ghost. Both he and Flora knew about the ghost, but at the end of the novel, when the female teacher shouted

to the ghost in the window, Miles looked puzzled:

“Is she here?” Miles asked, panting, his eyes (sealed eyes) fixed on the direction I was speaking, even though he couldn’t see anything.” [5]

From the above, it is clear that apart from the female teacher’s own eyewitness account, no one actually saw the ghost. They all claimed to have seen it in their narratives, but this contradictory narrative leads to a cognitive bias regarding whether the ghost truly exists. If the ghost really exists, why can only the female teacher see it? If the ghost is a hallucination of the female teacher, then is her account reliable?

Furthermore, Mrs. Gross’s character is portrayed as very complex in the female teacher’s account. When the female teacher received a letter from the headmaster and showed it to Mrs. Gross, she sadly shook her head, indicating that she was illiterate. A female butler who had worked on the estate for many years but was illiterate should be seen as simple and naive. However, in the female teacher’s account, Mrs. Gross’s expression alternates between being greatly surprised and unusually calm, making her personality shift abruptly and awkwardly. For instance, when the female teacher first told her about seeing a ghost, “My friend’s face turned even paler. Her eyes widened with astonishment, and her gentle mouth was slightly open.’ Sir? ‘She looked bewildered and panicked,’ How could he be a gentleman?” Later, when the female teacher mentioned Quint to Mrs. Gross again, the original text reads:

“He’s looking for little Miles,” I thought, a bad idea. “That’s what he’s looking for.”

“But how did you know?”

“I know, I know, I know!” I became more excited. “And you know that, dear!”

She didn’t deny it, and I understood her without her saying anything. [5]

She did not deny it. Mrs. Gross, without further questioning, tacitly accepted that Quint was looking for Little Miles. Although Mrs. Gross, with her extensive experience at the manor, was well aware of the close relationship between Quint and Miles, she did not need much thought to understand the teacher’s words, which seemed inconsistent with her previously mentioned intellectual level, which was not literate. Later, when the teacher mentioned again that Jessel wanted Flora to share the torment of the spirits, it was not difficult for Mrs. Gross to deduce that since she already knew Quint was looking for Little Miles, Jessel must be looking for Flora. However, Mrs. Gross showed unprecedented panic:

“She wants to get Floria.” She was so shocked by my words that she almost fell over. [5]

In the teacher’s manuscript, Mrs. Gross’s character is hard to describe with simple words. She is the children’s most loyal servant, whether in solidarity with the teacher, comforting Flora, or defending Miles. Mrs. Gross always prioritizes the children’s interests. Even when the teacher accuses the children of having a close relationship with the ghost, she still believes that Miles and Flora are not at fault;

it is the teacher who has changed. However, she occasionally makes comments that contradict her loyal nature, such as when she discusses Miles's misbehavior at school with the teacher.

Her eyes were straight, as if trying to understand what I meant. When she understood, she laughed strangely. "Are you afraid he will corrupt you?" she asked, boldly and humorously. [5]

The 'strange laughter' and the 'bold and humorous' Mrs. Gross seem to be in conflict with her nervous and fearful character, and this narrative gap is easy to become evidence of the unreliability of the female teacher. Is Mrs. Gross's character complex? Or is there a discrepancy between the female teacher's perception and the previous one?

In addition to the narrative contradictions, the narrator occasionally appears in the manuscript to engage in dialogue with the reader. Phrases like "At this point, I find myself hesitating to write" "I forgot what role I played that day, only remembering it was a crucial but unspoken part of my job" "I remember" and so on, raise questions about the narrator's memory and narrative skills. Typically, the narrator emphasizes their recollection to enhance their authority and highlight the clarity of that experience. However, the female teacher's recollections are marked by hesitation and uncertainty, creating a stark contrast in the narrative effect. The narrator's inability to confirm their own statements is evident through the repeated use of verbs like "remember," which carry strong sensory and uncertain connotations. This makes readers doubt the reliability of the narrative content and question the narrator's authority.

4. Blank: The Inevitable Trend of Coherent Narration

The cognitive oscillation of narrative contradictions requires 'emptiness' to maintain the text's openness. The term "emptiness" refers to the abundance of things that are not actually written or explicitly stated in a novel, which are endowed with corresponding connotations by the readers through their reading. The novel ends abruptly, with Miles suddenly dying and Flora leaving the manor. The origin of the ghost remains unexplained. The story begins on the first day the female teacher arrives at the manor and ends on the day Miles dies. Whether the employer reappears, how the female teacher leaves the manor, and the condition of Flora and Mrs. Gross are all unknown. The audience's reaction after Douglas finishes telling the story is also unknown. Readers face a large amount of blank space left by the novel, leading to the emergence of famous textual interpretation perspectives such as Wilson, Herman, and Ferman. In fact, Henry James was a writer with a strong sense of technique. He fully understood the significance of his innovative methods and proposed the theory of the point of view: all narrative details in the novel must be filtered through the thoughts of this central character, and this filtering process itself can better reveal the character's inner world [4]. Regarding the textual meaning of 'The Turn of the Screw' James clearly stated, 'For

my young lady, I will certainly adopt a very ingenious design, making her image appear peculiar and her past and present show childlike psychology. [6] He intentionally shaped the image of the female teacher without any specific description, not even a name, allowing readers to focus only on the subtle role positioning of the female teacher in the novel. To make the female teacher's image more 'depersonalized,' the narrator must ensure that their voice does not overshadow the female teacher's voice. Thus, the abrupt ending of the novel and the blank space within the text seem to be the writing strategy that James has to appear.

The contradictions in the manuscript narrative stem from the limitations of a limited narrative perspective. As previously mentioned, the narrator in the main text is exclusively the female teacher. Whether describing events or engaging in dialogue, all these are recorded by her. Within this limited perspective, the female teacher cannot grasp the full picture of events; she can only present what she has seen, heard, and thought. What others are doing is beyond the narrator's scope. This narrative perspective, defined by Genette as 'inward focus,' is characterized by the narrator only speaking about what a specific character knows, *i.e.*, 'narrator = character.' 'The narrator consistently narrates from the perspective of the story's protagonist—person [7], limiting the narrative to the narrator's known experiences, knowledge, and perceptions, thus restricting the reader's overall view and line of sight, making the narrative perspective singular and subjective. As a newcomer to the manor, the female teacher can only learn about the manor's past through Mrs. Gross, who is always evasive and hesitant to discuss the deaths of Jessel and Quant. Consequently, the female teacher must rely on her own reasoning and imagination to deduce why the ghosts appear. In other words, the female teacher does not know the true nature of the events; the many unexplained aspects in her narration are not deliberate concealment but parts that the single perspective cannot fully cover. The reader's cognitive uncertainty also arises from not knowing the true nature of the events experienced by the female teacher, leaving their own 'uncertainty' unresolved while reading. To maintain the narrative perspective, the female teacher watches Miles die in her arms, and the story ends abruptly. She does not know more and does not elaborate much, so the entire novel can be interpreted as either the female teacher's mental breakdown or the real existence of a ghost. Regardless of the interpretation, the narrator's purpose is to ensure the narrative's coherence, as James himself admitted: "The only condition I can think of for writing a novel is that it must be true" [8].

Moreover, the narrative flaws in the text can indeed highlight the unreliability of the female teacher. For instance, as mentioned earlier, her judgments about external matters are inconsistent, yet this inconsistency is also a crucial method for maintaining the coherence of her narrative. Although the manuscript is the teacher's recollection of past events, she does not immediately define everything but retains the initial sense of wonder and curiosity about these experiences, describing them in chronological order, including the shifts in emotions and the progression of events. Here, the teacher strives to control her emotional reactions

after experiencing the ghostly events, narrating in a relatively calm tone. The use of uncertain recall words like 'I remember' and 'I forget' not only raises questions from readers but also indicates that the teacher deliberately avoids attributing cognitive outcomes to the events, aiming for an objective and truthful narrative.

In his lengthy essay "The Screw of Explanation Tightening," Ferman suggests that the novel is a meticulously crafted trap by James. Naive readers fully believe the teacher's statements and explanations, while intelligent readers question her. In either case, when readers think they have seen through the author's trick and try to avoid the trap, they have already fallen into it [2]. This interpretation views the text as a masterful design by the author, leaving the interpretation of meaning to the reader. Moreover, even without the reader's involvement, the text determines the narrative direction as it is written. The introduction layers the narrative by introducing Douglas, transforming the story from a simple ghost tale into a suspicious pseudo-real event. Despite the contradictions in the manuscript, which confuse readers, the limited perspective and singular cognition are essential for creating the story's eerie atmosphere. The abrupt ending and unresolved contradictions seem like deliberate obscurity by the author, but they are actually an inevitable arrangement as the narrative progresses. The authority of the introduction has already created a 'real illusion' for the reader, while the content of the manuscript undermines this trust through the contradictions in the teacher's words. If the truth were revealed at the end, all the atmosphere created earlier would be wasted, and only by remaining silent could the teacher escape unscathed, preserving the novel's mystery and interpretative space. Similarly, the interruptions and evasions of Douglas in the narrative have the same effect.

5. Conclusion

The ambiguity and narrative techniques in "The Turn of the Screw" have sparked ongoing debates since its publication, with the narrator often referred to as "the most unfortunate narrator." The narrative gaps in the text are not intentional ambiguities by the author; James chose "I," Douglas, and the female teacher as narrators to guide readers closer to the text and the events themselves, providing the most direct narrative perspective. The narrative gaps in the female teacher's account are merely a result of the limitations of a limited perspective, and the contradictions between the text and its context inevitably cause cognitive shifts in readers. The abrupt ending further intensifies the interpretive pressure on readers. However, James still demonstrates unique narrative artistry in this novel, whether through the introduction of the narrator "I" and Douglas or the contradictions in the female teacher's narration in the manuscript, all leading to an open-ended conclusion. This is why "The Turn of the Screw" continues to captivate readers in terms of reading and interpretation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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