

GERARD GENETTE AND THE SEMIOTICS OF THE “TURNER” IN HENRY JAMES’S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

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Abstract

The several repetitions of the word “turn” in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* are of great significance from a semiotic perspective. James’s narrative is open to a proliferation or semiosis of turns, and therefore, it is important to know who turns the screw. Such turns are closely related to the context or realm in which the screw of reading turns. In this respect, one may refer to at least two major distinct realms in the story, namely the realm of the ‘Prologue’ and the realm of the ‘governess.’ In this study the whole issue is addressed in terms of semiotic narratology offered by Gerard Genette in his discussion of the concept of voice, in particular, ‘narrative level’ and ‘person.’

Key words: Semiotics, Turner, Gerard Genette, Voice

Introduction

Henry James has been praised as the “historian of fine conscience” by Joseph Conrad (1964, p. 15). *The Turn of the Screw* as the product of a fine conscience has been the subject of intense critical discussion and it has proved bewildering and controversial for many critics. Do the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel really haunt the children or no? Are the ghosts, as some Freudian readings of this novella suggest, merely hallucinations of the governess’s disturbed mind or not? Is the governess’s account of the events at Bly reliable or not? Is it warranted to assume that the first narrator is James or no? Whatever the answer to the above questions may be, *The Turn of the Screw* still challenges the readers’ competence and haunts their minds in the same way that the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, according to the governess’s narration of events, haunted the children at Bly.

In the very beginning of this narrative Douglas, talking about Griffin’s ghost, poses the question: “If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children?” (James, 1966, p. 1). The turns that the screw finds in this narrative are not limited, indeed, only to the turn that the children give to the screw. There are several turners who contribute to a

semiosis of turns in this novella; hence, James's *The Turn of the Screw* has been the subject of widespread interpretations and controversies among critics¹. However, instead of attempting to provide solutions to these interpretive diversities, one might attempt to give an account of the rules, conventions and the functioning of sign systems that account for these different turns of reading. A semiotic analysis of the role of the narrators-turners of the screw proves helpful in this respect.

Semiotics, defined generally as the science of signs, is a huge field of study involving many theoretical stances and methodological tools. As Chandler (2002) mentions, "there are divergent schools of thought in semiotics, and there is remarkably little consensus among contemporary theorists regarding the scope of the subject, core concepts or methodological tools" (p. xvi). One of its broadest definitions is presented by the Italian semiotician, Umberto Eco (1976), who states that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (p. 7). He refers to the broad range of studies that the field involves ranging from zoo-semiotics (the study of the communicative behavior of animals) to such diverse signifying systems as olfactory signs, tactile communication, codes of taste, medical semiotics, musical codes, visual communication, mass communication and rhetoric (ibid, p. 9-13). The field involves, as Chandler (2002) suggests, "the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else" (p. 2).

Semiotics, defined as the science of signs, in fact, becomes the study of codes, the systems into which signs are organized. The concept of code is fundamental in semiotic analysis since signs are not meaningful in isolation; they find their significance in relation to other signs and the value of a sign, in fact, depends upon the code within which it is organized.

By analyzing signs one can get access to codes, conventions and the semiotic operations accounting for them in the narrative. The concept of code is of crucial importance in semiotic analysis since signs are not meaningful in isolation; they find their significance in relation to other signs and the value of a sign, in fact, depends upon the code within which it is embedded.

As an approach to textual and literary analysis, semiotics is characterized by a concern with structural analysis and it enjoys close affinities with *Structuralism*. They are closely related to each other. As Jonathan Culler (1975) argues:

¹ Alexander E. Jones (1950) in "Point of View in *The Turn of the Screw*" has pointed out to a wide range of critical readings of James's narrative.

It would not be wrong to suggest that structuralism and semiology are identical. The existence of the two terms is in part due to historical accident, as if each discipline had first drawn certain concepts and methods from structural analysis, and only then realized that it had become or was fast becoming a branch of that semiology which Saussure had envisaged. (p. 6)

However, structuralism designates the work of a restricted group of French theorists and practitioners whereas semiology might refer to any work which studies signs (Culler, 1975, p. 7). In the twentieth century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, are credited as the founders of the field.

Semioticians consider a literary work or a narrative primarily as a “mode of signification and communication” (Culler, 2001, p. 48); the analysis of narrative is, in fact, an important branch of semiotics. Semiotic narratology, as Chandler (2002) observes, deals “with narrative in any mode – literary or non-literary, fictional or non-fictional, verbal or visual – but tends to focus on minimal narrative units and the “grammar of the plot”” (p. 90). One of the most elaborate and systematic approaches yet developed for the study of narrative is the one introduced by Gerard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (1980).

Gerard Genette and Semiotic Narratology

The analysis of narrative is an important branch of semiotics. One of the most comprehensive approaches yet developed for the study of narrative is the one offered by the semiotician Gerard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (1980). In the course of a remarkable study of Marcel Proust’s seven-volume work, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1972), Genette presents a method for analyzing a fictional text.

Genette (1980) begins by distinguishing among three distinct notions of the term *narrative*, which generally have been included under this umbrella term: story, narrative and narrating. Genette proposes:

to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content (even if this content turns out, in a given case, to be low in dramatic intensity or fullness of Incident), to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which the action takes place. (p. 27)

Genette also states that story, narrative and narrating interact by means of three qualities which he calls tense, mood and voice; these are “categories borrowed from the grammar of verbs” (Genette, 1980, p. 30). Tense, for Genette, refers to narrative time and involves the notions of order, duration and frequency; mood is the atmosphere of narrative developed by distance and perspective. Genette uses the term voice in connection with the question ‘who speaks?’ and in distinction from the question ‘who sees?’ (perspective or point of view). This study limits itself to Genette’s concept of voice.

Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* (1980) is by general consensus one of the most important contributions to semiotic or structural narratology.

His analysis of the concept of ‘voice’ is the starting point for most discussions of the term in narratology. He uses the term voice in connection with the question ‘*who is the narrator?*’ or, more simply, the question ‘*who speaks?*’ and in distinction from the very different question ‘*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?*’ or, more simply, the question ‘*who sees?*’ (p. 186). This study is limited to Genette’s concept of voice, in particular, ‘narrative level’ and ‘person’.

Voice, in the study of narrative discourse, is a complex and problematic issue. The concept of voice generally includes the speech of both narrators and characters in narrative fiction; but here the concern is with the concept of voice from a narratorial perspective.

According to Genette (1980), in every narrative, one can define “the narrator’s status both by its narrative level (extra- or intradiegetic) and by its relationship to the story (hetero or homodiegetic)” (p. 248). Discussing difference in narrative levels, Genette states that “*any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed*” (p. 228). He calls the narrating instance of a first narrative extradiegetic, and refers to the narrating instance of a second and third narrative inside an extradiegetic narrative as intradiegetic and metadiegetic, respectively. Genette also discusses the transition from one narrative level to another in terms of *narrative metalepsis* which can in principle “be achieved by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation” (p. 234).

As for ‘person,’ Genette suggests that the traditional classifications of narrative in terms of first-person or third-person narrative are incomplete and he distinguishes between two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from the story he tells and the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells. He calls the first type *heterodiegetic*, and the second type

homodiegetic (Genette, 1980, p. 244-245). Genette also differentiates within the homodiegetic type two varieties: One where the narrator is the hero of his narrative and one where he plays only a secondary role, which almost turns out to be a role as observer and witness. He uses for the first variety which to some extent represents the strong degree of the homodiegetic the term *autodiegetic* (p. 245). Therefore, according to Genette the four basic types of narrator's status in terms of 'narrative-level' and 'person' becomes as the following:

(1) *extradiegetic-heterodiegetic* paradigm: Homer, a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is absent from; (2) *extradiegetic-homodiegetic* paradigm: Gil Blas, a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story; (3) *intradiegetic-heterodiegetic* paradigm: Scheherazade, a narrator in the second degree who tells stories she is on the whole absent from; (4) *intradiegetic-homodiegetic* paradigm: Ulysses in Books IX-XII, a narrator in the second degree who tells his own story. Genette shows the whole issue in terms of the following diagram:

| LEVEL | <i>Extradiegetic</i> | <i>Intradiegetic</i> |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| RELATIONSHIP: | | |
| <i>Heterodiegetic</i> | Homer | Scheherazade C. |
| <i>Homodiegetic</i> | Gil Blas Marcel | Ulysses |

(Genette, 1980, p. 248)

The Semiotics of the Turner in *The Turn of the Screw*: A Narratorial Perspective

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* follows the pattern of what has been variously labeled as frame-story, Russian doll, or embedded narrative. As a frame story it has a serial structure implied also in its title. Jeremy Tambling (2000) refers to it as "James's Canterbury Tale[s]" where the governess's tale follows on from a link narrative (p. 96). In this narrative there are three narrators: the first unnamed I-narrator who introduces the reader to a second narrator, Douglas, who in turn reads from the governess's narrative. One can suggest that these three narrators correspond to three narrative levels in *The Turn of the Screw*. The paradigm, therefore, in Genette's terms, becomes as the following:

| Narrator | | Level and Relationship |
|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| The first I-narrator | extra/homodiegetic | 1 st level |
| Douglas | intra/heterodiegetic | 2 nd level |
| Governess | meta/homo(auto)diegetic | 3 rd Level |

The first unnamed I-narrator is essentially a narrator in the first degree, an extradiegetic narrator. He opens the prologue by saying: “The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be. I remember...” (James, 1966, p. 1). In this way he puts himself within the structure of the whole narrative, that is, he himself becomes a member of the fire-circle, a character-narrator; therefore, he can be considered as a homodiegetic narrator.

Douglas, on the other hand, is a narrator in the second-degree who is introduced by the first narrator; he is also absent from the narrative he is going to read from, that is, the governess’s narrative; therefore, he can be considered as an intra-heterodiegetic narrator. Both the first I-character-narrator and Douglas belong to the prologue of *The Turn of the Screw*. The main narrative is that of the governess.

The governess is, in a sense, a narrator in the third degree, a metadiegetic-heroine who is framed, in Genette’s terms (1980, p. 230), within the metadiegetic narrative (a narrative in the second degree) of Douglas. In contrast to Douglas, who is totally absent from his narrative, the governess is, on the other hand, the heroine of her narrative; therefore, she also functions as an autodiegetic narrator.

In relation to the main narrative (the governess’s narrative), the first I-narrator can assume, moreover, a heterodiegetic narrative function since he is, like Douglass, totally absent from the governess’s narrative; therefore, his narrating instance in this case becomes as the following:

| Narrator | Level and Relationship |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| The first I-narrator | extra-heterodiegetic |

Conclusion

There are three narrators-turners in *The Turn of the Screw*. The first-unnamed narrator and Douglas, as turners of the screw, also function as receivers (listeners-readers) of the governess's narrative since they are members of the fire-circle. In other words, as signs they are not only signifiers but also what they signify (the signified) depends on the turn that the governess gives to the screw. This interaction between signifiers and signifieds is, in itself, part of the grammar or semiotic code on which the screw of reading or, in Felman's words, the screw of interpretation turns (Hale, 2006, p. 315).

The governess, on the other hand, offers one of the major turns of the screw. Costello in his study of the structure of *The Turn of the Screw* refers to thirteen distinct sequences in the narrative and states that in each sequence "the governess represents an occurrence and then interprets it" (James, 1966, p. 314). In analyzing the significance of her turns, as Costello (1960) suggests, one must distinguish between "scenes in which the governess represents the action" objectively and "scenes in which the governess interprets the action" subjectively (p. 313).

The reliability of what the governess narrates has been the subject of many disputes among critics. On the one hand, some Freudian critics of the narrative insist that they cannot believe her version of the events at Bly since they consider the governess as a victim of hallucinations, a pathological liar or both; on the other hand, some critics consider her as a reliable narrator and recorder of the events. The governess's narration, in fact, becomes a matter of reading and semiotics, when considered as a theory of reading, can account for the seemingly inconsistencies in the text.

The semiotics of the turner-narrator in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, therefore, reveals at least two major distinct realms in this narrative: the realm of the 'Prologue' and the realm of the 'governess.' The realm of the 'Prologue' involves turners-signifiers such as the first unnamed I-narrator, Douglas and other members of the fire-circle. One may suggest that it is also the realm of the readers of the narrative since they are also figuratively members of the fire-circle listening to the governess's account of events at Bly. The realm of the governess includes, on the other hand, other than herself such signifier-turners as Mrs. Grose, the children and the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. The turns that they give to the screw are beyond the scope of this study but they are connected to the governess's turn. These signifiers-turners interact with each other and contribute to a semiosis of turns in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*.

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