

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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Shiraz University
Faculty of Literature & Humanities

M.A. Thesis in English Literature

**The Semiotics of the "Turn" in Henry James's
*The Turn of the Screw***

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Declaration Form

I, Hossein Fathi, a student of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities declare that this thesis is the result of my own research and I have given credit to all authors whose works I have cited. I also declare that the topic of my study and the thesis itself are original and the copyright of this thesis belongs to Shiraz University.

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

**THE SEMIOTICS OF THE “TURN” IN HENRY
JAMES’S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW***

BY

HOSSEIN FATHI

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TO MY
DEAR PARENTS
AND
PROFESSORS

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ABSTRACT

The Semiotics of the “Turn” in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*

BY

HOSSEIN FATHI PISHOSTA

The word “turn” in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* is of great significance. It can be considered as a major sign around which the whole semiotic structure of the narrative turns. From a semiotic perspective, indeed, it is important to know who turns the screw, what the semiotic context of this turn is, and finally how the screw turns.

Chapter one of this thesis is an introduction to the semiotic analysis of the study. Chapter two provides the theoretical background of the study. Chapter three, the semiotics of the turner (addresser), deals with the first research question by drawing upon the ideas of Gerard Genette and Charles Sanders Peirce. Chapter four, the semiotic context of the turn, addresses the second research question. It deals with the semiotics of the real and the semiotics of the ghostly by drawing upon the ideas of Roland Barthes, Charles Sanders Peirce and Roman Jakobson. In conclusion, chapter five of this study discusses the quality of the turn or the way the screw turns. Answering the third research question, it introduces semiotics as a theory of reading and highlights the role of interpretive operations of readers in turning the screw. For this purpose, the chapter draws upon the semiotic analysis offered by Jonathan Culler and Tzvetan Todorov.

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CHAPTER I

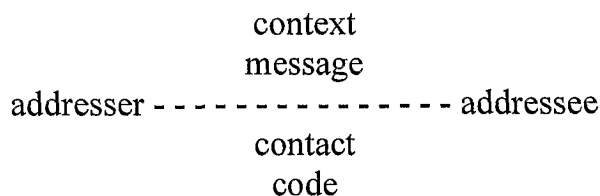
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction: The Semiotics of the Turn

From a semiotic perspective the word “turn” in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* is of great significance. James’s narrative is open to a proliferation of turns. In the very beginning Douglas, talking about Griffin’s ghost, asks: “if the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children- ?” (1). The word “turn” in itself is repeated many times in the text. In this narrative, indeed, it is important to know who turns the screw, what the context for this turn is, and as a result how the screw turns. James’s narrative has been the subject of widespread interpretations and controversies among critics; but 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 are responsible for these disagreements. Such a project falls under the topic of semiotics.

Semiotics, as a science of signs, considers a literary work primarily as a mode of communication and signification; it deals with signs and

their significations, the meanings that objects and events have for participants and observers. By analyzing signs one can get access to codes, conventions and the semiotic operations accounting for them. Roman Jakobson's formulation of communicative act proves in part useful as a framework for discussing the questions raised above. According to Jakobson (1960), the six features of a communicative act that make up any speech event are addresser, addressee, contact, message, code and context:



The *addresser* sends a message to the *addressee*. To be operative the message requires a *context* referred to ('referent' in another, somewhat ambivalent, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized, a *code* fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and finally, a *contact*, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to stay in communication. (353)

The first research question concerns the semiotics of the turner (addresser) in *The Turn of the Screw*. For this purpose, it analyzes the issue from a narratorial perspective by drawing upon Gerard Genette's

discussion of the concept of voice, in particular, 'narrative level' and 'person'. In *The Turn of the Screw* there are three narrators. The first narrator is the unnamed individual who opens the narrative by saying, "the story held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless ..." (1). The first unnamed narrator then refers to another person, Douglas, who in turn presents the narrative proper by reading from an old manuscript given to him by the third narrator, the governess. The reliability of what the governess narrates has been subject to many disputes among critics. On the one hand, some critics such as Freudian critics 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 other critics consider her as a reliable narrator and recorder of the events. The governess' 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. For this purpose a great deal of attention should be paid to the semiotic context of the turn in *The Turn of the Screw*.

The second research question of the study addresses the role of the semiotic context in which the screw turns. It can be considered as analogous to the role of the context in Jakobson's model of communicative act. A semiotics of the turn, for this purpose, discusses the realm of the real and the realm of the ghostly in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*; it deals with the semiotics of the real and the semiotics of the ghostly by drawing upon Roland Barthes and Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, respectively. The "turns" in *The Turn of the Screw* find their significance to a high degree in relation to the context in which the screw turns. In this respect, the role of the governess as one of the major turners of the screw can be analyzed.

She is connected not only with the first two narrators but also with the ghosts, the children, Mrs. Grose and the master who hires her. The incidents of the narrative occur mainly in two realms: the realm of the real and the realm of the ghostly. Of course, Lustig (1994) suggests the possibility of a third realm, a neutral territory, in Jamesian fiction which is related to the *boundaries*, "those scenes in James's work which turn on thresholds, perspectives, windows, doors, on those isolated moments of heightened attention which amount, at times, to encounters with the margins of the text" (7). However, these boundaries are not fixed and sometimes they are mixed together. This is in itself part of the grammar or code on which the semiotics of the "turn" in *The Turn of the Screw* depends. In *The Art of the Novel*, Henry James (1962) talks about "the element of reality" and "the air of romance" or "the near and familiar" and "the far and strange" in a work of art. He believes that in the men of largest responding imagination these elements exist together (30-31). The semiotics of the real and the semiotics of the ghostly are also connected to the semiotics of the neutral territory; one may call it the realm of the reader, a point from which different turns of the screw can be perceived by the reader.

The final research question of the study addresses the quality of the "turn," the way or direction that the screw turns. A semiotics of the turn in this respect introduces semiotics as a theory of reading. Lustig refers to two kinds of turn in Henry James's fiction: the centrifugal and the centripetal. He relates the first to the romantic and the librated consciousness, to what the Prefaces called 'the expansive principal,' and the latter to the real and to the formal limitation and exigencies of 'economic mastery' in James's work (3). Semiotics, like structuralism,

is not interested in what a text means, but in *how* a text means what it means. Therefore, a semiotics of the “turn” in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* should account for the grammar responsible for such turns.

1.2. Review of Literature

Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980) is by general consensus one of the most important contributions to semiotic or structural narratology. Jonathan Culler in the foreword to the book states that:

If *Narrative Discourse* is the culmination of structuralist work on narrative and shows, in its terminological exuberance, a Gallic delight in the adventures of thought, it is also wholly conversant with Anglo-American discussions of narrative, which it cites, uses, and occasionally refutes. This is no provincial exercise but a broadly based theoretical study. (8)

Genette through a remarkable study of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1972), presents a method for analyzing a fictional text. His discussions of narrative ‘time’, ‘mood’ and ‘voice’ are very illuminating.

Roland Barthes in his well known-essay ‘The Reality Effect’ (1968/1986) draws upon the role of some details in the narrative of

such realist authors as Flaubert. According to Barthes, these seemingly useless details are not insignificant; they, indeed, contribute to the generation of the effect of the real in a narrative. Barthes' essay proves fruitful in discussing the semiotics of the real. Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1974) is also one of the richest and most successful applications of semiotic methods to the analysis of a single text. It analyzes *Sarrasine*, a short story by the French writer, Balzac, in terms of five codes: the code of actions (proairetic), the code of enigmas (hermeneutic), cultural codes, connotative codes and the symbolic code.

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) presents a detailed and comprehensive study of signs. In contrast to Saussure's dyadic (signifier/signified) model of the sign, his triadic (three-part) model of the sign includes a *representamen*, an *interpretant*, and an *object* (Peirce 1931-58, 2.228). He also mentions three kinds of signs: indices, icons and symbols.

Russian formalist and semiotician Roman Jakobson makes a distinction between rhetorical figures metonymy and metaphor. For Jakobson (1956) metonymy is the mode of realism whereas metaphor is the mode of literary schools of romanticism and Symbolism (Jakobson 1956, 91-92).

Robert Scholes in *Semiotics and Interpretation* (1982) refers to the place of semiotics among the humanities, "those disciplines primarily devoted to the study of texts" or communicative objects (1). In Chapter Two of this work, he presents a good argument on a semiotics of literature; and in Chapter Six he applies three semiotic approaches to James Joyce's short story "Eveline": that of Tzvetan Todorov, as

illustrated in his *Grammaire du Decameron*, that of Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* and that of Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (87). In his *Structuralism in Literature* (1974), he defines structuralism as a “methodology with ideological implications ... which is seeking nothing less than the unification of all the sciences into a new system of belief” (2). In Chapter Five, he presents illuminating discussions on Todorov’s theory of reading, the codes of Roland Barthes and the figures of Gerard Genette.

Jonathan Culler in *The Pursuit of Signs* (2001) declares that the task of a science of signs is “to understand the conventions and the functioning of the sign systems that make up the human world” (ix). He also introduces semiotics as a theory of reading and believes that in a semiotic analysis the semiotician goes beyond interpretation. Part Three of this book includes comprehensive discussions on apostrophe, story and discourse in the analysis of narrative and the turns of metaphor. His other major work *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) is the fullest and subtlest introduction to the structuralist literary theory and criticism. Its critiques of writers such as Jakobson and Greimas as well as its discussion of the poetics of the novel are semiotically excellent.

Terence Hawkes’ *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1997) has two parts. The first part of the book concerns structuralism and its development from Vico to Roland Barthes; the second part offers a clear and succinct introduction to literary semiotics. It presents a science of signs exemplified by Saussure, Peirce and Barthes.

The structuralist semiotician Tzvetan Todorov considers *The Turn of the Screw* as belonging to the genre ‘the fantastic’. His work *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a literary Genre* (1975) is a good

example of interpretive operations that readers draw upon in their reading of texts.

Daniel Chandler's *Semiotics: The Basics* (2002) is one of the best introductions to semiotics. It is an invaluable resource for both beginners and more advanced students. The book describes some difficult concepts of semiotics very clearly and comprehensively. It also includes a glossary of semiotic key terms at the end. Readers also may have access to the online version of the book at: www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/

Kieran Cashell (2007) in his essay "Ex Post Facto: Peirce and the Living Signs of the Dead" proves very cogently the potentiality of Peircean semiotics for the analysis of the signs of the dead. He believes that "we maintain a relationship with the dead precisely in their death, and this relationship is best understood in terms of Peirce's semiotics" (345).

David Liss (1995) in his "The Fixation of Belief in 'The Figure in the Carpet': Henry James and Peircean Semiotics" proposes that: "The possibility of a third kind of reader, a functional reader, can be found in the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce" (36-37). In this essay, through the analysis of Peirce's triadic model of the sign, Liss proves the semiosis inherent in Peircean semiotics.

The Prefaces, which Henry James wrote for the New York edition of his works and later were collected under the title *The Art of the Novel* (1962) by Richard P. Blackmur, represent as Blackmur in the introduction to the work states, James's artistic views concerning: "*The Relation of Art and the Artist. The Relation of Art and Life. Art, Life, and the Ideal. Art and Morals. Art as Salvation for its Characters*" (xiv).

Pam Morris (2003) in *Realism* offers a clear and comprehensive guide to the critical debates surrounding this literary form. The book covers historical development and artistic achievements of literary realism. Morris explores ideas of realism in the nineteenth-century French and British fiction, the twentieth-century formalist reaction against Literature's status as 'truth' and realism as a democratic mode or utopian form.

As a ghost story, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* follows the tradition of oral tales. According to Alexander E. Jones (1959): "Ghost stories were originally oral tales, whispered before a winter fire while the wind howled outside and darkness crowded in upon the little circle of firelight; and writers who propose to deal with the supernatural are obliged to recreate imaginatively this atmosphere of superstitious but pleasing shudders" . (112)

S. Steven Jones (2001) in his article "Folklore in James's Fiction: Turning the Screw" states that "James's incorporation of folkloric conventions can provide us a revealing glimpse at the main strategies and hidden logic informing the telling of this tale"; he is of the belief that it is "our familiarity with the folkloric tropes of ghost tales, horror legends, and fairy tales that initially turns the lifeless words printed on the page into a mysterious world inhabited by innocent victims, vulnerable females, and spectral demons" (3).

Sawyer (1993) emphasizes the role of prologue in *The Turn of the Screw*. He believes that it directs one's reading of the governess' narrative in quite a determined manner: "By identifying in advance the generic form of the governess's tale, the prologue narrows the hermeneutic boundaries around the text. Told to expect a ghost story, we dutifully adjust our reading to that particular format" (53).

As a frame story *The Turn of the Screw* has a serial structure implied also in its title. Jeremy Tambling (2000) refers to the story as “James’s Canterbury Tale[s] where ‘The Governess Tale’ follows on from a link narrative” (96).

James’s handling of the technical problems of point of view is central to a proper understanding and appreciation of the semiotics of the “turn”. Taylor (1982) suggests that it is unwarranted to assume that the first narrator is James: “denied a name, the [first] narrator,--in this game of negation and omission--is also denied any contingent detail that might give us something to distinguish him by” (718).

Edmund Wilson in his article “The Ambiguity of Henry James” presents a Freudian reading of *The Turn of the Screw*. According to him, James’s narrative should be read as “a neurotic case of sex repression” in which “the ghosts are not real ghosts but the hallucinations of the governess” (115).

Pittock (2005) in his article “The Decadence of *The Turn of the Screw*” refers to the tradition of the spectral ghost in the narrative; for example, that of Hamlet’s father or Banquo’s ghost in *Macbeth*, the idea that the ghost can choose to appear only to one person. Therefore, it does not necessarily mean that the ghosts are hallucinations of the governess’ mind. He considers the narrative as a decadent text and states: “as well as being the greatest ghost story It resembles Wild’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) in its motif of external beauty masking inner corruption” (332).

Costello (1960), studying the structure of James’s narrative, points out that both the Freudians and the anti-Freudians have robbed it of a whole dimension. He believes that “a close examination of the structure of *The Turn of the Screw* will indicate that James so built his