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**Linguistic Complexity in Henry James’
The Portrait of a Lady and *The Ambassadors*:
A Formalist Reading**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Master of Arts in English Literature

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The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write from experience, and experience only," I should feel that this was a rather tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"

Henry James

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Abstract

The first movement of literary criticism in the twentieth century is Russian formalism and, in terms of their perusal, Henry James' novels can be easily pigeon-holed into this category. The two dominant exponents of this movement, Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, also spearheaded two formalist sub-schools – Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915) and OPOJAZ (1916), respectively. This research levels at the many ways formalist literary devices, as invented by these forerunners, can be used with regard to Henry James' two tours de force – *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Ambassadors* (1903).

The research scaffolding will follow a careful order; the introductory chapter attempts to give a general background of the thesis. The second chapter would sketch out what formalism is and goes on to map out Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky's development as the big noises of this movement. It also introduces a brief biography of Henry James and his umbilical influence on formalism – for, after all, James is the starting point of this movement due to the fact that he has left no stone unturned with respect to his use of literary language. Chapter three brings the framework of my thesis to the foreground. It gives the many ways *The Portrait of a Lady* can be read linguistically under the lens of Jakobson and Shklovsky's literary devices. Some of its passages will be compared to those of *The Ambassadors* and the end result will be the difference between the complex diction of the two novels. I will also include the theories of other critics and quotations from the essays and books I have perused for preparing this study. Chapter four will, more or less, do the same trick with the latter novel – *The Ambassadors*. The terminal chapter wraps up the whole thesis in a grand summation in a way that links the overlaps that James and formalists have.

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Chapter One

Introduction

A. General Overview

The major focus this study aims to bring home to the reader is a fairly lapidary survey of the *form/content* binary which is extremely seminal in a formalist approach to a work of art, and also to delineate the linguistic complexities that Henry James (1843-1916) so frequently puts forward in the sentence structure of his novels.

James is one of the first novelists to focus on the psychological and mental states of his characters in a style that paved the way for later experimenters such as James Joyce and William Faulkner. Most of the later twentieth century writers go into the mind of their characters as James did before them. His long career covers about fifty years, spanning from the mid 1860s

with the publication of his first story *A Tragedy of Errors* up to his death in 1916 – leaving behind at his desk two unfinished novels – *The Sense of the Past* (1917), *The Ivory Tower* (1917) and a memoir *The Middle Years* (1917) which were posthumously published. I will cover his other books within that snippet of my screed which would deal with biographical segments.

Russian formalism which is primarily preoccupied with the autonomous nature of the language of a work of art is interestingly coincident with James' final period of writing – the early 1900s. The final novels that show James' writing finesse (*The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*) have made vital inroads in the movement mostly to good effect, in a way that most of the devices highlighted by the formalists such as *defamiliarization*, *literariness*, and *foregrounding* are already reverberated brilliantly in James' prose. Most of the formalist practitioners have employed the above-mentioned tools to two eighteenth century novelists; Lawrence Sterne (1713-1768) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) whose novels *Tristram Shandy* (1767) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) were all the rage in the early twentieth century and I am slightly tempted to say that they still have stood the test of time. I want to wind up by saying that in this study James is a new Sterne or Swift to be under the application of these elements!

In a series of lectures on 'The History of World Literature' given in 2007 by Grant L. Voth – Professor Emeritus of English and Interdisciplinary studies at Monterey, Peninsula College – he presented an elegant quotation by Henry James: "Literature is re-reading" (Voth, 2007, lecture 1). I think whoever cudgels his brain about this statement can starkly read James' thoughts. He wants to emphasize that by re-reading a piece of writing one can broaden their horizons of perception to get to new realms of meaning. An artistic work involves readers' mind and forces them to react to aesthetic sentences. By the same token, Professor Paul Fry's lecture

course on ‘Literary Theory’ in 2009 at Yale University presented a discussion on formalism. In lecture seven, he mentions the poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), arguing that he has written a very sugarcoating sentence about poetry: “Poetry should make the visible a little hard to see” (Fry, 2009) which may well be contrasted with what James has said about narrative prose. What is interesting about James and Stevens’ theories is that both focus on the linguistic aspects of these different genres and as a formalist reader, I am intrigued with this dimension of James’ work.

The two novels under the lens of focus show James at the apogee of his literary prowess – one from the infancy of his career – *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and the other *The Ambassadors* (1903), a late Jamesian production which is summed up as a kind of capstone to his entire career – in fact one of the first modern novels in terms of its *technique* and *style*. The first novel will be compared to the second one in my thesis to show how his *style* has shifted gears to a completely different level in his late years. It is a watershed by which one might lucidly divide James’ career into two different sides of the same coin – James the novelist and James the artist.

B. Argument

James' fiction is the culmination of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century novel. To say that James himself was somehow a formalist writer is not a big claim, since the elements of the formalist theory of art are found in almost everything he has written. In his early writing (novellas) his diction is rather easy compared to the work of his mature years. *The Portrait of a Lady* illustrates James’ early rule-bound prose, whereas *The Ambassadors*

delineates what is generally believed to be the apotheosis of James' creative dexterity. The writer purported the latter book to be his magnum opus. He substantiates his claim by a wonderful peroration at the end of the Preface which he later added to the '1909 New York Edition' of the book:

I consciously fail to shrink from that extravagance. I risk it rather, for the sake of the moral involved' which is not that the particular production before us exhausts the interesting questions it raises, but that the novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most realistic, most prodigious of literary forms. (*The Ambassadors*, xix)

The Portrait is still a difficult book – one might call it James' *opusculum* or little masterpiece – but juxtaposed with *The Ambassadors* it is more accessible, because it has a linear plot, while the plot of the latter book gradually comes clear to the reader in the process of reading. Something that mesmerizes me in this novel is the comparison James makes at the beginning of his (again later-added) Preface which is that of a work of art to a '*House of Fiction*'. I think in this book the reader is sandwiched between art and imagination in a way that he has to get involved in the book with perfect concentration. It is a marmoreal book because the language is extremely clear, the diction is scrupulously presented to the reader and, at the same time, the plot of the book is so magnificently designed that there is only one "time gap" in the five-hundred pages he has written. James is so entranced by the novel he has produced that later in the Preface (1909) he mentions: "this is, to the author's own sense, the most proportionate of his productions after *The Ambassadors* which has no doubt a superior roundness" (*The Portrait*, 13).¹

¹ . From here on I would like to shorten the title of this novel to '*The Portrait*' for the sake of succinctness, wherever I happen to be citing from the novel.

I have tried to be as chary as possible in choosing two books from his body of work that make him the unacknowledged master of formalism and their study, long ago, put me in mind of conducting a research on them, both comparatively and formalistically. By ‘comparatively’ I don’t mean *thematic* comparison, rather I want to throw the reader into the relief of finding out to what extent James’ early fiction (epitomized by *The Portrait*) and his later production (represented by *The Ambassadors*) has changed through all those years – a clear prose versus a difficult, mental and yet palatable *style* of writing. Therefore, linguistic aspects of the two books will be under focus. The second dimension of the two books that will be more convoluted in my thesis is the *form/content* binary which is one of the lynchpins of a formalist approach. By extension, formalism surveys a work of art through the lens of literary devices it has put forward under the aegis of its avatars, as Viktor Shklovsky and others have discussed, such terms as *literariness*, *defamiliarization*, *foregrounding* and there is no better writer than Henry James in whose work one can investigate these devices. Following are some of the most prominent questions this thesis is going to handle:

1. How far does James prosper in producing aesthetic effects on the reader? How is the writing of the two novels? Is it gorgeous or an allegory of writing?
2. What are the principal facets of the two texts? Could the whole novels be read in terms of their linguistic complexity?
3. How do the *form* and *content* of the novels under survey differ?
4. Has the writer skillfully utilized the major formalist devices to attain his aim with regard to his claim that these two novels are quintessential paragons of artistic production?
5. What are exactly the aesthetic passages James has linguistically and formally produced?

C. Significance of the Study

No one can deny the gargantuan ambiance James has occupied in the American letters and it goes without saying that he has been read and worked on extensively. An avalanche of critics has written criticism on his oeuvre and, interestingly enough, he has applied criticism to his own work as well. Therefore, in my case, it may seem as if I want to carry coal to New Castle, but the following paragraphs aim at elucidating the novelty the present study is going to bring to the reader's presence.

It is worth mentioning that James is a kind of writer whose style puts off a lot of readers today. "Part of the problem with James is the kind of intellectual "readerly" laziness that people cannot come to terms with and readers chase the footsteps of such minimalist authors as Hemingway" (Weinstein, 1997, lecture 42). They expect prose to be cleaner, sharper and briefer than anything James has ever produced. According to John Carlos Rowe:

In our era of overnight celebrities, video game and computer obsessions, television news soundbites, sitcom humor, and stand-up one-liners, the difficulty of Henry James' prose may present a refreshing alternative to the superficiality of postmodern culture. (Thompson, 2005, 518)

He continues: "his writings show the superiority of the English diction over all other nations – U.S included. The difficulties are because of his *prose style* not because of his stream-of-consciousness or multiple points of view. He is, along with Joyce, Faulkner, Shakespeare, the most discussed author in the English canon" (Thompson, 2005, 519). Nevertheless, I believe in what Henry James once said astutely about the duties a novelist must undertake and recant the diatribes leveled at him by them: "The first job of a novelist is to create a world that is so

convincing that you may find yourself lost in it” (Voth, 2007, lecture 1). I think this world is created through the medium of linguistic dimensions and an enchanting atmosphere in James’ fiction, though many readers hate his diction.

By juxtaposing the two books’ diction and formal style, I would like to show that James’ *prose style*² and *linguistic facets* have opened a new realm of study. Another issue tackled in my thesis is the binary operation of *form/content* devices which will be diligently attempted to bring the research to a proper fruition. A lot of studies have been carried out on James’ novels, but as far as I have searched, no technical perusal has been put into practice which exactly conforms to my subject. Formalist reading has been applied to James’ books, but a *comparative formalist* study of these two books has not been conducted by anyone else – at least, so far as my research efforts have taken me I am not able to name any.

D. Approach and Methodology

My approach in the current thesis would be Formalism. Although this is no place to dwell on the ramifications of a critical novelty, what I want to tackle is the overall scaffolding of the two aforementioned novels by dint of the different devices of this approach from the two proponents who spearheaded the movement, viz. Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky. The major formalist I will be following in this treatise is Jakobson whose theories of ‘*function*’ and ‘*the dominant*’ have been widely utilized by formalists. His division of all literary utterances into six linguistic functions is to be taken advantage of and encapsulated in the second chapter. Jakobson’s re-definition of the *horizontal/vertical* aspect of language and positioning all

². I will italicize all the terms related to Formalism in the rest of my thesis.

sentences within *metonymic/metaphoric* poles will also be briefly adumbrated in the second chapter based on my own reading of Richard Bradford's book on Jakobson called '*Roman Jakobson; Life, Language and Art*' (1994).

Another formalist whom I will be following in the process of my analysis would be Viktor Shklovsky whose contributions to the movement throughout his long career (up to the 1980s!) are of great moment. The two figures' major devices of textual analysis will be put to practice as sedulously as possible and at the end I will try to wrap up the whole thesis with linguistic exemplars, that is, I quote various prototypical passages from James' two novels to demonstrate the *lexical facets* of the books under scrutiny. The passages which will be chosen amalgamate the formalist aspects found in the novels apiece and pose their separate differences. *Defamiliarized* texts and *foregrounded* ones will be illustrated from the two books and the *linguistic* differences of the *Portrait* and *The Ambassadors* will be shown to arrive at a propitious goal – that of the young and mature James.

E. Literature Review

In *The Art of Fiction* (1992) David Lodge dedicates two wonderful essays to James' *What Maisie Knew* (chapter 6) and *The Ambassadors* (chapter 33). What is intriguing about this book is that it is the eponymous title of James' famous 1884 essay from which I have quoted a brief apothegm at the flyleaf of this treatise. No wonder he carefully expatiates upon the books by James. He threads his way through the literary device of 'Coincidence' in *The Ambassadors*:

The European culture whose beauty, style and elegance he has so enthusiastically embraced, turns out to be morally duplicitous, confirming the prejudices of puritanical

and philistine New England. This denouement is contrived through the medium of *Coincidence*. (Lodge, 1992, 151)

Robin Chamberlain wrote a thesis in 2005 under the title *A Magnificent Form: The Shape of Domination in Henry James's Washington Square, The Portrait of a Lady, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl*. As he says: “using the psychoanalytic framework provided by Jessica Benjamin, this thesis examines relationships of domination in the aforesaid novels” (Chamberlain, 2005, 11).

In *Aspects of the novel* (1927) E. M. Forster lauds James a lot, emphasizing the sweating efforts of a fine artist for hard work. “*The Ambassadors* like Thais, is the shape of an hour-glass. Strether and Chad Newsome like Paphnuce and, Thais change places, and it is the realization of this that makes the book so satisfying at the close” (Forster, 1927, 153).

In "The Meaning of the Match Image in James's *The Ambassadors*," a 1955 essay in the journal *Modern Language Notes* Patricia Evans asserts that “the thingamabob is a safety match – which, she claims, would explain why James jokes at one point in the novel that Mrs. Newsome's daughter's unpleasant smile was as prompt to act as the scrape of a safety-match. Here the hermeneutics of suspicion is contagious” (Evans, 1955, 7).

The same journal published "Time and the Unnamed Article in *The Ambassadors*," in which R.W. Stallmann, also relying on what might or might not be fraught similes and allegories in James' text, claims: “the object is – or ought to be a clock, to be precise, an alarm clock, which "represents a way of life the opposite of Europe's” (Stallman, 1955, 9).

F. Research Limitations

The study, as mentioned earlier, is in some measure confined to the fact that James's long novels are seldom read today. This cannot be regarded as a limitation, because after all, they will find their discrete readers in the long run. However something which is clear and trammels my gamut of freedom in this study is that a host of great writers such as Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) have conducted studies on James' novels and discussed their discursive areas, therefore I am not free to go wherever I want or pick up any topic that comes handy.

The delimitations of the study include the following items: First, not only cannot a general treatise by a humble student sum up and clarify the ambiguities found in James' two masterworks, but it may even add to their complexities. So I am chained to the tangible reality of dealing with a novelist who is more or less a high priest of literature and one, two or even more volumes are not enough to encompass his writings to perfection. The second of those constraints within whose confines I would be bounded throughout this research is that I am chained to approach the two books *formalistically*. Any reader of English or American literature may know that James' great theme is the contrast between European and American civilization in almost all his work with the possible exception of his Gothic novelette *The Turn of the Screw*, however, I will not approach his ecumenical theme rather I try to handle the formalist aspect of his novels.

G. Definition of Key Terms

There are a lot of innovative and technical terms which became widespread in the early twentieth century with the advent of Russian Formalism. Most of those used in this section of my

study would later be referred to in the upcoming chapters of my thesis. Those explained here are probably the most important contributions of this movement to later literary theory.

Defamiliarization

A term coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay ‘Art as Technique³’ (1917) – collected in his 1925 collection of essays *Theory of Prose* – which refers to the process of making strange (ostranenie – in the Russian) something that is familiar or putting the old in a new light or sphere of perception that slows down the act of perception and arrival at meaning becomes asymptotic. Shklovsky in particular is very much preoccupied with the sense of the automatization or automism of perception in which we no longer really see what is around us. I once quoted Wallace Stevens that poetry should "make the visible a little hard to see" and this can be equally germane to what I am talking about at this juncture. Shklovsky insists that: “the business of the roughening of surface by means of various modes of *literariness* is to *defamiliarize* automated perceptions; to make us suddenly see again the nature of the language we are using and, as a consequence, perceive the world itself anew by means of devices of language that tear the film away from our eyes” (Shklovsky, 1925, 4).

Device as a Function

Language is a device, and in relation to other devices it is called a ‘function.’ It has a function within our understanding of the way a text is structured. Every aspect of the structure of the text can be understood as having a function. Take, for example, "The rain in Spain falls

³. The Essay has sometimes been transliterated as ‘Art as Technique’, ‘Literature as Technique’ or even ‘Art as Device’.

mainly on the plain." This is an example of a text in which alliteration is plainly predominant. It is repetitive, and we understand it to be somehow different from the ordinary way a fact is communicated; but if we are not Russian formalists, we are tempted to say, "it is a mnemotechnic device introduced for the purpose of the communication of a fact" (Fry, 2009, lecture 7).

Form and Content

These cannot be segregated for the simple fact that they are confusingly coalescent. Put simply, "when we speak of the *form* of a literary work we refer to its *shape* and *structure* and how it is organized (hence its style and technique). *Content* or *substance* is, on the other hand, the essence of a work of art – what is depicted. The two are inseparable and concomitant to each other, nevertheless they could be analyzed separately" (Cuddon, 1998, 327).

This is a crucial issue for the Russian formalists, which they handle very boldly. Part of their platform is that *everything* is form. There is no distinction, in other words, between *form* and *content*. That is the fundamental mistake their various enemies make in their understanding or approach to literature. But the formalists' own basic distinctions are dualistic: the distinction between *poetic* and *practical language*, the distinction between *plot* and *story*, the distinction between *rhythm* and *meter*. In all of these cases, one is tempted to say one is form and the other is content, or in the case of "*plot*" and "*story*" where "*plot*" is the constructedness of the text and the "*story*" is what the text is about. The Russian formalists can be defended against the charge that, unbeknownst to themselves, they fall back in to *form/content* distinctions by insisting on this variety of dualities.

Literariness

Coined in 1919 by Roman Jakobson, the term was expanded on in the following definition: “the subject of literary science is not literature, but *literariness*, i.e. that which makes a given work a literary work” (Cuddon, 1998, 465).

In fact, it is those aspects of a text in which those devices of a text that call themselves to our attention are new: that is to say, they shake up perception through the fact that we are not used to seeing them. In a way, this call for that which is new is worldwide; at the same time we have Ezra Pound among the high Modernists in the West saying, "Make it new," as his slogan. You have the various observations of Eliot, Joyce and others, all of them insisting on the necessity of difficulty, of novelty, of coming to terms with the immediacy of one's particular circumstances, and of getting away from that which is familiar and ordinary and vague. It is a transnational idea, which nevertheless has, certain specific applications depending on where it is. “The newness that the Russian formalists are interested in is not just any newness. It has to do particularly with the palpable or roughened form of that which *defamiliarizes*” (Fry, 2009, lecture 7).

Plot and Story

When taking the distinction between plot and story, one would really think the formalists are on thin ice. *Plot* is the constructed-ness of the *story* or the way it is put together. *Story* is what the plot is *about*, and if that is what the *plot* is about, how can we avoid calling it content? The

formalists' own technical terms for these are “*syuzhet* for plot which is strictly literary while story is called *fabula* which is merely the raw material” (Selden, 1985, 34).

Sometimes *story* can be the dominant in obviously formal terms. ‘The Things They Carried’ by Tim O'Brien is an example of this kind. It is a list of the contents of the knapsack of a soldier during the Vietnam War, just a list of the contents. All these items in the knapsack are evocative and they suggest a plot. By the end of the story, a plot is implied. It's just the opposite of the usual relationship between plot and story. Ordinarily, a plot constructs something which is implied -- that which happens, that which we can talk about in paraphrase or as a subject matter outside the text -- but in O'Brien's story, we are given the subject matter. The subject matter itself becomes the dominant device, and it implies a way to construct it, not vice versa. The dominant in the text is just the stuff in his knapsack listed with as little implication as possible. This is an instance of the way in which one can see the relationship between plot and story as a relationship of devices. The formalists don't want to keep that distinction. Any device can be the dominant at a given moment in the development of literary history.

Poetic Language and Practical Language

Because *formalism* views literature as a specialized use of language, it bifurcates it into two separate linguistic dictions. It holds that “*literary* or *poetic* use of language is self-focussed. It gives a reader a mode of *aesthetic* experience by drawing attention to itself and its *formal* features. By contrast, *practical* or *ordinary* use of language aims to communicate or impart information” (Abrams, 2011, 103).

While the New Critics, in a variety of ways, insist that form is meaning, form is content and so on, they are still not really breaking down the distinction between form and content. There