

# Narrative Frames and Ambiguity in Henry James' The Turn of The Screw

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## Narrative "frames" and Ambiguity in *The Turn of The Screw*

Since it was written, Henry James' *The Turn of The Screw* has been acclaimed by numerous critics to be one of the most immaculate, engrossing and terrifying ghost stories ever produced. Harriet Waters Preston described it as, "a sheer mortal horror, like the evil dream of a man under the spell of a deadly drug"<sup>1</sup>, and Gertrude Atherton said, "[it] is the most horrifying ghost story ever written!"<sup>2</sup>

I will argue that it is the narrative frames enclosing *The Turn of The Screw* that are largely responsible for the reception the book has received. They serve two main purposes; one, to build up an element of suspense and tension before the governess's account actually begins, thus heightening the potential for horror and terror in the text; and two, to cast uncertainty on the reliability of the narrators and hence to increase the ambiguity and scope for interpretation of the text. In fact, I will argue that these frames do not assist the reader in interpreting the action, but are actually used by James to deliberately confound the reader and foster an ambiguous atmosphere.

At first [glance](#) there appear to be three narrative frames surrounding the governess' account. At the outermost level we have the voice of the narrator. The narrator tells us of a time when they were one of several guests staying at the abode of a character named "Griffin". Whilst there, the narrator [heard](#) the governess's tale, as told by Douglas over a period of several nights. Although the narrator was not at Bly, nor did they take any part in the tale of the governess, it is the narrator's [retelling](#) of this story that the reader receives.

Within this is the reading by Douglas, who ...

... middle of paper ...

...: Macmillan, 1968).

Troy, William, "The Altar of Henry James" in Tanner, Tony, ed., *Henry James Modern Judgements* (London: Macmillan, 1968).

#### Endnotes

1 Gard, Roger, ed., *Henry James The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 333.

2 Ibid, pp. 361.

3 Sheppard, E. A., *Henry James and The Turn of the Screw* (Suffolk: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 17.

4 James, Henry, "The Turn of the Screw" in Hampl, Patricia, ed., *The Houghton Mifflin Anthology of Short Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), pp. 617.

5 Ibid, pp 617.

6 Ibid, pp. 617.

7 Ibid, pp. 620.

8 Gard, pp. 275.

9 Hosking, Rick, lecture for English 1A: ENGL 1003, Flinders University, 12th March 1996.

10 Tanner, Tony, ed., *Henry James Modern Judgements* (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 33.

11 Sheppard, pp. 15.

12 Ibid, pp. 15.

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