

Using barthes to
explain "turn of the
screw"



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In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes so thoroughly maps out his narrative theory that he leaves little room for problematic tales such as *Turn of the Screw*. While Barthes' example text *Sarrasine* revolves around a central unknown – the identity of the strange old man from the party – it differs from Henry James' text in that the former is grounded in real-life events and traceable history (albeit a fictional one). *Turn of the Screw*, in contrast, is difficult to categorize using Barthes' plan because it exists in the realm of the inexplicable: a world of ghosts, psychosis, and suspect imagination. *S/Z* was supposedly written to debunk the notion of realism, to prove that a narrative, like a painting, statue or play, is merely a pastiche of some long-lost original. However, for all his efforts, Barthes fails to acknowledge the shadowy spectrum into which *Turn of the Screw* falls – a spectrum where narratives originate in fantasy, not in the tangible historical topos of cultural, semic and symbolic voices from which Barthes claims a final narrative product is woven. Stories where even a basic level of veracity cannot be confirmed, where characters, events and references may be entirely fabricated, become a jumble of perverted pseudo-origins created by unstable figures. *Turn of the Screw* is less a “perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures” than a convoluted internal tumor originating from a single mind (20). It is not that Barthes ignores volatility in narratives – he successfully analyzes *Sarrasine*, whose characters are led astray by deceit and disguise. However, while he allows characters to experience “an impulse of madness, a kind of frenzy” in situations where “the effect was delirium,” he does not have the capacity to deal with an entire narrative that may be made-up. His narrative theory is effective even amidst plot instability, but he cannot tolerate fundamental narrative uncertainty. It can and should be argued, however, that even an unstable psyche must

draw from some kind of universal network in order to communicate. After all, the governess uses a coherent language and uses cultural colloquialisms such as "I daresay" and "heavens." She associates a "small shifty spot on the wrong side of it all" with "the wing of a bat," which most readers accept as a cultural signal for evil, fear, and darkness. In similar texts where the primary source connecting us to the narrative is a narrator about whom we have reservations, we are able to conduct a narrative analysis if we overlook our suspicions about the story's authenticity. It is simple work to chart the hermeneutic and proairetic codes in *Catcher in the Rye* because even though Holden Caulfield is prone to extreme exaggeration and outright lying, his presence in the text gives the narrative the ability to thrust forward to his goal of redemption from guilt and loss. Like the governess, Holden's actions are definite, even if their claimed intent or effect may be interpreted differently than his point of view. In the hallucinatory, drug-addled world of *Naked Lunch*, the narrative arc and movements required by the hermeneutic and proairetic codes are obscured by narrator Bill Lee's turmoil. However, Lee/Burroughs makes extensive use of the other three codes through the many metaphors, allusions and creation themes littering the text. The narratives spawned by these unsound narrators call into question the nature and purpose of any narrative analysis. After all, most narratives are but fictions to readers anyway - that the fiction derives from a narrator within the text rather than just a writer from the reader's level should not preclude a study of the narrative's structure and sources. Perhaps *Turn of the Screw* is an experiment in stacking writerly texts - from James to the original anonymous narrator at the party to Douglas' manuscript to finally the unnamed governess - and a Barthesian analysis must delve into the many-

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layered network of connotations, allusions and historical references used by these multiple sources. In the eighth chapter of James' story, the presence of all five Barthesian codes is clearly evident in the text but becomes increasingly obscured as the reader begins to interpret the subtle warnings that the text may be poisoned with insanity, leaving it unreliable. James manipulates the hermeneutic code in this chapter (and others) to strain towards a small climax, as if the chapters form individual narratives, while continually building to the grand apex of Miles' death at the end of the inclusive narrative. As chapter eight draws to a close and the governess finds that Miles lied about his relations with Peter Quint, both the chapter and the governess are "wound up." Some similar form of twisting, winding, or turning takes place in each chapter, tightening the screw, deepening the reader's involvement in the sordid tale. At the end, the frustrations from the mystery explode from their coils, the governess snaps into murder, and the reader becomes trapped on the zenith of confusion. Throughout this chapter, James employs several tactics to create "a powerful enigma...so that, provided certain precautions are taken, the more signs there are, the more the truth will be obscured, the harder one will try to figure it out" (62). We are ensnared in the governess' repeated assurances that she "should get used to [her] danger" when we know she is still obsessed, and her claims that her suspicions made her only "guilty of a cynicism" rather than something more sinister. Miles is an "imperturbable little prodigy of delightful, lovable goodness" at the beginning of the chapter, belying the governess' suspicion of him by the end. The governess is shown retreating gradually into her zealous belief in the ghosts, raising fewer and fewer questions about her visions as the text progresses but remaining just

skeptical enough until the end of all action so that the narrative's conclusion is more a culmination of tensions than a downward slope. However, the purpose of the hermeneutic code, which is meant to draw out "the expectation and desire for [the] imminent closure" of an "incomplete subject," may actually be ineffective in *Turn of the Screw*, where the structure of snares, partial answers, equivocations, etc. is identified as an illusion and shattered, not resolved, where the finalization of the "incomplete subject" would normally be placed (76). Where we expected the conclusion of a ghost mystery, we instead find the beginnings of an insanity investigation. It is difficult to accept a disclosure from a figure who may be mad. Connotations suggesting that the governess may not be a dependable guide to the narrative are scattered across the text, with Mrs. Grose wishing to "sink the whole subject" but not offering any explanation as to why. Ironically, all the governess' musings and plottings, which seemingly dominate the story, may just be a feint distracting us from the true narrative: the stripping of her charade of sanity. However, because the governess is the narrator for this chapter, she controls everything about the text and story and heavily influences the reader's opinion. Even the observed actions of the proairetic code, the "voice of empirics" - which should provide the most irrefutable record of motion in a narrative - is subject to her machinations (21). Anything described by a narrator who is not omniscient and has her own incentives and pressures should not be assumed to be a complete documentation of events. When the governess claims that she and Mrs. Grose "were of a common mind" or that Flora's "greater intensity of play" is a "portentous little activity by which she sought to divert [the governess'] attention," there is a strong likelihood that the governess is

actually inventing these moments. The proairetic code in this narrative faces the threat of being dissolved into nonexistence; this reneging on the "illusion of continuity" required from actions thus causes *Turn of the Screw* to become what Barthes called "a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, or readerliness" because the characters may "stay somewhere without having arrived...travel without having departed" (105). The similarities of the remaining three codes cause James' peculiar narrative to incorporate them all in roughly the same manner. A textually-based version of *Turn of Screw* following the governess' descriptions creates, contributes to and relies on an entirely different network of symbolic, semic and cultural codes than another version focusing on the text as a guide to the governess' psyche. In the former, more reader-friendly adaptation, the dominant symbolic themes, sprung from the governess' struggle to protect the children, battle the ghosts, and convince Mrs. Grose, are undoubtedly tied to the supernatural as well as to the extremes of faith. However, in the more writerly, interpretative account, the inherent suspicion of the narrator/governess' authority over the text and plot causes the symbolic code to highlight cases of rampant but underdeveloped sexuality and the hallucinations it breeds. In a single paragraph in chapter eight, evidence of this split symbolic code is extensive: the governess describes her confidence in Mrs. Grose as an "outbreak," then, "in [her] delusion," is "plunged afresh" into her duties and "inconceivable communion" with the children despite her clear "agitation." Likewise, the semic and cultural codes both exist in this bipolar disjunction in *Turn of the Screw*, leaving readers unsure which of the narrative's multiple narrators is injecting their personal meaning into the continually fluctuating complex of associations, or to which version of the story that complex should

be directed. While *Turn of the Screw* as a story may represent the governess' self-constructed mythology of sexual abuse and hauntings, the text itself is too twisted and based in psychology to be understood through the "bare bones" format of a straightforward Proppian folktale, which is rooted primarily in the equivalent of the Barthesian hermeneutic and proairetic codes. No amount of identifying the governess' actions in "calling for help" and then participating in an "interrogation" with the donor, Mrs. Grose can shed light on the governess' self-righteous desperation and her dubious convictions. However, even the actions mapped by Propp's code are difficult to classify. If the ghosts and the children's collusion with them is, in fact, a fragment of the governess' mind, then does the narrative line follow the events of her descent into and final realization of madness, or does it simply record the events of her imaginary world? Depending on the chosen interpretation, the governess could be "receiving information about the villain(s)" or "mechanically falling victim to the influence of a magical agent" - her confused mind. Furthermore, in a work where every character has an agenda and pursues it through many layers of sanity, it is difficult to identify a single hero or villain. The governess is no Frodo-Baggins, with "heroine" practically branded into her identity. It is unclear if she "expels the villain" by purging Peter Quint from Miles' soul, or whether she is, in fact, the villain attempting to (and succeeding in) "destroying the hero." Propp's plan clearly does not apply well to tragedy and, like Barthes' analysis, is ill-suited to purely psychological texts. Despite the inadequacies of both methods, each raises the question of what should be considered truth or reality, and what a narrative can offer that is worthy of analysis. The

value of a text seems to not be in its reflection of something formerly authentic, but rather in its ability to strike a communal nerve within readers.