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## TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Types of ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry  
James

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## ABSTRACT

*The Turn of the Screw* is one of the most important stories with a supernatural theme of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one of the most well-known works of Henry James. Most of its popularity comes from how the reader is engaged with the narration and the uncertainty of whether the information that he or she is getting from the narrator is true or not. The following paper will focus on the different ambiguity techniques that Henry James used in *The Turn of the Screw* and what interpretations we can get from those distorted meanings.

Key words: ambiguity, gothic fiction, ghostly, Romanticism

*The Turn of the Screw* es una de las historias con temática supernatural más importantes del siglo XIX y una de las más famosas dentro de las obras de Henry James. Su popularidad se debe mayormente a cómo el lector disfruta de la narración sin saber a ciencia cierta si la información que recibe por parte del narrador es real o no. El siguiente trabajo se centrará en las diferentes técnicas que usa Henry James en *The Turn of the Screw* respecto a la ambigüedad y las interpretaciones que podemos extraer de esos significados confusos.

Plabras clave: ambigüedad, ficción gótica, fantasmagórico, Romanticismo

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the different kinds of ambiguity that William Empson classifies in one of Henry James' most famous ghost stories *The Turn of the Screw* and how these affect the reading. Empson identifies seven different types of ambiguity in poetry and drama, but can that division be made in prose narratives? The hypothesis that governs this paper is the possibility that every different type of ambiguity presented in Empson's work may not be so efficiently applied in a short story such as *The Turn of the Screw* as it does in poetry or drama, although there are other types which Empson does not include, such as the informational gaps and contradictions, which would be also taken into account in this paper, but would not be the central core of it.

What drove me to choose this topic was my interest in literature and how some works play with the reader, allowing them to have different interpretations of what is written. As Romantic Gothic works are my favourite, I decided to choose Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* because of the multiple interpretations that the story has due to the many open questions it leaves by using ambiguity.

First of all, in order to make the analysis of the text, we have to know what ambiguity is. This is the first problem we encounter in this paper because 'ambiguity' is a difficult term to define. Looking for the term in the Cambridge Online English Dictionary we get the following results:

- (an example of) the fact of something having more than one possible meaning and therefore possibly causing confusion.
- a situation or statement that is unclear because it can be understood in more than one way.

However, in this same dictionary, we find an additional option for ambiguity that is used in literature and which is mentioned as 'intentional ambiguity'; this is defined as "the use of language or images to suggest more than one meaning at the same time, especially in a poem." (Cambridge English Dictionary). This tells us that inside literature, ambiguity is mostly used in poetry, so this will be the starting point in order to identify how ambiguity is applied to a text and how this can influence the reader.

## 2. QUESTION STATEMENT

A lot has been written about *The Turn of the Screw* and the different interpretations that can be taken from it. Some of the books I used which address this specific topic are Peter Beidler's *Ghosts, Demons, and Henry James: The Turn of the Century*, *Tales of Henry James: The Text of the Tales, the Author on his Craft, Criticism* by Henry James, Christof Wegelin, and Henry B. Wonham, Tonny Tanner's *Henry James: The Writer and His Work*. Moreover, there are some articles like "Ghostly Ambiguity: Presuppositional Constructions in 'the Turn of the Screw'" by Helen Aristar Dry and Susan Kucinkas, "Possible-word Semantics, Frame Text, Insert Text, and Unreliable Narration: The Case of 'the Turn of the Screw'" by José Antonio Álvarez Amorós, or Alexandre Jones' article "Point of View in the Turn of the Screw" which also address ambiguity in Henry James' elected work.

All the mentioned works provide an analysis on how the ambiguity presented is interpreted, the different versions that the reader might get, and in basic terms how that is achieved— be it with the role of the unreliable narrator or with the absence of information. However, I did not find a work as such providing an analysis of the different types of ambiguity that can be found in the story, so basing the central core of my paper on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and with the secondary help of the books and articles mentioned above, I try to figure out if my hypothesis can be proved right.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology that has been followed has been based on Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1973) as the core of the research; I will use a verbal analysis as the method to identify textual ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. First of all I will extract a corpus with the main examples where ambiguity can be see clearly in the text; these examples are extracts of several lines and not just the isolated sentence, so a brief, but enough, context would be given to support the comments that come after the cited examples. These commentaries will be made in order to explain why those selected pieces have some kind of ambiguity, how it is identified, and why it is problematic for the reader.

## 4. HENRY JAMES

### 4.1. Biography

Henry James was born in 1843 and died in 1916. Although he was born and raised in New York, he finally moved to Europe acquiring in 1915 the British citizenship. He was an American-English 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries novelist, critic and essayist, but he has more recognition now than he had when he was alive (Henry James – Biography, Books and Facts).

As a child he was very influenced by his father, Henry James Sr., who was an important intellectual man at the time. He had several siblings who also were intellectually successful, like his brother William, who became an important philosopher, or his sister Alice, who was a diarist (Henry James – Biography, Books and Facts). Moreover, his greatest influences were important authors such as Hawthorne, Dickens and Balzac; but he also established a relation with other contemporary authors like Robert Browning, Emile Zola or Tennyson (Henry James – Biography and Works).

When he was a child, he visited Europe with his family and he was taught by tutors at different significant cities of the continent. When he was older, he was going to study law at Harvard Law School, but eventually he acknowledged that he wanted to study literature, so he dropped his law studies. He had very clear that his dream was to become a playwright, but the plays that he wrote were not as successful as his novels (Henry James – Biography, Books and Facts). His life was marked by the events of the American Civil War and the First World War (Tambling 5).

The year of his death, Henry James was awarded by King George V the Order of Merit for his works. When he died, he was incinerated and his ashes were placed back in the United States, in Massachusetts at the Cambridge Cemetery; he was considered a “Citizen of Two Countries, Interpreter of His Generation On Both Sides Of The Sea” (Henry James – Biography and Works). Besides, he also got a memorial stone in the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey in London in 1976 (Henry James – Biography and Works).

## 4.2. Works and style

Henry James is regarded as one of the best American writers of short stories of all times together with Poe -who was the creator of this genre- and Hawthorne. He is also considered the “first poetic realist of prose” (James, Wegelin and Wonham 424). Henry James’ total set of works includes 22 novels, around a hundred short stories, autobiographies, plays and critical essays (Henry James – Biography and Works). In all his works can be noticed a European influence due to his travels to the continent when he was younger, but also this might be due to the fact that he left New York and moved to Europe when he was a young man (Henry James – Biography and Works). He was considered “the American writer who is not American” because in some way he lost contact with his origins (Tambling 3).

Most of his novels deal with the psychological development of the characters, personal freedom and morality (Henry James – Biography and Works), meaning that the characters have their own points of view; they have their own “centers of consciousness” (James, Wegelin and Wonham 375). His most famous works might be *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Daisy Miller*, but he also has other great works like *The Ambassadors* or *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James – Biography and Works).

When talking about writing, Henry James used painting terms as metaphors (James, Wegelin and Wonham 373). For example, he said that the writer of fiction could choose to “treat a subject as a picture or a scene”; with this he meant that a picture is descriptive and internal, whereas a scene is dramatic with dialogues. He thought that the pictorial attitude was more indicated for the *nouvelle*, but in the case of *The Turn of the Screw* –the center of this paper- a mix of both styles can be seen (James, Wegelin and Wonham 374).

One of the most interesting categories of James’ short stories is the “ghostly” or “quasi-supernatural”, which is concerned with the psychological part of the character - as it has been mentioned before- and most importantly, the part dealing with obsession (James, Wegelin and Wonham 425). Besides the *Turn of the Screw*, James also wrote other short stories that fall into this category, like *The Altar of the Dead*, *The Friends of the Friends*, *The Great Good Place*, *The Real Right Thing*, or *Jolly Corner* (James, Wegelin and Wonham 425).



He also wrote some works on critical theory on writers like Flaubert, George Eliot, Balzac, and Hawthorne, but his most important critical essay is *The Art of Fiction*, which was published in 1884; this work supposed a turning point on the theory of the novel. In *The Art of Fiction* he said that reality is an experience that is not limited or complete; reality is just composed by light hints of life (Tanner 72).

The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire. – James quote (Tanner 23).

Tanner divides stories into two sections: stories as idealistic stories and characters versus realism or analysis. With this division, he addresses James' stories as studies; he bases this theory on the idea that the analysis is actually the story (Tanner 5); James' stories are considered "too subtle, too psychological, too analytical, for the purpose of fiction" (Tanner 6). This idea is supported by the fact that his writing is very difficult technically; most of his stories –specially the 'ghostly' ones- have a certain degree of ambiguity that makes it more difficult for the reader to notice everything that actually happens in them (Tambling 2).

Henry James' very first novel was *Watch and Ward*, written in 1870; in Paris he wrote *The American* in 1875-76. He is also considered a "citizen of literature itself" (Tanner 9); this way of addressing him might be due to the fact that he spent so many years in Europe, but also he was also influenced by American authors like Poe and Hawthorne. When he settled in London, he learnt "the art of fiction" from European writers (Tanner 8), especially from French fiction (Tanner 4). Most of the critics on Henry James have divided his works in three phases; *Portrait of a Lady*, written in 1881, is maybe his great novelistic achievement of his 1<sup>st</sup> period -the developing phase of his own style-; although this belongs to the first period, it is in the third phase where most of his novels belong to (Tanner 9).

*A Passionate Pilgrim* is the best example of the most recurrent problem in James' works: he tries to fix the balance between perception and illusion (Tanner 11); *De Grey: A Romance* has a Hawthornesque style. "We prefer not to envisage the possibility of hidden atrocity under the smooth social surface, but for James it was a

perpetual possibility – one for which he developed his art, in order to explore it more fully.” (Tanner 12). *Watch and Ward* is taken as the best example of an analytical work from all his repertoire (Tanner 13).

Happy endings are not common in Henry James’ works; there are complexities in the relations between both sexes. Instead, he uses a lot the “figure of the loyal and devoted sufferer” who has an “interior emotional ratiocination” (Tanner 15). *Roderick Hudson* explores the different kind of problems that an American artist may experience. Besides, he also includes the dramatic feeling of the observer’s consciousness; this last aspect is crucial in his works (Tanner 16). James rebels against the well-made ending popular novel leaving his novels as if they were unfinished (Tanner 4). *The American* written in 1887 is one of his simpler works (Tanner 20).

After the death of his parents, he moved to London and there he wrote serious social novels in the naturalistic mode of the time. The best ones that fall into this category are *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, written in 1886, and *The Tragic Muse*, written in 1890. All of them were considered a failure by the public, so he tried to write something different. James started to write drama, but it was also a great failure, so he moved to fiction again, but to a different kind of one. He started to write experimental fiction and moved into the idea of the ghost story, writing in 1898 his most famous work of this category, *The Turn of the Screw* (Tanner 51).

*The Aspern Papers*, published in 1888, is also one of his best known ghost stories; it is written with a first person narrator. How do the readers take what he tells them? Basically what Henry James does is applying Browning’s dramatic monologue technique: self-exoneration. This is what makes the reading problematic due to the amount of ambiguity that surrounds the work and the subjectivity with which it is told (Tanner 76), as well as it happens in *The Turn of the Screw*.

## 5. THE TURN OF THE SCREW

For T. J. Lustig, *The Turn of The Screw* is considered one of the most evil stories ever written in literature (James and Lustig vii). “‘The Turn of the Screw’ has an intensity and a power to disturb which makes it at least equal of Works like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde -1886-, The Picture of Dorian Gray -1891-, Dracula -1897-, and Heart of Darkness -1899-” (James and Lustig viii).

The first influence that can be found comes from the gothic tradition; this characteristic is that of centering the narration on a group of people who gathers and tells each other stories to entertain themselves— very much as how *Frankenstein* was born. *The Turn of the Screw* is an autobiographical text written by a governess whose name we are not given. It resembles to *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer, where pilgrims would tell each one a story during the pilgrimage, and the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, where people are staying a period of time in a house and they tell stories for ten days (Tambling 96). But the actual narration of events, those told by the writings of the governess, and which we are interested in, has its center on an old house to which we have to add the concern with struggles of possession and dispossession of the truth and the children (Tanner 91).

Peter Beidler supports the idea that there might be two different interpretations of the same text. Apparently in both versions there is formally nothing different, both have the same text written and were published in the same way; they are even inside the same text. But how can this be possible? The truth is that depending on how the text is written, the reader might get some kind of information or another. This is what happens in *The Turn of the Screw*. One of the readings is a ghost story itself, but the other is an analysis of the psychological attitude of the governess focusing on the idea that she is mad (Beidler 1).

Both readings present a young governess who arrives at Bly to get care of two little children, Miles and Flora; but the intentions are different. In Beidler’s *Ghosts, Demons and Henry James*, the summary that we get of the first reading is the following one: the governess is received by Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, and everything seems to be perfect, but as time passes by, the governess begins to notice two strange figures of people she does not identify as the people working at Bly. When she tells Mrs. Grose about them, she confesses that they might be Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, but the housekeeper tells the governess that both had died some time ago and that during the

time they were working there, there was something suspicious between them. In the end, the governess reaches the conclusion that those two strangers are two spirits that are trying to corrupt Miles and Flora (Beidler 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

The second interpretation that is given in Beidler's work is that ever since the beginning, the governess is controlled by her feelings for the children's handsome uncle, and these feelings would only deteriorate her mind more and more throughout the story. However, everything starts to get out of control when on her first night at Bly, the governess hears footsteps and other kind of noises outside her room, which might be the first allusion to her madness. Moreover, this mental instability gets more severe when Miles' school letter arrives; the information why Miles cannot attend school next semester is not revealed, but she thinks that is because he must have harmed other children there. In her state of mental exhaustion, she thinks that she sees ghosts. This perturbation of the mind is thought to be the cause of seizures she suffers from her tired state and paranoia. At a point of the narrative, the governess starts to become overprotective with the children until the point that she suspects that they are consciously showing hostility towards her and are actively trying to hide away their own aims with the spirits (Beidler 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).

The governess has a literary background with references to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, or Jane Austen's *Jane Eyre* view of the maid finally married to the master; with this idea of the perfect ending love story, there is an opinion that the governess might be obsessed with the uncle and children and goes to the extreme in order to carry out her possessiveness in order to please the uncle (Tanner 94). This leads us to the second main influence that James reflects in the story. As it has been already mentioned, James was a big fan of Hawthorne's works, and as Leland Person explains in *The Cambridge introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, "Hawthorne's fiction is marked by psychological and moral ambiguity and whose plots feature a 'return of the repressed'" (Leland 117). This explains the amount of ambiguity that James uses in his work and also the interpretations that say that the governess is sexually repressed, relating it to different Freudian theories of the self.

To end with the main influences that this ghost story has, we get to the third main one. This one has also something in common with Nathaniel Hawthorne's work and it is the Lacanian paradigm. As Person explains, many critics see this theory in his writings and James' work has been compared to it. This theory consists on the idea that a person creates its own identity by the reflection that they sees in a mirror. Somebody who

would not recognize themselves in a mirror does not accept that image presented in the mirror as a projection of themselves (Vanheule and Verhaeghe). An example of this reflection in a written text would be the connection that there is between the letter and the identity, as it happens in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and in James' *The Turn of the Screw*. The following quote is from Juliet McMaster about the full image of a repetition related to the mirror reflection.

“The pane of glass between the human mind and the apparition becomes a focus for the total and deliberate ambiguity in the tale. We may take our own choice as to which side of the pane we want to be: with the governess, looking outwards at the baleful stalking ghosts, or on the other side, looking inwards at her and the working of a diseased imagination. Or alternatively, in another operation of the image, we may think of the glass either as a transparent medium through which real ghosts can be seen, or as a mirror in which the governess sees, essentially, only her own reflection.”

(Bloom 128)

There is also some sort of connection between *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Scarlet Letter*; in this case the reflection has to do with Miles, Flora, and Pearl. These children show a type of behavior that is somehow strange; they act and talk in a way that is more natural for an adult. Their knowledge goes beyond the expectations of the adults who look after them. The image they project is a mix of malevolence and innocence.

*The Turn of the Screw* is also considered to be one of Henry James' strangest, most perplexing, and haunting stories. According to Tanner, due to the amount of ambiguity it has, this story is “a trap for the unwary” (Tanner 93). Miles and Flora are the children the governess has to take care of without ever disturbing their uncle. She thinks they are pure love, innocent and behave like angels; but with the apparition of the two ghosts, later identified as Quint, a former servant, and Miss Jessel, the former governess. The governess has the hypothesis that they have returned to take the children away and that they have corrupted them (James and Lustig xii). She pressures the children to confess in some way if they ever had any contact with ‘the spirits’ because she feels the need of being their savior (Tanner 93).

The main themes surrounding the story are spoiled childhood and contaminated innocence, all under the eyes of the governess (Tanner 51), although signs of anxiety and hysteria can be also found in *The Turn of The Screw* (Tambling 94) regarding the governess. This gets us to the following dilemma: can we as readers accept the governess' interpretation of events? This question is very important because the reader gets a subjective narration of events. Following Edward Wilson's point of view in *The Ambiguity of Henry James* (1934) that the governess is a neurotic being and suffers from

sexual repression, that the ‘ghosts’ are part from her hallucinations, and that she is indeed the one who caused Miles’ death, the reader cannot trust her telling of the events (James and Lustig xii and xiii). However, there is no absolute clear evidence that the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are a product of the governess’ mind; indeed, Heilman defended that both children were corrupted by the ghosts (James and Lustig xiii).

If we look inside the story for an explanation or a hint supporting one version or the other, we find the following:

At the beginning of ‘The Turn of the Screw’ Douglas, who introduces the story, deflects suggestions that the governess is motivated either by fear or desire, gently discouraging explanations in terms either of apparitions or hallucinations. ‘The story *won’t* tell,’ he informs his audience, ‘not in any literal vulgar way.’ Yet, perhaps understandably, much of the criticism of ‘The Turn of the Screw’ has been devoted to making the story tell.

(James and Lustig xiv)

This, together with the idea that the governess might not be a reliable narrator, makes the reader more confused and in need to know if what he or she is reading, might be one thing or the other. But this is what ambiguity does, it confuses the reader; as there is nothing that proves the reliability of the governess words, the reader has to admit that “perhaps *nothing* the governess says is true” (James and Lustig xv).

In *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*, Lustig mentions that Shlomith Rimmon came with the idea that the central story had “a central informational gap”. This has a connection with how ambiguity works with Hemingway’s iceberg principle where less is more. In the case of ambiguity, the author, who has all the events planned with all the information, creates gaps by omitting crucial information so the reader cannot get the whole set of information and tries to decipher the true message. In the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, as Christine Brooke-Rose said, “no apparition is narrated *whole*”, in other words, the governess breaks the continuity of her narration (James and Lustig xvi).

When the governess envisages herself as ‘a screen’ between the children and the ghosts...she seems quite literally to inhabit a borderland between the light and the dark. On other occasions she is ‘possessed’ by a ‘portentous clearness’, ‘held’ by a ‘thought’, and ‘harassed’ by her ‘conclusions’. These would usually be perfectly ordinary figures of speech but in ‘The Turn of the Screw’ the dead metaphors spring to life. Repeatedly unable to remember or express experiences, the governess resorts to strangely fused sensory formulations. The governess actively fills in the blanks, manipulating patterns in accordance with her design. Her design may be consistent but her arguments are less than straight. When Flora denies seeing anything out of the window the governess ‘absolutely believed she lied’. Discovering the child again gazing into the night, she now becomes convinced that Flora ‘saw-as she had not, I had satisfied myself, the previous time’. The

governess revises her interpretation yet again when she sees Miles and not Miss Jessel on the lawn.

(James and Lustig xx and xxi)

In the following point, I am going to describe the different types of ambiguity classified by William Empson and try to apply them in an analysis of how ambiguity works in *The Turn of the Screw* including a selection of examples.

### 5.1. Different types of ambiguity according to William Empson

William Empson in his work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* gives two definitions of ambiguity. The first one that he gives is that ambiguity is “a puzzle as to what the author meant”; to this definition he adds that somebody, even if it is not the individual person who is reading the ambiguous text at that moment, has to be puzzled. Ambiguity can be found in something that can have a double meaning, but this can also be used when making reference to irony, although in this last case ambiguity is more difficult to detect. (Empson 19)

However, in the second definition that Empson gives for ambiguity, he says that it is “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language”. (Empson 19) Once we have a general idea of what ambiguity is we start to understand that it is a complex phenomenon because it cannot be defined so easily; besides, most of the times, it cannot be also identified as easily as we might think.

The explanations and examples that Empson gives in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* are related mainly to poetry, but we are going to see if it can also be applied to the short story *The Turn of the Screw* as well. In his book, as the title indicates, Empson presents to the reader seven different options of ambiguity. In this section I will show the most important elements of each type and in the next point I will classify the different examples I took from *The Turn of the Screw* according to these types, although I will not provide examples taken from Empson’s work because as they are taken from poetry and drama, what is useful for the analysis is the concepts and explanations that he uses and not the examples themselves.

### 5.1.1. Type one

The first type is the most difficult one due to the use of metaphors. The reader gives the meaning of words for granted, but when a different type of word is used, they come to the realization of it (Empson 22-23). This happens for example when trying to translate a word into another language and that target language does not compile the full meaning of the original word.

Ambiguity also means that several meanings were meant to be said, or that there is indecision on what somebody has said (Empson 24). This first type is supported by the Paget theory, which is the idea that the sound of words also has something to do when noticing their meaning (Empson 33). In other words, this means that there are ambiguities in the fundamental symbolism of the sound (Empson 34). As it has been said before, these techniques are more commonly used in poetry because there is a restriction to say things and it is not frequent to use colloquial expressions; they sound forced in some way, so the reader has to look for different ways they can say it in everyday English in order to find the actual meaning.

With the Victorians it was common to use italics to show a word off, to drag attention to the reader; this method can be seen in *The Turn of the Screw* with some of the pronouns written in italics—as it is the case of the edition that has been used for this paper—or in capital letters for the reader to question who the narrator is referring to. This option is not a good one because if the sentence is well structured and accentuated, in poetry for example, it can catch the reader's attention as well as if it would have been in italics.

### 5.1.2. Type two

In the second type there are three possible cases in which ambiguity may happen: depending on the degree of grammatical or logical disorder (this is considered to be most simple, although it has its complexity because it mostly depends on punctuation), the degree in which the apprehension of ambiguity must be conscious (this means when two or more meanings are involved in a single one), and the degree of psychological complexity (Empson 69).

In the grammatical or logical disorder there is usually just one metaphor, but in the apprehension of ambiguity several metaphors are used at the same time, for example. The difficulty that is found in this kind of reading is that the examples that Empson uses are taken from poetry or drama, where the speeches are more condensed due to their form than in prose as we can find it nowadays.



The technique that is used in this second type is the ambiguous participle (Empson 100), or also known as the “blurring of the grammar” (Empson 101). This technique can make some of the words stand out naturally without making use of italics or unnecessary explanations. It also may be due to the so called nature of some words, which we might not really know if it is from the context or their position in the sentence, they can be, for example, a verb or a participle. This is kind of rare in narrative writing, whereas in poetry it can be trickier due to the compression of the sentences.

#### 5.1.3. Type three

The third type makes reference to ‘two ideas that are connected simultaneously in the text and that are given by one word’ (Empson 127); or it can also be the antithesis between two words, for example ‘marvelous beast’ – the idea that the reader might get from the word ‘beast’ might not be connected to a beast being marvelous; for beast has negative connotations whereas marvelous has positive. This is used when an allegory has several ways of interpretation (Empson 137). According to Empson, this type of ambiguity is very difficult to tell apart from the first type ambiguity because they are very similar (Empson 139). As a curiosity, this kind of ambiguity was very popular at the Elizabethan times, but due to its difficulty it has been used less and less (Empson 151).

#### 5.1.4. Type four

The fourth type can be distinguished “when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author” (Empson 160). Empson uses the word ‘tender’ as an example where there are two different meanings of a word; the first meaning can be that of the legal sphere meaning debt, or the second one, which is that of taking care of a person (Empson 162). Although this type of ambiguity might be provoked by the word itself, it can also be produced by the bad timing in punctuation (Empson 164). In English, whether we accentuate some words more than others could be crucial to the understanding of the sentence, so sometimes we have to be careful and look for the different interpretations when reading something ambiguous in order to find it (Empson 176).

#### 5.1.5. Type five

Regarding the fifth type, Empson says the following: “when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing,..., there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly, but lies half-way between two things when the author is moving from one to the other.” (Empson 184). It means that when the author is describing something, he or she uses a simile at some point of the act of writing and leaves the reader the sense that what he or she is reading is unfinished. This confusion is what brings the ambiguity to the text.

#### 5.1.6. Types six and seven

Finally I will address the sixth and seventh types together because they are very much related (Empson 224). The sixth one appears when “a statement says nothing” (Empson 207); it is an ambiguity caused by contradiction (Empson 209). However, this kind of ambiguity can also be achieved with another device, and that is asking a question which can be answered both yes and no (Empson 214).

In the case of the seventh type, Empson says that it “occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer’s mind.” (Empson 225). The method is more or less the same as the one before, in both cases the ambiguity is achieved by a contradiction; but in this last type the meanings are clear in the text, whereas in type number six the statement can mean nothing to the reader.

### 5.2. Classification

The following examples are taken from *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories* (2008) by Henry James and T.J. Lustig. They are presented as quotes and after each one there is an explanation of why those fragments include a certain type of ambiguity. In this point there will not be a certain classification of the types of ambiguity as has been done in the previous point 5.1. because some of the excerpts taken include more than one type; however, there is an extra division inside this classification that includes other types of ambiguity which are not present in Empson’s analysis.

### 5.2.1. According to Empson's classification

"I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong. After raising, in town, to meet his appeal I had at all events a couple of very bad days – found all my doubts bristle again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake." (James and Lustig 123)

These are the first lines of the governess' record; here the ambiguity has to do with 'his appeal'. There is no back or forward reference to which person is the governess talking about. This lack of reference is included in the second type of ambiguity: grammatical disorder.

"I felt within half an hour that she was so glad – stout simple plain clean wholesome woman- as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much. I wondered even then a little why she should wish *not* to show it, and that, with reflexion, with suspicion, might of course have made me uneasy." (James and Lustig 124)

Here the governess is talking about her first meeting with Mrs Grose. The first thing that catches our attention is that '*not*' which is written in italics. The first thought that we might get from reading this extract can be that Mrs Grose is a modest woman that does not want to get too much attention. But with the governess' thought on why she does '*not* want to show it', drawing special attention to that '*not*', makes us think twice on her intentions and that she could be suspicious of something. This type of ambiguity belongs to the first type of ambiguity due to the use of italics to outstand the word and also to the second type mentioned in the last point due to the degree of psychological complexity it contains.

"In spite of this timidity – which the child herself, in the oddest way in the world, had been perfectly frank and brave about, allowing it, without a sign of uncomfortable consciousness, with the deep sweet serenity indeed of one Raphael's holy infants, to be discussed, to be imputed to her and to determine us – I felt quite sure she would presently like me." (James and Lustig 125)

In this extract the governess has now met Flora, one of the children, and is describing her. Here there is no ambiguity in its pure concept, but we might get it because of the extremely long description that is inside the main sentence. This distracts the reader, having to go back to the start of the sentence and finish it correctly in order to get the information in the right way. This sort of ambiguity is inside the type number five.

“What I felt the next day was, I suppose, nothing that could be fairly called a reaction from the cheer of my arrival; it was probably at the most only a slight oppression produced by a fuller measure of the scale, as I walked round them, gazed up at them, took them in, of my new circumstances. They had, as it were, an extent and mass for which I had not been prepared and in the presence of which I found myself, freshly, a little scared not less than a little proud.” (James and Lustig 126)

Here we find again the lack of reference (type number two), but here it is repeated over and over again. We do not have a clear reference of who ‘they’ are, but due to the circumstances we can guess that the governess is making reference to the people at Bly, but we cannot be sure enough; here is where the ambiguity takes place.

“She held me there a moment, then whisked up her apron again with her detached hand. ‘Would you mind, Miss, if I used the freedom—’  
‘To kiss me? No!’ I took the good creature in my arms and after we had embraced like sisters felt still more fortified and indignant.” (James and Lustig 133)

Here we find a contradiction of how the governess feels after meeting Miles and talking to the housekeeper about what she has decided to do with Miles’ school letter. She feels both ‘fortified and indignant’; we do not know if this is because of how she reacted at first with the letter or if it has to do with the fact that she sees the child as an angelic and pure figure and she sees herself not worthy of such pureness. This excerpt might be classified inside the third type of ambiguity due to the possible contradiction of the elements ‘fortified and indignant’.

“We expect of a small child scant enough ‘antecedents’, but there was in this beautiful little boy something extraordinarily sensitive, yet extraordinarily happy, that, more than in any creature of his age I have seen, struck me as beginning anew each day. He had never for a second suffered. I took this as a direct disproof of his having really been chastised. If he had been wicked he would have ‘caught’ it, and I should have caught it by the rebound---I should have found the trace, should have felt the wound and the dishonour.” (James and Lustig 141)

In this example we find that the word ‘antecedents’ has been marked differently catching our attention. This might make reference to Miles having certain antecedents of having done something bad as children his age do; but it also can have the meaning of having a previous experience with the ghosts, which would have marked him in some way ‘catching’ the wickedness so the governess would have found it. This type of ambiguity is marked by the punctuation of words (type two) so the reader feels the urge to explore why certain words are written in that way.

“But with this joy of my children what things in the world mattered? That was the question I used to put to my scrappy retirements. I was dazzled by their loveliness.” (James and Lustig 141)

Here we have a double meaning ambiguity; ‘dazzled’ might get the meaning of something that is brilliant, so the governess would be surrounded by the brightness of the children’s loveliness, or rather meaning that she was blinded by how lovely they were and she could not see the truth behind it; she is being fooled. This double meaning in one word belong inside type number four.

“Coming downstairs to meet my colleague in the hall, I remembered a pair of gloves that had required three stitches and that had received them---with a publicity perhaps not edifying--- while I sat with the children at their tea, served on Sundays, by exception, in that cold clean temple of mahogany and brass, the ‘grown.up’ dining room.” (James and Lustig 141)

This is a great example on how long sentences work with ambiguity. In this case it is the length of the sentence itself what makes the reader be lost and go back to re-read the text so they can get the full information that is being given. This corresponds to the divagation ambiguity type that Empson refers to as type number five.

“He appeared thus again with I won’t say greater distinctness, for that was impossible, but with a nearness that represented a forward stride in our intercourse and made me, as I met him, catch my breath and turn cold.” (James and Lustig 142)

Maybe this is not one of the better examples to show the double meaning of words (type number four), but it is interesting how some words may vary depending on the context. Here the governess is talking about her second meeting with Peter Quint, their ‘intercourse’. This last word also means a sexual encounter, so examples as this one might be also the fundament to the critics who support the idea that the governess is sexually repressed and that sex (or lack thereof) is the centre of her madness.

“But it was in sight of nothing now---my visitor had vanished. I stopped, almost dropped, with the real relief of this; but I took in the whole scene---I gave him time to reappear.” (James and Lustig 142)

Here ‘vanished’ and ‘reappear’ are the centre points of ambiguity. They might give us the clue that, in the first place, Peter Quint is really a ghost and as such has ‘evaporated’ somehow and the governess is waiting for him to come back in his ghostly state or, on the other hand, that he has gone through the staircase and has hidden

somewhere –if we think that he is not a ghost but a human being. This excerpt might belong to the first type of ambiguity because it might involve some kind of metaphors which include the idea of the referent being a ‘human being’ or a ‘ghost’.

“I closed with her cordially on the article of the likelihood that with recurrence---for recurrence we took for granted--- I should get used to my danger; distinctly professing that my personal exposure had suddenly become the least of my discomforts.” (James and Lustig 161)

We have seen previously that the governess feels the need to save and take care of the children and here we find a reference to ‘danger’. In this extract the governess might think that she is in a dangerous position, that something is going to hurt her in some way, but it could also mean that she feels herself as some kind of danger towards Miles and Flora due to her protectiveness, as some critics support. The connection of two ideas connected in one word is included in type number three.

“‘You were looking fo me out of the window?’ Isaid. ‘You thought I might be walking in the grounds?’  
‘Well, you know, I thought someone was’--- she never blanched as she smiled out that at me.  
Oh how I looked at her now! ‘And did you see anyone?’  
‘Ah *no!*’ she returned almost (with the full privilege of childish in consequence) resentfully, though with a long sweetnes in her little drawl of the negative.” (James and Lustig 172)

The governess, seeing that Flora was out of bed and looking through the window, asks her if she has seen anything, thinking that maybe she might tell her that she has seen Miss Jessel or Peter Quint outside. When Flora answers, part of her speech is in italics (type number one); and therefore, ‘no’ is full of ambiguity. That ‘*no*’ could be an emphasis on Flora really not having seen anything, or she also could have said it with irony on it, which is where the ambiguity is more tricky, meaning that she truly has seen something out there confusing the governess.

“‘The trick’s played,’ I went on; ‘They’ve successfully worked their plan. He found the most divine little way to keep me quiet while she went off.’  
‘“Divine”?’ Mrs Grose bewilderedly echoed.  
‘Infernal then!’ I almost cheerfully rejoined. ‘He has provided for himself as well. But come!’” (James and Lustig 207)

This extract includes a contraposition of the terms ‘divine’ and ‘infernal’. Although they are not together defining something, as it would be ‘*infernally divine creature*’, for example, both make reference to Miles’ attitude when tricking the

governess to not pay attention to Flora so she could go outside. Those opposite terms conceive the idea that the children are lovely and angelic figures, but at the same time they have been wickedly influenced by the previous servant and governess, but also the governess could just be making reference to the naughtiness of a young child. The ambiguity lays in the interconnection of the words' ideas and the antithesis that comes when they are together, so this means that this belongs to the third type of ambiguity.

“‘It’s *he*?’

I was so determined to have all my proof that I flashed into ice to challenge him. ‘Whom do you mean by “*he*”?’

‘Peter Quint---you devil!’ His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. ‘*Where*?’

They are in my ears still, his supreme surrender of the name and his tribute to my devotion. ‘What does the matter now, my own’--- what will he *ever* matter? *I have you,*’ I launched at the beast, ‘but he has lost you for ever!’ Then for the demonstration of my work, ‘There, *there!*’ I said to Miles.” (James and Lustig 236)

In this case the element that is more ambiguous is not the combination of certain words in italics (type number one), but Miles’ exclamation ‘Peter Quint---you devil!’. As there is no real punctuation as a comma—the dividing line tells us that there is a pause—we do not know the referent of that ‘you’. The pronoun can be addressing Peter Quint or even the governess, which gets the excerpt inside the second type too and not just inside the first one with the use of italics.

### 5.2.2. Other cases of ambiguity

“‘You really compare me to a baby girl?’

This found me singularly weak. ‘Don’t you then *love* our sweet Flora?’

‘If I didn’t---and you too; if I didn’t---!’ he repeated as if retreating for a jump, yet leaving his thought so unfinished that, after we had come into the gate, another stop, which he imposed on me by the pressure of his arm, had become inevitable.” (James and Lustig 192)

This is an example on how the idea of the empty text works. Information is not given, not finished and so the reader has holes they need to fill but it is impossible to know. This happens in this Miles’ speech; he does not finish his answer to the governess’ question. As he leaves the answers unfinished, there is a lack of information which unables the reader to get the whole meaning that is being implied.

“‘Is he really *bad*?’

The tears were still in her eyes. ‘Do the gentlemen say so?’

‘They go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him. They can have but one meaning.’ Mrs Grose listened with dumb emotion; she forbore to ask me what this meaning might be; so that, presently, to put the thing with some

coherence and with the mere aid of her presence to my own mind, I went on: 'That he's an injury to the others.'" (James and Lustig 128 and 129)

The governess has received a letter that was directed to the children's uncle from the school Miles was attending. As we presume, Miles has been expelled from the school, but as the governess does not tell exactly what they say about the reason why Miles cannot go back to the school, we have that lack of information. Moreover, the governess creates her own ideas and gets to the conclusion that Miles might possibly have harmed others. The reader does not know that kind of information yet and has to fill in the blanks that this sort of ambiguity creates. This excerpt provides a type of ambiguity that lays on the information that is not given to the reader. The author is the one who knows all the information, and by taking out the pieces that he wants creates ambiguity.

“ ‘And these things came round---?’  
‘To the masters? Oh yes!’ he answered very simply. ‘But I didn’t know they’d tell.’  
‘The masters? They didn’t---they’ve never told. That’s why I ask you.’  
He turned to me again his little beautiful fevered face. ‘Yes, it was too bad.’  
‘Too bad?’  
‘What I suppose I sometimes said. To write home.’  
I can’t name the exquisite pathos of the contradiction given to such a speech by such a speaker; I only know that the next instant I heard myself throw off with homely force: ‘Stuff and nonsense!’ But the next after that I must have sounded stern enough. ‘What were these things?’” (James and Lustig 235)

In this excerpt we find the governess talking to Miles about the reason why he was expelled from school. There is not a clear reason why because there is no written evidence in the story of what was said in the letter that arrived to Bly. The governess is anxious to know what Miles did, and her frustration to know is transmitted to the reader.

The author is hiding information and plays with the reader. Although the governess asks Miles again about what things were said, he does not answer, so the reader has to fill in that gap and think of a version of the events.

“I cought him, yes, I held him---it may be imagines with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.” (James and Lustig 236)

How and why did Miles die? This is a question that the reader formulates at the end of the story. As the ambiguity here lies on the lack of information given by the author, there is no possible way of knowing the right answer to that question; the reader can only make suggestions and think about the blank spaces that the author leaves.



With this set of examples indicating that ambiguity lays on the lack of information, it can be affirmed that silence has a lot of power when guiding the reader through a set of events where crucial information is being omitted, leaving the readers to formulate their own suppositions of what happened.

## 6. CONCLUSION

After the analysis of the examples provided, we can conclude that in this type of narrative it has been difficult to identify each of the seven types of ambiguity that Empson provides in his work. Although most of them have been identified—as has been the case of types one, two, three, four, and five, the other two have been left out because there were no clear examples of them and there were also no examples of every subtype; for example, sound repetition in words has not been found inside the text, although there were some repetitions in order to give emphasis to an idea and not as just mere ambiguity.

The principal aim of this paper was to find what kind of ambiguity does *The Turn of the Screw* have. This implies how that affects the reading of the target audience and what methods are used in language to achieve that. In order to find this, the main source in which this paper has been based on is William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1973). The idea was if the same types could be found in a prose narrative short-story such as *The Turn of the Screw*.

*The Turn of the Screw* is a great writing which utilizes ambiguity in such a way that the reader cannot completely argue whether if one interpretation is right or wrong. Besides, the text itself does not contribute to one or another, so many ideas can be taken from the way the text is read. To support this thesis, Peter Biedler's *Ghosts, Demons, and Henry James* (1989) was used to capture the two main stories that could be interpreted from that one text.

After looking for the different analysis that authors like Biedler have made of this story, and the analysis of the different examples taken for this paper, the main conclusion that has been reached is that there is ambiguity or not in the text depending on the side that the reader is taking. The author might have or have not written a text with certain ambiguity in mind hoping that the readers would find it and understand it,

but it could also be that depending on how the text is formulated some people might not see the double meaning that has been camouflaged. This may be the case where the ambiguity lies on a word or set of words which have been delicately used to hide something else, or when those words do not outstand because they have not been written differently, as in the case of the use of italics as has been shown in this paper, where the reader's attention is dragged to those words looking for what makes them different or what they might mean.

Furthermore, in José Antonio Álvarez Amorós' article "Possible-world Semantics, Frame Text, Insert Text, and Unreliable Narration: The Case of "the Turn of the Screw" (1991), the ambiguity that can be found in Henry James' ghost story mainly deals with the unreliability of the narrator and how the informational gaps contribute to that idea. This thesis centres more in what is not being said rather than in what has been said and how that has been written—as has been said before in connection with the iceberg theory—although that would be an option to take into account for a further investigation.

To conclude, it is necessary to mention that the initial aim of the paper has been reached until the end and the hypothesis that all the types that Empson classifies could be found in the story has not been reached. Although five ambiguity types have been identified in Henry James' work, the final two have not been found; this might have happened because a further and deeper analysis has to be made, or because those types can only be positively used in poetry or drama. But it is also important to add that there are several ways of analysing ambiguity and that some other causes which may provoke ambiguity to appear can be the unreliability of the narrator due to its subjective telling of events and the information that the author omits on purpose for the reader to fill in the blanks by themselves.

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