

# Henry James's the Turn of the Screw: A Gothic Novella with a Modernist Twist

---

Davor Njegić

*University of Sarajevo/ Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

**Key words:** Henry James, Gothic, Modernism, narration, experimentation

## ABSTRACT

Henry James was a very prolific writer who tried his skill in writing about topics varying from the Gothic fiction to early Modernism, from fiction to essay. He was careful enough to make his own twist even when writing a story that could seemingly belong to the Gothic subgenre, as with his novella *The Turn of The Screw*. It has all the necessary Gothic elements, but its ambiguity and openness is rather a characteristic of Modernism than of a simple Gothic ghost story.

In this paper, I will analyze if this novella could be considered a Modernist type of writing and to what degree. Elements that convey the Gothic tradition are noted and discussed with the notion of James's own approach to the genre. James's narrative strategy in *The Turn of the Screw* serves the purpose of ambiguity, where the unreliable narrators are rather characteristics of Modernism than of the novels that convey the Gothic genre. In this sense, the importance of the narrative strategy and unreliable narrators are the major sub-topics of this paper. It will also be discussed to what extent these features contribute to Modernism, and abandon, or deviate, the Gothic subgenre.

This paper also explores the question of the narrator, especially the relation between the governess's manuscript and the unnamed narrator's retelling of Douglas's reading from her manuscript. James's use of various experimentations deviated from Gothic norms prove that he was Modernist in his approach to the story telling and the narrative technique. In addition, the reliability of the governess's narration is discussed through a Freudian reading.

Gothic conventions in the novella are closely observed in this paper. It is stressed that Gothic novels have some similarities with the traditional realist writing. Gothic prose is mostly based upon a riddle where the truth and resolution are delivered at the end, thus bringing the story to its end, whereas Modernist writing tends to end with open questions and ambiguity.