

## A “Charm” of Storytelling: Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*\*

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Ryu, Hyun-Ju. A “charm” of storytelling in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 69 (2018): 207-221. This study explores Henry James’s “charming job” in his novella gem, *The Turn of the Screw* in connection with frequently used words, “charm” and “charming” in the text. These words are used to describe characters’ feelings and thoughts about people (appearances and behaviors) and things (summer, stillness, news) in the novella. As the two “charming” children and their governess’s “charming” work cast a spell (“charm”) on her, James’s storytelling gets hold of readers “sufficiently breathless” like Douglas does with his audience. This research focuses on the two prevalent storytelling strategies that achieve the effects of triggering curiosity and building up suspense: storytelling delay and dramatic dialogues. These are James’s ingenuity that provides a ghastly atmosphere for the ghost story genre, which contributes to a great readership of the story in English literature over different generations via different media as well—movies, theatrical dramas and opera. (Busan University of Foreign Studies)

**Key words:** Henry James’s storytelling, charm(ing), word repetition, dramatic dialogues, a ghost story genre

### I

This research aims at exploring a charming storytelling in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)<sup>1</sup>. To describe it as ‘charming’ might

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *The Turn of the Screw* and from James’s own criticism of the text in this paper refer to Lee Sang-sup’s annotated and edited version, which will be cited respectively as ‘TOT’(the text) and ‘James’(criticism) for clarification. Otherwise, pages will be indicated only.

be subjective views of readers and researchers. It is true that the present research is initiated by such subjective thoughts. However, from a scholastic perspective, it is also noteworthy that James actually uses the words often, “charm” and “charming” in the text. This study attempts to find significant implications of the words’ usage. This approach is meaningful especially for the characteristics of James’s writings that require laborious readership because most of his writings “resist easy interpretation” (Hay 161).

The words, “charm” or “charming” have the meaning of “agreeable,” “good looks,” “beauty(beautiful)”, “handsome”, “wonderful” in the text. Considering charm(ing) is more often used than these equivalent words, it can be assumed that charm(ing) is James’s favorite word. The words are used twenty three times in the text and another four times in the preface to the New York edition (Bengels 252).

Charm(ing) denotes something/someone is appealing. The words, in fact, appeal and cast a spell on the prologue auditory and readers of the text together because the word appears frequently in the text. James seems to be no exception: He must be tremendously attracted to these words. He used the words every other page in the preface. This novella was first published as magazine installments in 1898 and was released again as a full novella in 1908 including James’s own critical comments on the story in the New York version. Despite of 10 years’ lapse and some changes in the version, the word still appeared several times even in the preface, to say nothing of the main text, which proves the author favored the words, charm(ing). In this context, the words, charm(ing) are charming themselves.

In the preface, he explained “a charming job” (James 269) of making a ghost story more attractive to readers with repetitive uses of the words. A successful ghost story is “good,” “really effective” and “heart-shaking” (262). *The Turn of the Screw* is the story of the governess possessed by

ghosts while fulfilling her job of taking care of the two children, Miles and Flora. James's comments on a charming storytelling echo the governess's thoughts about her job exactly with repetitive uses of the words: She thinks her responsibility as "a charming work" (77-8); "... so how could work not be charming that presented itself as daily beauty?" (78); She also dreams of possible romance with her master, so her job is "as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone" (69).

From James's perspective, it is a charming work to write a ghost story to horrify readers, and in turn, which is a charming source of the story for readers. The charm of this novella or what makes his literary work "so fine a germ" is "an exercise of the imagination" that can arouse readers' terrors (James 269). This paper's purpose is to address such James's ingenuity of storytelling in conjunction with the words, charm(ing).

With a traditional oral culture of storytelling in mind in the prologue scene, I preferably use the term, 'storytelling' instead of a generic critical terminology such as a narrative method or technique. *The Turn of the Screw* opens with a storytelling scene on Christmas Eve where attendees share ghost stories and the storyteller, Douglas tells the auditory party the governess's story in his turn. From Chapter 1 onward, the story is told from the governess's point of view in the form of dialogues, narration and description. Therefore, this research includes but is not limited to a narrated or described story. Rather the study will focus on how to tell a story to engage readers powerfully into their active imagination.

Firstly, I will examine how the words, charm(ing) are used with text examples, and then analyze them to identify the common elements of the usage; Secondly, I will discuss how they work as effects to make this story charming enough to possess readers steadfastly like ghosts.

## II

### 2.1. Examples of the Word Usage

In a ghost story genre, it is no wonder that certain words (including their variants) appear often to depict a freaky atmosphere such as “dread” (dreadful, dreadfulness), “horror” (horrible, horribly) in this novella. Repetitive uses of same words stress characters’ psychology or emotions in a certain situation. For example, the governess’s relief is emphasized with the word, “relief” repetition.

Would exasperation, however, if relief had longer been postponed, finally have betrayed me? It little matters, for relief arrived. I call it relief, though it was only the relief that a snap brings to a strain or the burst of a thunderstorm to a day of suffocation. (171)

In addition, this effect has an influence on readers because the emphasized governess’s emotions with repetition of words make readers more emphatic with her while they are indulged in reading the text. This is why the present study pays attention to the more frequently used words, “charm” and “charming” than the aforementioned typical words in a ghost story.

Charm(ing), is used frequently across the whole text of *The Turn of the Screw* from the prologue by Douglas through the main part of the governess’s story. the words not merely depict someone or something but also they implicate storytelling and its effects.

When the governess came to the property at Bly, her first impressions are expressed with the repetitive uses of the words. These words mean likable points of people and things such as the governess, her master, her work and children. In the prologue, Douglas commends the governess and her master: “She was a most charming person ...” (35); “She

conceived him as rich, but as fearfully extravagant—saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women (41).

In the governess’s narration, the words also appear many times to express how she feels about another main characters, Miles and Flora — their appearances, attitudes and behaviors. The words are also used to describe how she thinks of other things around her as explained in the introductory part before — her work (77-8), summer (66), stillness (67), children’s exercise (170) and news (159).

As the governess thinks her work charming, it is no wonder that she considers everything involved with the work charming. So the words often appear in her description of the children’s irresistible charm. “Charm” is simultaneously used with another word “spell” as in the examples of “under a charm (41, 66)” and “under the spell (80, 192)” because she is enamored with their magical charm.

Furthermore, I would argue that the words themselves, charm(ing) function as a perfect characteristic of a ghost story genre in that they also mean ‘possessed by supernatural power,’ which is one of the major themes of the genre. Interestingly enough, Korean and Chinese equivalent, ‘매력’(魅力) of the English word, “charm,” mean ‘a magical or supernatural power’ which refers to attract and haunt people. In other words, those Asian equivalents for the English counterpart contain the meaning of ‘ghosts’(매魅). When someone is visited by apparitions, the visited person is easy to be drawn to what s/he sees and hears. The governess was attracted to the children immediately when she met them, of which she was aware and confessed later the experience as “a beguilement” (128). This is another meaning of the words, charm(ing), so charm(ing) are a double-edged words: these words signify appeals for people to willingly fall for(a positive side) and lures to cautiously watch out for(a negative side).

On one hand, when the governess had high hopes of her responsibility, she sought comfort and courage from the work and the children in challenging situations because she thought she could handle them ; But on the other hand, when she began to suspect that the children were touched and manipulated by ghosts, she realized that she “was beguiled and befooled” (234). When she reexamined their charm with suspicious eyes, she related that the spell was broken.

The words, charm(ing) can be also stretched for the charm of a story and storytelling. It can be said that *The Turn of the Screw* as a ghost story is all about haunting experiences in one way or another – the governess, children and even readers who are deeply drawn into the literary work. This connection is well featured in the governess’s experience of reading Henry Fielding’s *Amelia*: She was interested in the author with his “spell” (134). A charming story lingers in the audience(readers and listeners)’s mind and spellbinding them like a ghost.

James did not craft the story originally. The story was germinated from what he had heard from a Canterbury archbishop, Edward Benson many years ago. Benson’s episode had been capturing and catching him (Ginsburg 350). Here, the words, “capturing” and “catching” are synonyms for ‘charming’ (verb). The first line of *The Turn of the Screw* reads, “The story has held us ..., sufficiently breathless ...” (31). The word, ‘held’ reflects James’s explanation of an effective ghost story “getting hold of” readers (James 262). As the archbishop’s story held James strongly, so did James’s work readers; Douglas storytelling captured the auditory; and ghosts caught the governess or (and) the children. All these chains of haunting is a charm of the novella.

In James’s days, a popular source of a ghost story is a visited child like the archbishop’s one. In the prologue, Griffin introduced her story about one haunted child, which Douglas called “its charming kind”(31). A ghost story builds up suspense constantly and triggers horror among the audience.

As the novella title says, a screw turns slowly but finally fixes the audience “sufficiently breathless” in James’ words. If two children are involved in a ghost story, the story gives the audience “two turns” (32).

Then, how does the screw turn? That depends on a storytelling of how to create a charming story. This is to say what is an effective storytelling? In a ghost story genre, a storytelling charm induces tension, suspense, curiosity, fear and horror in the audience successfully. In this regard, this research will deal with the following two effects for a charming storytelling – story telling delay and dramatic dialogues.

## 2.2. Charm of Storytelling

### 2.2.1. Storytelling Delay Effect

*The Turn of the Screw* is a framed story. The governess story is framed in Douglas’s storytelling (the prologue), followed by her own narration of the story. A plethora of academic interpretations and criticisms have been centered around the second part, the story the words while the first part, the prologue is easy to underestimate. The prologue, however, is equally worthwhile to discuss because it serves more than a frame structure and sets the whole tone of the story. For example, it mentions why the story needs a prologue: “the narrative he had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue” (39).

“I” is one of the auditory members (listeners) in the prologue, but “I” is the governess from chapter 1 forward. This structure increases curiosity and suspense for readers. With the point of view changing from chapter 1, readers feel empathically what the governess feels. This is the power of storytelling to get hold of the audience. Through this experience readers exercise their imaginations. This is likely the reason behind the tittle of James’s preface, “an exercise of the imagination” (James 261).

Douglas makes excuses and doesn't begin the story right away for one reason after another. Instead, he simply comments on the story backgrounds, which is so intriguing that the listeners grow more anxious and excited: "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible"; "It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it" (32). The governess had been dead for 20 years and her manuscript had been kept in his drawer for 40 years. The listeners rush Douglas to spill out the story only to fail as follows:

"For sheer terror?" I remember asking.

.....

"Oh, how delicious!" cried one of the women.

.....

... he saw what he spoke of. "For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain."

"Well then," I said, "just sit right down and begin."

.....

Then as he faced us again: "I can't begin. I shall have to send to town." (33)

"I" speaks for the party and readers who can't wait to hear the whole story — what happened to the governess and the children with ghosts. The haunted children are a charming source of a ghost story and the governess's love story is an icing on the cake. Nevertheless, Douglas merely insinuates the story, which mirrors James's signature storytelling style of ambiguity in this text.

In a response to his hints, the listening party including Griffins and "I" keep asking for "a little more light" (37) or details. Douglas, however, plays a game again with the party by procrastinating the telling.

"The story will tell." I took upon myself to reply.

"Oh, I can't wait for the story!"

"The story *won't* tell," said Douglas;  
"More's the pity, then ..."  
"Won't *you* tell, Douglas?" somebody else inquired.  
He sprang to his feet again. "Yes—tomorrow. Now I must go  
to bed. Good night." (37)

The two examples above show that storytelling delay achieves effects of adding up tension and curiosity among the listeners; It is more effective when the situation is featured with inquisitive dialogues instead of bland narrations or descriptions. As such, stalling scenes are often depicted with dialogues. Even though storytelling is meant to be accompanied and delayed along with dialogues in most of cases, these two aspects will be detailed separately in this research for consistent focus. In this session, storytelling delay has been discussed so far from the prologue examples. And the other effect of dialogues will be elaborated in the next session from the governess's narration.

### 2.2.2. Dramatic Dialogue Effect

The governess saw 'him' above a tower of the property, when she was thinking of her master. A person who she thought of and saw were indicated with the same pronoun, "him." So, it is not clear who 'he' was — a ghost or the master. The man she saw was clarified later as the already-deceased Peter Quint through dialogues with Mrs. Grose. The governess also got to know, from the talk with her, another dead worker, Jessel, a former governess who was involved with Peter. This is a point of departure when she began to be possessed by the ghosts.

Mrs. Grose's attitude makes the governess more suspicious and insecure. She hesitated to explain about what had happened before the governess came to the residence as if she wished to hide something. Mrs. Grose and this situation are a charming reminder of stalling Douglas and his

delay of storytelling about the governess.

Much as we had discussed it that Sunday night, I was, in the immediate later hours in especial—for it may be imagined whether I slept—still haunted with the shadow of something she had not told me. I myself had kept back nothing, but there was a word Mrs. Grose had kept back. (98-99)

The governess's feelings above are exactly the same with those of the anxious and curious listeners waiting for Douglas's story in the prologue where readers share their anxiety and curiosity for the story to unfold. Likewise, readers share the governess's same feelings here again.

Flora and Miles posed another challenges for the governess who had been exposed to a serial of eerie situations with the ghosts. As she deemed the ghosts existed and thought that she saw and heard them, she became suspicious of Flora and Miles. The more she talked with the children, the more she became unstable emotionally or excited extremely.

Once her emotions get intensified, she sounds more dramatic. Repetitive expressions produce a charm again of dramatic effects in her dialogues as were mentioned before. The following examples are a good comparison in dramatic effects with the example above where the governess described her thought about Mrs. Grose.

I seized my colleague's arm. "She's there, she's there!" (211)

Miss Jessel stood before us on the opposite bank exactly as she had stood the other time, ... She was there, and I was justified; she was there, and I was neither cruel nor mad. She was there for poor scared Mrs. Grose, but she was there most for Flora; (212)

Repetitive expressions, "She's there!" explain how assertive she is about seeing the ghost, Jessel like her comments, "I was justified." The second

example (212) above doesn’t have quotation marks as if she said to herself with confidence. It is plausible that she cried with joy ‘thinking’ that she saw the ghost of Jessel. However, it may also be true that she ‘spoke’ to Mrs. Grose for sure that Jessel stood there, given the situation the governess was talking with Mrs. Grose as the first example (211) clearly shows. This study sides with this interpretation which is supported by her quoted comments in conversation with Miles about the same issue of the ghost existence.

“She’s there, you little unhappy thing—there, there, *there*, and you see her as well as you see me!” (213)

With or without quotation marks, her self-assertive excitement is effectively conveyed with repetitive expressions.

In the aforementioned examples, the governess was extremely excited and said the same things over and over again. She sounded dramatic profusely. When she said, she seemed to say her lines in a theatrical (drama) stage like a performing actress. Then, the words coming from her mouth were dramatic dialogues literally. At the same time, dramatic dialogues mean the dialogues that generate dramatic effects of showing the speaker’s extreme feelings as in the case of a drama queen’s acting and language. As Piré (11) stated, a strong drama is created among characters when they communicate with dialogues. Then, dialogues are more effective in showing and telling a speaker’s feelings than interior monologues. When she ‘stages’ dramatic dialogues, readers get involved with her emotions naturally as if readers feel her presence before them.

Short inquisitive or ambiguous dialogues produce more powerful dramatic effects in immersing readers to heighten a sense of sharing with the governess’s thoughts and feelings. Her escalating emotions are accentuated with repetitive word uses and italics like the previous

examples. This is the way how “a dreadful turn” (214) screws and paralyzes her with terror. When *The Turn of the Screw* nears the end of the story, her fear and anxiety reach their climax and dramatic dialogue effect culminates. At this denouement, she faced Miles upfront who had been acting in a strange manner to her eyes. The tension between them is reminiscent of the game between the auditory party and Douglas in the prologue, and of course, of the first effect of storytelling delay, too.

“I’ll tell you if you’ll tell me—”

“Well, what?” (210)

“you wanted me to tell you something.”

“That’s it. Out, straight out... ” (244)

“I’ll tell you everything,” Miles said—“I mean I’ll tell you anything you like... and I *will* tell you—I *will*. But not now.”

“Why not now?” (246)

Here, stalling Miles is juxtaposed with Douglas in procrastinating the telling.

The confrontation between the governess and Miles makes a very efficient dramatic scene with contrastive words, her “everything” and his “nothing.”

“And you found nothing!”—I let my elation out.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing, nothing!” I almost shouted in my joy.

“Nothing, nothing,” he sadly repeated. (251)

“Did you know I mightn’t go back?”

“I know everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything. Therefore *did* you—?” But I couldn’t say it again. (252)

As many previous examples testify before, short and inquisitive dialogues loaded with ambiguity create more dramatic effects. A good case in point is the above governess’s probing scene. The simple two words, “everything” and “nothing” allow for different kinds of innuendo not only for the two characters concerned, but more importantly, for readers because ambiguity is unarguably a charm of this novella. This charming storytelling with dramatic effect leads to all the feelings effectively that a ghost story is supposed to bring out—suspense, curiosity and terror while keeping the two parties in question tense — a speaker vs. listeners and a storyteller vs. readers.

### III

This paper has explored the two effects, storytelling delay and dramatic dialogue, so far in storytelling of *The Turn of the Screw* with focus on the words, “charm” or “charming” which are used remarkably often in the text. While a wealth of research and criticism have long been released since the novella publication, it is still controversial whether ghosts are real or the mentally ill governess is just hallucinated, which are the two prominent schools of Jamesian academics. This paper, however, has been dealing with, not how to interpret the story, but how to tell a ghost story effectively from readers’ perspectives. To this end, this study read the text as it is and accepted the existence of ghosts from the governess’s point of view by paying attention to James’s charming storytelling.

When this novella was published, a ghost story genre enjoyed a huge popularity and James was a well-established writer already. A ghost story genre was a profitable commodity back then. Upon request by *Collier’s Weekly*, *The Turn of the Screw* was published as 12 installments from January through April (Orr 24) and was republished again with several changes as one ghost story novella. With the genre mushrooming, a

famous writer's title must have been expected with high hopes, popularly and critically. One of cliché formula of the genre is that dead people appear as ghosts in an isolated gothic mansion. This was also true in James's days. What matters, then, was how to make James's story distinctly appealing. I have been arguing in this research that his charming ingenuity of storytelling creates a literary lucky charm commensurate with the author's reputation. The issue in the genre lies in how to effectively scare readers by generating suspense and horror. In addition, the story should grab readers' curiosity constantly so they keep looking forward to what's next.

In this sense, this paper has analyzed James's "charming job" of storytelling to achieve such goals and identified the two prevalent effects that contribute to making a successful ghost story and further this novella as one of the genre gem. As Douglas plays a game with the auditory party to keep the party anxious to hear the story in the prologue, so does James for readers to stay curious and emphatic with the governess by creating inquisitive and provocative atmosphere added to all sorts of ambiguity. So, the words "charm" or "charming" perfectly match the genre because a ghost story often "befools" and "beguiles" readers unexpectedly as the definition of charm(ing) denotes as such.

Horror and anxiety are not the whole points of a ghost story, though. The story needs to guarantee a pleasant readership. Storytelling delay and dramatic dialogues work charmingly in this regard because they "get hold of" readers effectively, which is a charm of its storytelling.

With this James's genuine storytelling, this novella will never stop casting a spell on readers. And the audience will not be reluctant to be visited by the ghost named *The Turn of the Screw* which is 'disguised' in a different form, that is, different media – a written text, films, musicals and opera. This literary ghost has been welcomed for more than two decades and still attempts to communicate with the audience. With

such a charming and effective strategy of storytelling, as the two effects have been displaying in this paper, James has been also positioned as a founder of modern novels and a critic as well.

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