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# Unveiling Narrative Threads: Wilde’s Spectral Tale vs. James’s Haunting Mystery

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## Abstract

*The research delves into the distinct narrative techniques employed in the two novellas, Oscar Wilde’s *The Canterville Ghost* and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. Wilde’s work, characterised by its satirical and humorous approach to the supernatural, stands in stark contrast to James’s psychological horror narrative, which intricately weaves a web of ambiguity and suspense. The research examines the role of humour in *The Canterville Ghost* and its impact on the overall tone, drawing attention to Wilde’s use of satire to challenge conventional ghost story tropes. In contrast, *The Turn of the Screw* is explored for its psychological depth, with a focus on James’s subtle and intricate portrayal of the human psyche, leaving readers in a state of haunting disquiet. Through a comparative lens, the research seeks to uncover the ways in which these two novellas employ narrative techniques to achieve their respective effects, shedding light on the interplay between humour and horror in literature and the diverse strategies writers employ to engage readers in the realm of the supernatural.*

**Keywords:** Satirical, Humor, Horror, Ambiguity, Suspense, Ghost Story, Human Psyche and Supernatural.

## Introduction

Literature is treasure trove of diverse narrative techniques, each offering unique lens through which stories are told and experienced. This article delves into the distinctive narrative strategies employed by Oscar Wilde in *The Canterville Ghost* and Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw*. Despite both being classic ghost stories, the authors adopt contrasting approaches, enriching the genre with their individual styles.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) a renowned Irish playwright, poet, and author, celebrated for his wit, flamboyance, and literary prowess. Born in Dublin, Ireland. His education at Trinity College and Oxford University showcased his scholarly acumen and keen wit. He excelled in various genres, crafting sparkling comedies like *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, known for their witty dialogue and biting social satire. Wilde’s literary legacy extends beyond the stage, with his poetry, including Ireflecting themes of suffering and redemption inspired by his own experiences, notably

his imprisonment for *Gross Indecency*. Despite his tragic downfall, Wilde's enduring contributions to English literature continue to captivate readers with their timeless appeal and exploration of the human condition. Whereas, Henry James (1843-1916), an American-born writer, left an indelible mark on the modern novel through his exploration of psychological depth and intricate narrative techniques. Raised in a culturally rich environment in New York City, James's literary journey began with his early short stories before he embarked on a life of travel and expatriation in Europe. His novels, such as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, are lauded for their meticulous attention to detail and penetrating insights into human relationships and societal conventions. James's narrative mastery, often employing a close third-person point of view, immerses readers in the inner lives of his characters, enriching his exploration of themes like the clash of cultures and the complexities of human psychology. Despite his transatlantic roots, James's influence as a preeminent literary figure endures, with his works continuing to be studied and admired for their profound impact on the genre of the novel.

When examining *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James in the context of the Victorian era, several parallels and distinctions emerge, shedding light on the societal, cultural, and literary influences of the time. Both novellas were written during the Victorian era, a period characterized by its rigid social norms, moral values, and hierarchical structures. Victorian society placed great emphasis on propriety, decorum, and maintaining appearances, yet beneath the veneer of respectability lay a fascination with the supernatural, the gothic, and the unknown.

In *The Canterville Ghost*, Wilde employs satire and humour to critique Victorian attitudes towards tradition, modernity, and the supernatural. Through the interactions between the Otis family, who embody the progressive ideals of the era, and the ghostly Sir Simon, Wilde explores themes of societal change, scepticism, and the clash between rationality and superstition. The novella's light-hearted tone and comedic elements serve as a commentary on the absurdity of Victorian ghost stories while challenging conventional notions of fear and belief.

On the other hand, *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James delves into the darker undercurrents of Victorian society, delving into themes of repression, sexuality, and psychological instability. Set in a remote country estate, the novella unfolds against a backdrop of repressed desires, hidden secrets, and ambiguous supernatural occurrences. James's exploration of the governess's psychological unravelling and her increasingly fraught interactions with the enigmatic ghosts reflects the anxieties and uncertainties of the Victorian psyche. The novella's ambiguity and psychological complexity mirror the era's fascination with the subconscious and the supernatural, while also challenging traditional narratives of morality and innocence.

During the late 19th century, when both Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* were written, societal beliefs about ghosts were influenced by a combination of superstition, religious beliefs, and evolving scientific understanding.

### **Narrative Techniques in both the Novellas**

Narrative technique serves as the backbone of storytelling, shaping the reader's experience and perception of a literary work. This research delves into the contrasting narrative techniques employed by Oscar Wilde in *The Canterville Ghost* and Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw*. Through a detailed examination of narrative perspective, atmosphere and tone, characterization, symbolism, and thematic exploration, this research unravels the intricacies of these classic ghost stories and explores how their narrative techniques contribute to their enduring appeal.

### **Narrative Perspective**

In *The Canterville Ghost* Wilde employs a third-person omniscient narrator, offering insights

into the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of multiple characters. This narrative perspective allows for a panoramic view of the story's events and character dynamics, enhancing the reader's understanding of the Otis family's interactions with the ghost and their humorous responses to supernatural occurrences. "On reaching the top of the staircase it turned round, and when it saw the ghost it had a fit, and then it was ill for days." (Wilde 12). Through the omniscient narrator, Wilde offers a humorous portrayal of the Otis family's reaction to the ghost, highlighting their disbelief and lack of fear. Whereas, in *The Turn of the Screw*, James utilizes a first-person unreliable narrator, framing the story as a manuscript written by the governess. The governess's subjective perspective creates ambiguity and uncertainty, as readers must navigate her unreliable narration and question the authenticity of her perceptions and interpretations of events at Bly Manor.

### **Atmosphere and Tone**

Wilde infuses the narrative with humour and satire, creating a light-hearted and comedic tone that contrasts with traditional ghost story conventions. The humorous tone serves as a vehicle for social commentary, critiquing Victorian societal norms and attitudes towards the supernatural with wit and irony. Whereas, James cultivates an atmosphere of ambiguity and dread, enveloping the narrative in an eerie and unsettling tone. The ominous tone heightens the psychological tension as the governess grapples with the presence of malevolent spirits and the safety of the children in her care.

### **Characterization**

Wilde crafts vivid and exaggerated characters, each embodying distinct personality traits and societal roles. From the pragmatic Otis family to the tormented ghost Sir Simon, the characters contribute to the comedic elements and thematic exploration of modernity versus tradition. Whereas James employs subtle characterization, leaving much to the reader's interpretation. The governess is intricately drawn, her psychological complexity fuelling debates about her reliability and sanity. The children, Miles and Flora, are enigmatic figures, their innocence juxtaposed with hints of sinister influence.

### **Symbolism and Themes**

Wilde utilizes symbolism to explore themes of redemption, forgiveness, and societal change. The ghost's inability to find peace until he fulfils his duty reflects broader societal anxieties about progress and modernity. Whereas James employs symbolism to probe themes of repression, innocence, and the corruption of youth. The sprawling estate of Bly serves as a metaphor for the governess's psyche, its hidden secrets mirroring her repressed desires and fears.

Oscar Wilde's portrayal of ghosts in his work, including *The Canterville Ghost*, typically involves a blend of humour, satire, and symbolism. His narrative technique often employs wit and irony to subvert traditional ghost story conventions and explore deeper themes. The blend of horror and humour in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* offers a rich opportunity to explore the craftsmanship of the Irish writer. Wilde's subtle and controlled humour serves a specific satirical purpose throughout the story. Wilde's narrative technique often involves subverting readers expectations. Instead of adhering to typical ghost story tropes, he introduces elements of comedy and farce. Wilde introduces suspense to heighten the story's engagement and add an element of horror to the comedic narrative. While suspenseful moments are relatively few compared to the abundance of comic elements, they effectively evoke traditional Gothic novel expectations. Terrifying happenings are recounted: "My grandaunt, the Dowager Duchess of Bolton, was frightened into a fit, from which she never really recovered, by two skeleton hands being placed on

her shoulders as she was dressing for dinner” (Wilde 193).

In Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the portrayal of ghosts is intricately woven into the narrative to create a sense of ambiguity and psychological tension. Unlike Wilde’s overt blend of humour and satire, James employs a subtler approach, relying on psychological complexity and narrative ambiguity to unsettle readers. The ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* serve as enigmatic figures, their presence and intentions left deliberately ambiguous. James’ narrative technique involves building suspense through the unreliable perspective of the governess, whose interpretation of events blurs the line between supernatural occurrences and psychological manifestations. The governess’s narration creates a sense of unease as readers grapple with the uncertainty of whether the ghosts are real entities or products of her imagination. James masterfully employs suspenseful moments, such as the governess’s encounters with the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, to heighten the story’s tension and evoke a sense of dread. These encounters are shrouded in mystery and ambiguity, leaving readers questioning the nature of reality within the narrative. The blend of horror and psychological complexity in *The Turn of the Screw* offers a rich exploration of James’ craftsmanship, inviting readers to delve into the depths of the human psyche and confront the ambiguity of the supernatural.

### Conclusion

While *The Canterville Ghost* and *The Turn of the Screw* both belong to the ghost story genre, their narrative techniques diverge significantly, shaping the reader’s experience and interpretation of the stories. Oscar Wilde’s comedic approach and satirical commentary contrast with Henry James’s psychological depth and ambiguity. Nevertheless, both authors masterfully manipulate their chosen techniques to captivate readers and explore timeless themes of human nature and the supernatural. Through their distinct narratives, Wilde and James leave an indelible mark on the genre, showcasing the versatility and power of storytelling in literature.

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