

Narrative Technique

and

Gender Ideology

A Study on Henry James

叙述技巧与性别意识

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Introduction

Henry James as a subject of study has been approached from a variety of perspectives, which results in a wide spectrum of judgments. While earlier critics tended to focus on the aesthetic properties, social critical readings, particularly feminist interpretations of James's major novels have become an increasing trend (see the detailed discussion below). However, many feminist interpretations of James appear inadequate not only for the critics' reliance on their subjective impression but also for an attempt at an either-or verdict concerning the author's attitude towards women's gender identity and relation with men (Mitchell 1972; Fetterley 1978; Felman 1978). Of the various reasons for such a problem, a crucial one lies in the feminist critics' general negligence of the technical complexity and ambiguity in James's art of fiction. As for the numerous critics who have investigated the structural and stylistic choices in James's novels, there is, in general, a notable neglect of the ideological implications involved. This unsatisfactory situation largely underlies my choosing to reexamine James's narrative techniques in relation to gender politics implied in his fiction.

My methodological framework is eclectic, drawing on analytical models in narratology and on feminist criticism of the 70s to early 80s and gender study prevalent in the 80s. From this interdisciplinary perspective, I try to examine the relationship between James's technical choices and the issue of gender in his five novels: *The American* (1877), *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Tragic Muse* (1890), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Ambassadors* (1903). By selecting these novels from James's

early, middle and late stages and focusing on a primary technical aspect in each novel, the present study attempts to uncover the relationships between James's various narrative strategies and gender politics implied in his fiction. I would point out, James's exquisite narrative techniques are more than a consequence of purely aesthetic construction. He writes well also "because he has so much to say about the societies in which he participated" (Rowe 1998, x).

In this brief introduction, I would first give a critical review of the various forms of criticism on James' fiction throughout the years. By tracing the different approaches and focuses, I want to show how Henry James undergoes the gradual shift from being regarded as a formalist master to another James who is implicitly critical of the patriarchal societies on both sides of the Atlantic. For a better understanding of the necessity in revisiting James from the perspective of feminist-narratology, I shall briefly review orthodox narratology as well as the development in feminism. In the final part of this introduction, I will specify my focus of attention and scope of analyses proper.

1. A Historical Review of James Criticism

Throughout the years, James criticism has exhibited several shifts of attention, showing a general tendency from aesthetic study to political criticism. These changes of attention can be summarized by way of looking at the emphases critics in different periods place on the various aspects in his novels.

Both in chronology and in methodology, there appears to be a parallel between the formation of Henry James as a canonical study and the rise of formalism as a mainstream criticism. More Jamesian than James, Percy Lubbock codifies James's use of Strether's point of view in *The Ambassadors* as the most artistic way of "showing" a story (1957, 61-62). This

stress on the authorial detachment by restricting the representation of the story world from characters' perspectives sets the stage for the initiation of James as a literary master who introduces the dramatic elements into the art of fiction. While New Criticism celebrates literary works as autonomous aesthetic objects, James' s "point of view" technique is prized as a paragon of dramatic representation. In *The Art of the Novel* (1984), R. P. Blackmur collects James' s prefaces to the New York edition of his eighteen novels and writes an illuminating introduction, systematizing James' s structural principles in the construction of these novels. Like Lubbock, Blackmur pays little attention to the author' s biographical and historical information.

However, this does not suggest that critics in this period unanimously overlook the social implication in James' s fiction. Several critics call attention to the recurrent theme of morality (Spender 1935; Trilling 1955; Matthiessen 1944). With an abundance of biographical information, Edel produces *The Life of Henry James* (1977), which explores the origins and structures of James' s major novels. As a central point of reference for biographical interpretations, Edel' s work exerts great influence on the subsequent biographical-psychological criticism in James study. Despite the dominant spirit for objectivity and scientificity, as exemplified in Dorothy van Ghent' s *The English Novel* (1953), this period also saw F. W. Dupee' s *Henry James* (1951) and Lionel Trilling' s Introduction to *The Princess of Casamassima* (1948). Both critics discover in James' s fiction the suffocating social context of the late nineteenth century America.

Under the influence of humanistic criticism, James study in the 60s shows an interest in a variety of issues, which marks a transitional point in the historical reinterpretation of James' s major novels. While the political study of James occasionally merges itself with the structuralist-formalistic

interpretations, the exploration of James's aesthetic art begins to question itself by challenging the Jamesian artistic principles codified in the early 20s. Wayne C. Booth challenges in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) a set of rules and regulations codified throughout the years. Equal attention should also be given to Oscar Cargill's *The Novels of Henry James* (1961), a book highly valued by Richard Hocks as "the first major synthesis, review, and evaluation of all previous scholarship on the major works" (Hocks 1993, 11). With Dorothea Krook's *The Ordeal of Conscientiousness in Henry James* (1962), James criticism starts to touch on the economic issue. As Hocks points out, although "multidirectionality" is the word that describes James study in this period, most of the critical works display a tendency towards placing James in the liberal humanistic tradition (1993, 11). Naomi Lebowitz's *The Imagination of Loving: Henry James's Legacy to the Novel* (1965) and Laurence Holland's *The Expense of Vision* (1964) are typical examples in this respect.

The 1970s could be regarded as the beginning of postmodernist analyses of Henry James. Frederic Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1971), though not a study on Henry James in itself, is indirectly influential for it initiates James criticism into a historical revisionist perspective. With an increasing awareness that James's supposed ahistorical-aesthetic stance is in fact firmly tied to a social historical process, critics such as Ralf Norman (1982) and Ruth Yeazell (1976) argue that what has been accepted as an autonomous aesthetic world in James's fiction is both historical and political. By turning away from the traditional version of James as a formalist master, both critics grasp James as a moral critic of his time and society.

Until Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1978), forceful feminist interpretations of James's fiction are rarely seen. With the basic fem-

inist tenet that the Western society is structured upon the hegemonic principle that women “are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate the male system of values” (1978, xiii), Fetterley argues that the right way to decode the writings of male authors is to read the other way round. To exemplify such a political stance, she grasps *The Bostonians* as a sharp criticism of how the patriarchal system disguises itself and takes effect through some socially accepted forms such as love and marriage.

As confusing as feminist theory itself, feminist interpretations of James's novels in the subsequent years appear both unstable and contradictory. With an acute awareness of the gender issue, Alfred Habegger published his *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism* in 1982. Different from Fetterley, Habegger regards James as a feminine writer lacking masculine vigor. Appearing in the year 1984, Virginia Fowler's *Henry James's American Girl* is another major feminist reading of James's representation of women. With a combined approach of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Anglo-American feminism, Fowler contends that the typical feminine woman in James's fictional world is always depicted as one confined within her subjective self. Different from Fetterley's radical criticism of the hegemonic social structure, Fowler ascribes the repeated tragedy of women in James's fiction to their own psychological deficiency. In a broad sense, these feminist readings of James's novels are deeply influenced by the first wave of feminism which is justifiably defined by Showalter as the first stage of feminist critique – feminist readings of male texts. Drawing on the theoretical force from reader's response theory, feminist critics usually emphasize the real reader's political alignment. In keeping with the assumption that both reading and writing are gender-biased, feminist critics explore the cultural implications of being a woman reader. As Showalter

summarizes, "For the male reader, the text serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal" which consolidates his "affinity with the universal, with the paradigmatic human being, precisely because he is male" (1989, 26). Corresponding with this critical trend, many feminist readers of James criticizes James for his implicit collusion with the paternalistic gender ideology (Fryer 1976; Stubbs 1981; Jones 1987; Allen 1984). This assumption is partly due to critics' emphases on the biological entity of the writer. The significance of gender in James's novels seems to be totally reliant on the biological identity of the reader. A comment made by Jonathan Culler typifies such a stance: "If the meaning of a work is the experience of a reader, what difference does it make if the reader is woman?" (1982, 42). Besides its negligence of James's ambivalence towards the social system, which is usually carried out through his subtle narrative technique, such an over-emphasis on the biological identity of the reader is dangerous as it obviously confuses the biological entity with the sociological identity. Ironically, the biological, which has been used to construct and disguise the political in the patriarchal ideology, returns to consolidate the binary opposition in gender hierarchy. Needless to say, such a confusion has its serious impact on James study. While the biological identity of a female critic is believed to add political force to what she says, any critical opinion expressed by a male critic might risk being regarded as phallogocentric. No wonder, while Judith Fetterley's feminist critique of *The Bostonians* is generally hailed by feminist readers as a disruptive reading, Habegger's *Henry James and the "Women's Business"* (1989) is largely neglected simply because it is produced by a male critic. Interestingly, when Fetterley takes pains to show that the previous phallic interpretation of James's gender representation "is not so much what James wrote as what the critic wants" (1978, 111-12), she

frankly admits that her argument is based on “a different subjectivity” (Fetterley 1978, 115). Interpretation, in such a feminist critique, seems to be reduced to an empirical activity whose meaning depends on the reader’s subjective will and political consciousness.

The advantages and disadvantages in such a concentration on the reader’s role are evident. On its positive side, the stress on the reader’s subjectivity and gender consciousness may shift the critical interest from a text-centered interpretive mode to a reader-oriented approach, which is helpful in revealing the ideological interaction between the real author and the real reader. On its negative side, this over-emphasis on the biological entity of the reader may reproduce some essentialist notions, which ironically confirms the binary opposition between men and women. This narrow understanding of feminism as a form of women’s reading of male texts lingers on until the 80s when gender study is introduced into feminist studies. With the realization that gender is culturally constructed through prohibition, regulation and control, feminist critics argue that the concept of gender is “neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler 1990, 6). This rise of gender as a subject of study, as Showalter remarks, has enabled feminist critics to recognize that “talking about gender means talking about both women and men”, therefore, “the meaning of gender needs to be interpreted within a variety of historical, national, racial, and sexual contexts” (Showalter 1989, 2-4).

In company with this change of critical wind, there appears a new wave of James study. In *Henry James and the Art of Power* (1984), Mark Seltzer demonstrates that James’s aesthetic art is a discursive weapon contrived within the power of representation. John Carlos Rowe’s *The Theatrical Dimension of Henry James* (1984) could be regarded as a forerunner of postmodern analysis of Henry James. Dissociating himself from the

classic formalist stance, Rowe argues that James has been the subject of discussions for various critical schools because James himself is a writer in deep concern with the linguistic, philosophical, social and political problems (3-28).

James studies in the 90s have been extremely fruitful for the increasing tendency towards anti-formalism and intertextual analyses. Heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot's speculation on the relationship between literary tradition and individual talents, Daniel Mark Fogel produced his *Covert Relations* in 1990, calling attention to James's influence on both James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In a similar fashion, Susan Griffin in his *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James* (1991) explores James's visual sensitivity in connection with both art history and William James's *Principles of Psychology*. Drawing on the insights of feminist study, queer theory and cultural studies, Rowe expands his theoretical groundwork in *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* to a deconstructive framework in *The Other Henry James* (1998), illustrating how "the other James", as implied in his works, confronts changes in gender roles, ethnic identifications and racial discrimination in the nineteenth-century. Different from most of the conventional James critics, Rowe offers a new version of James as a social critic whose depiction of the changing behavioral patterns of both men and women anticipates a postmodern conception of gender as a function of social discourse (171-173).

To sum up, James study has undergone three major phases: 1) aesthetic criticism from 1930s to 1955 when New Criticism dominated the critical scene; 2) structural analysis from 1960s to 70s; 3) political criticism, intertextual analysis and cultural studies from 1980s onwards. From this brief review of James study, we could see that these various modes of analyses and different interpretations should not be understood as compet-

ing claims for objectivity or truth but rather as inherent components of a never-ending process of historical reinterpretation, which makes James available for contemporary reconsiderations.

2. A Brief Review of Orthodox Narratology

It would take me far too long in this brief introduction to delineate a complete history of narratological evolution whose theoretical groundwork may be traced back to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, but a critical review of what can be termed "orthodox narratology" is useful in understanding the purpose of this present study. I use the term "orthodox narratology" as both a period definition and a descriptive term to refer to those models devised in the 1960s and 1970s by those narratologists who try to investigate literary forms and functions in a systematic and scientific way. According to Ingeborg Hoesterey, the classic period of narratology in Britain and America begins in the 1970s with the introduction of Frank K. Stanzel's typology of "narrative situations" into Anglo-American critical discourse (Hoesterey 1992, 4). Based on the three basic analytical categories: person, mode, perspective, and with a focus on degrees of mediacy, Stanzel defines the three narrative situations as: "first-person narrative situation", "figural narrative situation" and "authorial narrative situation" (Stanzel 1984, 46-56). In spite of its confusion of voice with perspective (Genette 1980, 187; Shen 1998, 225-28), Stanzel's emphasis on the distinction, overlapping and progression between the figural and the authorial narrative situations alerts critics' attention to the recognizable facets in literary texts under investigation. Of course, "these concepts must be revised in the light of current work in narrative theory if they are to remain functional", as Stanzel wisely predicts (1984, 2). Stanzel's confusion of voice and perspective is largely clarified by Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980). Based on the linguistic concepts "tense", "aspect"

and “mood”, and with a deep concentration on the level of discourse, Genette insists on a distinction between “mood” and “voice”, i. e. between focalization and voice (Genette 1980, 186). On the other hand, while Stanzel’s focus on the issue of “person” recedes into the background, Dorrit Cohn radicalizes the person distinction in *Transparent Minds* (1978) for the purpose of measuring the ways in which characters’ unspoken thoughts, feelings and perceptions are represented both in the authorial and figural narrative situations.

Aware of the limitations of narratology as an intrinsic approach, some narratologists have tried to broaden their scope of investigation by drawing on other theoretical perspectives or methods. Deeply influenced by the concept of “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin 1996: 324), Boris Uspensky devotes a whole chapter in *A Poetics of Composition* (1973) to the analysis of “point of view on the ideological level” (1973, 8-16), defining point of view on this level as the presence of “polyphonic narration” (10). In a similar way, Rimmon-Kenan describes narrative point of view in terms of its emotive, cognitive and ideological facets (1983, 79). Although the study of narrative point of view is intended to give priority to the source of vision of events in fiction, narratologists do not neglect the ideology of the text, which is referred to as “a general system of viewing the world conceptually” (Uspensky 1973, 8). And in accordance with this “world view”/the norm of the text, characters, events and narrative voice are evaluated (Rimmon-Kenan 1983).

Surely, we have to admit, in comparison with the various branches of social critical theory, orthodox narratology has not paid sufficient attention to the social issues such as gender, race and class. Interestingly, feminist criticism, “which by definition always asks the gender question first, has not inquired into narrative discourse” (Warhol 1989, 3). If we

admit the fact that the “comprehensiveness and care with which narratology makes distinctions can provide invaluable methods for textual analysis” (Lanser 1991, 614), then, this structuralist-feminist dichotomy can perhaps be bridged to some extent by asking a similar question: how a feminist analysis could utilize narratology?

3. A Brief Review of Feminism

By consensus, feminism can be classified as three major stages in terms of its chronological development. Primarily concerned with the notion and significance of male or female authorship from the late 60s to the early 70s, critics such as Elaine Showalter (1977), Mary Ellmann (1968), Kate Millett (1971) mainly focus on a critique of the sexist vocabulary and gender stereotypes in the literary works of male authors, highlighting the ways in which male writers ascribe to women features such as passivity and hysteria. Feminism in the late 70s is often referred to as gynocriticism or the study of women writers. To retrieve a female aesthetic marginalized or suppressed by the phallogentric literary tradition, feminist critics like Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), Mary Jacobus (1979) and Elaine Showalter (1977) concentrate on exploring the psychoanalytic themes in the 19th-century women's writings. From the mid-80s on, differences of color and sexual preference become inter-related subjects of study in feminist criticism, leading to the critics' examination of other categories of differences, such as ethnicity and class consciousness (Smith 1980; Coward 1983; Eisenstein and Jardine 1985; Butler 1993).

In terms of differences in perspective and geographical distinction, feminism can also be described as three strains: the French, the American, and the British. With attention to the ways in which meaning is produced, French feminists contend that the language one learns often reflects a binary logic that opposes such terms as activity/passivity; sun/moon;

culture/nature; day/night; father/mother; head/emotions; intelligence/sensitive; logos/pathos (Cixous 1981). In order to disrupt this phallogocentric logic which privileges masculinity by associating it with values that are more appreciated in culture, Julia Kristeva asserts that language is not symbolic but rather semiotic, that women can develop a language which is associated with the female body (Kristeva 1980, 101-7; Moi 1985, 161-2, 164-6). The feminine is interpreted as that which is marginalized by the symbolic order (qtd. In Moi 1985, 165-66). Such an emphasis on femininity as marginality not only helps critics understand femininity in terms of positionality but also calls attention to the historical fact that women's biological entity has been used to construct and rationalize the political.

The French feminists' stress on the existence of a female aesthetic is shared by their American counterparts. Nevertheless, instead of philosophizing about women's writing, the American feminist critics are more interested in analyzing specific literary texts. By examining the stereotyped images of women in literary works, many American critics explore how these distorted images of women are voluntarily or involuntarily used to suppress women's subjectivity (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 21-44; Cornillon 1972, 110-118; Ellmann 1968, 5-8). To varying degrees, these critics regard literary authority as "both overtly and covertly patriarchal" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 45).

In comparison with the French and the American, British feminists are more inclined towards a Marxist perspective that facilitates a recognition to the fact that the sexual differences between men and women result from an unequal socio-economic social system which reduces women to objects. The question of sexism, in most critical works of the British feminists, is usually explored with emphatic attention to the unequal power re-

lation and social status between men and women under patriarchy (Barrett 1980; Mitchell 1971). Such a radical social criticism is a recurrent note in the works of the leading figures in this group, such as Rosalind Coward (1983), Terry Lovell (1982) and Janet Wolff (1981).

Despite their differences in perspective and focus of attention, these groups of feminist critics share the basic tenet that gender is a patriarchal construction which suppresses women more than men. Although this notion of a universal patriarchy has been criticized in recent years for "its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists" (Butler 1990, 3-4; 35-36), it allows feminist critics recognize the discursive power in literary works in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social institutions and values.

4. Towards a Feminist Narratology

As touched upon in the previous discussion, feminist critics on both sides of the Atlantic regard literary texts as referential systems to the real world, a point which forms a contrast to the view of the structuralist-formalist critics whose sole interest lies in uncovering the aesthetic property of literary works. The limitation of orthodox narratology in this respect can be best revealed when compared with the feminist perspective. In comparison with the feminist critics' emphasis on the gender consciousness of the real reader and writer, the issue of gender has been neglected in orthodox narratology (Lanser 1991, 612). Recognizing such a negligence, Susan Lanser advocates that it is necessary to "study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political" (1991, 614). Drawing on the insight of the reader-response theory, which stresses the subjectivity of the reader, Ingeborg Hoesterey calls attention to the reader's role in decoding the