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# Henry James and his Ghosts: Narrative Ambiguity in "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner"*

Henry James ve Hayaletleri: "The Real Right Thing" ve "The Jolly Corner" Öykülerinde Anlatı Belirsizlikleri

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***Abstract***

When Henry James is considered in relation to the supernatural, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is usually the first and foremost work that comes to mind. This, however, is somewhat unfair to James, who produced, especially in the later stages of his literary career, a significant amount of short fiction marked by an interest in the supernatural. An important quality these "ghostly" works often share is the ambiguity they create in relation to the reality status of the narrated events. Considered from a Todorovian perspective, most of these works may be said to evoke the state of the fantastic, whereby the characters and/or the readers remain, even at the very end, unable to decide whether the preternatural events can be explained through "natural" means or whether they really partake of the "supernatural" within the world of the story. This article focuses on two such examples of the short fiction of Henry James, namely "The Real Right Thing" (1899) and "The Jolly Corner" (1908), and explores the clever strategies James uses to create narrative ambiguity. The study focuses particularly on the way these stories evoke a sense of hesitation and uncertainty in the reader without resorting to first-person or frame narration. Both works are marked by a strong aura of mystery, which remains unresolved even at the very end. On the one hand, the reader is led to believe the supernatural quality of the protagonists' experience. On the other hand, however, both stories include important clues as to the protagonists' potential unreliability. An effective technique James uses to create this atmosphere of uncertainty is to shift continually between literal and figurative meanings, upsetting usual habits and expectations in reading. Following this discussion of James's strategies to create narrative ambiguity, the article probes the possible meanings of James's interest in the supernatural and of his preference for keeping his ghost stories unresolved. It aims to demonstrate how the persistently sustained fantastic mode in these stories points to

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James's preoccupation, especially in his late career, with significant themes concerning not only reality and consciousness but also boundaries, oppositions and liminality. Exploring James's ghost stories from this perspective sheds light on how his work anticipates modern and even postmodern concerns and enables a better understanding of the Jamesian canon as a whole.

**Keywords:** Henry James, narrative ambiguity, the fantastic, the supernatural, reality.

***Öz***

Henry James'in doğaüstü öğelere olan ilgisi çoğu zaman sadece *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) adlı eseriyle ilişkilendirilir. Halbuki yazarın özellikle kariyerinin son döneminde yazmış olduğu dikkate değer sayıdaki öykü, doğaüstü öğeler üzerine kurulmuştur. Bu öykülerin ortak özelliği ise, anlatılan olayların gerçekliğine ilişkin oluşturulan tereddüt halidir. Todorov'un kuramı açısından bakıldığında, bu öykülerde okuma sona erdiğinde bile ciddi bir belirsizlik hakimdir. Okuyucu, anlatılan sıradışı olayların doğal yollarla mı, yoksa doğaüstü öğelere başvurarak mı açıklanabileceğine bir türlü karar veremez. Todorov'a göre, okuyucunun içine düştüğü ve sonlandıramadığı bu tereddüt durumu, yapıtın "fantastik" türe ait olduğuna işaret eder. Bu çalışmada, Henry James'in bu özellikteki iki öyküsü, "The Real Right Thing" (1899) ve "The Jolly Corner" (1908) üzerinde durulmakta ve yazarın bu öykülerde anlatı belirsizliği yaratmak için kullandığı teknikler irdelenmektedir. Bu hikayelerin birinci şahıs veya çerçeve anlatım olmadan tereddüt ve belirsizlik duygusunu nasıl uyandırdığı üzerinde durulmaktadır. Her iki eserin de en çarpıcı özelliği, yaratılan esrarengiz havanın sonda da çözüme kavuşamamasıdır. Okuyucu, bir yandan karakterlerin başına gelenlerin doğaüstü nitelikte olduğuna ikna olmakta, diğer yandan da aynı karakterlerin odaklayıcı olarak güvenilirliğinden ciddi şüphe duymaktadır. Her iki öyküde de gerçek ve mecazi anlamlar sürekli birbirinin yerine geçer. Okuyucunun beklenti ve alışkanlıklarını alt üst eden bu teknik, yaratılan belirsizliğin daha da kuvvetlenmesini sağlar. Çalışmada, Henry James'in başarıyla kullandığı bu teknikler incelendikten sonra, yazarın doğaüstüne olan ilgisinin ve hayalet hikayelerini çözümsüz bırakmayı tercih etmesinin ne anlama geldiği sorgulanmaktadır. Bu öykülerin fantastik durumu ısrarla sürdürmesi, Henry James'in kariyerinin özellikle son döneminde yakından ilgilendiği, gerçeklik, bilinç, sınırlar, zıtlıklar ve eşiksellik gibi konularla ilişkilidir. Yazarın hayalet hikayelerine bu şekilde yaklaşıldığında, yapıtlarının işaret ettiği modern ve hatta postmodern temalar daha çok dikkat çekmekte, bu da Henry James'in bütünüyle daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Henry James, anlatı belirsizliği, fantastik, doğaüstü, gerçeklik.

Any reader who has sat down to read a work with expectations rooted in realism will feel disorientated if the text starts introducing elements that are hard to reconcile with the "natural" laws of the known world. The reader will try to overcome this feeling by asking whether the supernatural-looking events are "real" within the world of the text, or whether they can be explained through natural means, in which case he would have to suspect the reliability of the characters' perceptions, treating the strange events presented in the work as fanciful products of the characters' mind. This is a serious state of uncertainty for the reader, and as long as it remains unresolved, it is a major source of curiosity and suspense. In his seminal study of the fantastic as a literary genre, Tzvetan Todorov

argues that "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty" (1975, p. 25). In most narratives, however, the hesitation experienced by the reader does not last long. The reader "opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic" (1975, p. 40). If he decides that the supernatural events are real, this means he has accepted the world of the story as partaking of the supernatural, and the work may be categorized under the genre of "the marvelous" (1975, p. 40). If, on the other hand, the reader chooses the other alternative and "decides that the laws of reality remain intact", this means the supernatural-looking events in the story do have a natural explanation after all, and the work may then be categorized under the genre of "the uncanny" (Todorov, 1975, p. 40). In rare cases, however, the reader is not allowed to resolve this hesitation. The reading ends, but "the ambiguity persists", and then the work remains within the genre of "the fantastic". To illustrate his point, Todorov refers to Henry James' famous ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), where it never becomes clear whether ghosts really "haunt the old estate or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized by the disturbing atmosphere that surrounds her" (1975, p. 43).

As a ghost story hard to reconcile with Henry James's realistic vein, *The Turn of the Screw* is usually considered somewhat apart from the bulk of the Jamesian canon. This approach, however, is not always appropriate since it may also lead us to ignore a considerable amount of James's short fiction marked by an interest in the "ghostly" or the supernatural. This aspect of the author's work becomes manifest especially in the short fiction of his late career, when he became increasingly preoccupied with the nature of reality and the workings of human consciousness. This article explores this quality of James's work by focusing on two of his short stories marked by an interest in the supernatural, namely "The Real Right Thing" (1899) and "The Jolly Corner" (1908). The article first demonstrates how both stories, in a vein similar to *The Turn of the Screw*, create an overall sense of unresolved ambiguity – hence maintaining the state of the Todorovian fantastic throughout. It then comments on the possible meanings of James's interest in the supernatural and his preference for "fantastic" plots, relating these to James's concerns as a writer especially in the later phase of his literary career.

Like *The Turn of the Screw*, both "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner" introduce haunted houses, but in these stories the protagonists encountering the supernatural events are male. Furthermore, both stories depart from the usual techniques of resorting to first-person and/or frame narration to create a sense of suspicion and unreliability. Both are told in third person, employing James's well-known technique of the third-person center of consciousness. This involves the third-person narrator handing over the task of focalization almost entirely to the protagonist, thereby making the reliability of the narrated events debatable. This technique may not be as conducive to creating a sense of unreliability as first-person narration, or may not serve to distance the reader from the narrated events as in frame narration, but, backed by a variety of other strategies, it also serves to evoke hesitation in the reader.

Compared to "The Jolly Corner", "The Real Right Thing" is a shorter and lesser known short story by James. The protagonist is George Withermore, a young journalist and critic who has been asked to write a biography of Ashton Doyne following his sudden, rather unexpected death. It can be gathered from the narrative that Ashton Doyne was a

well-known and established member of the same profession, a figure whom Withermore regarded as "his master" (p. 545). Withermore, therefore, feels great honor and awe to take on such a task, which is the request not only of Doyne's publishers but also of his now widowed wife. The story is set primarily in Doyne's study, to which Withermore has been granted access by Doyne's wife, and it is here that Withermore comes every night to work on the materials – "diaries, letters, memoranda, notes, documents" – he needs for writing this biography (p. 543). It is again here that he gradually starts to feel the uncanny presence of his late master:

> It wasn't a thing to talk about – it was only a thing to feel. There were moments, for instance, when, as he bent over his papers, the light breath of his dead host was as distinctly in his hair as his own elbows were on the table before him. There were moments when, had he been able to look up, the other side of the table would have shown him his companion as vividly as the shaded lamplight showed him his page (p. 549).

This description, which the reader may easily interpret as the subjective and slightly unreliable contemplation of the protagonist, becomes more credible as the reader is presented with more concrete clues as to the presence of Doyne's spirit. While engrossed in reading, for example, Withermore hears "documents on the table behind him gently shifted and stirred", finds a letter he has "mislaid pushed again into view" or an old journal opened "at the very date he wanted" (p. 550). Though somewhat frightened, Withermore also seems pleased with this situation since he feels that Doyne's spirit is supporting him in the writing of this biography. After some time, however, the spirit stops making its presence felt, and Withermore finds that he is unable to work in its absence. One night his uneasiness reaches such a point that he feels he can no longer remain in Doyne's study. Rushing out of the room and descending the stairs, he encounters Doyne's wife. In this highly ambiguous scene, she looks as though she shares and understands what has been going on. The dialogue that ensues between them is again rather vague and fraught with incomplete sentences, but it gradually dawns on the reader that Withermore is not alone in feeling that the house is haunted by Doyne's spirit. The two then confide in each other, exchanging opinions as to what should be "the real right thing" to do (p. 552). Does Doyne's spirit want them to go on working on the biography, or is it upset by this activity? A couple of days pass, and Withermore comes to the house for a final attempt to understand the spirit's intent. He goes up the stairs to Doyne's study, but is quick to come back. What Withermore has experienced upstairs is kept back from the reader, only to be learned through his conversation with Doyne's wife:

> "I give up."
> "Then you've seen him?"
> "On the threshold – guarding it."
> "Guarding it?" She glowed over her fan. "Distinct?"
> "Immense. But dim. Dark. Dreadful," said poor George Withermore.
> She continued to wonder. "You didn't go in?"
> The young man turned away. "He forbids!" (pp. 555-56)

The reader, then, has only this ambiguous dialogue to decide about the reliability of Withermore's experience. The encounter with the spirit, if there is one at all, is intentionally kept back – a significant device to add to the sense of uncertainty. Following this, Doyne's wife also goes up to the study, and the ambiguity increases even further as she comes back with a frightened expression on her face. In this scene, too, the reader's only source of knowledge is Withermore as focalizer, and the question he puts to her about her experience remains unanswered:

> "You've seen him?" Withermore asked.
>
> He was to infer later on from the extraordinary way she closed her eyes and, as if to steady herself, held them tight and long, in silence, that beside the unutterable vision of Ashton Doyne's wife his own might rank as an escape. He knew before she spoke that all was over. "I give up" (p. 556).

The story ends with this sentence, and the reader is left wondering what really happened. Is there really a ghost in this story, or is the narrator presenting the unreliable experiences of two troubled characters, who might have their own valid reasons for hallucinating about this dead man? On the one hand, the story presents significant clues about a supernatural presence in the house, and the experience with the apparition seems to be shared by two persons. This serves to strengthen the possibility of the ghost's reality. On the other hand, the story also leaves ample room for a "natural" explanation. It is, after all, possible to argue that Withermore feels so awed by the task of writing the biography of his late master that he starts to conjure up images reflecting his dread of inadequacy, of not being up to the greatness of the task. Even at the beginning, for instance, the narrator provides clues as to the anxiety Withermore feels at writing this biography:

> Withermore was conscious, abundantly, how close he had stood to him [Doyne], but he was not less aware of his comparative obscurity. He was young, a journalist, a critic, a hand-to-mouth character, with little, as yet, as was vulgarly said, to show. His writings were few and small, his relations scant and vague. Doyne, on the other hand, had lived long enough – above all had had talent enough – to become great ... (pp. 543-44).

This problem, which may even be read in the light of Harold Bloom's theory of "the anxiety of influence" (Bloom, 1975), is intensified further by Withermore's inability to decide about his late master's attitude towards the genre of biography in general and towards the writing of his own biography in particular:

> How did he [Withermore] know, ... he might begin to ask himself, that the book [Doyne's biography] was, on the whole, to be desired? What warrant had he ever received from Ashton Doyne himself for so direct and, as it were, so familiar an approach? Great was the art of biography,

> but there were lives and lives, there were subjects and subjects. He confusedly recalled ... old words dropped by Doyne over contemporary compilations .... He even remembered how his friend, at moments, would have seemed to show himself as holding that the 'literary' career might ... best content itself to be represented. The artist was what he *did* – he was nothing else (p. 546).

Similarly, there are hints in the story as to the serious discontent Doyne's widow feels about her relationship with her husband during his lifetime. It is as though she is trying to make up for something irretrievable by having this biography written. Meeting Withermore for the first time to talk about her wish to have her late husband's biography written, she explains how she wants this book "to make up": "She had not taken Doyne seriously enough in life, but the biography should be a solid reply to every imputation on herself" (p. 544). Later on, while the two are discussing whether or not Doyne's spirit wants them to continue with the biography, she expresses how deeply anxious she feels about a possible rejection by her late husband's spirit:

> She hesitated. 'You see what it means – for me – to give up [having this biography written].
>
> ...
>
> 'It would mean that he won't take from me –' But she dropped for despair.
>
> 'Well, what?'
>
> 'Anything,' said poor Mrs Doyne (p. 555).

Like Withermore, then, Mrs. Doyne may also be said to have her own reasons for being obsessed with her late husband and imagining the house to be haunted by his presence. In the story, then, a "natural" explanation for all that happens is as equally possible as a "supernatural" explanation.

James weaves all this uncertainty into the narrative very cleverly. A major strategy he uses for this purpose is the continual shifts between literal and figurative meanings, leaving the reader at a loss, unable to decide whether to take some words or expressions literally or figuratively. The following dialogue between Withermore and Doyne's wife is a good example for this strategy. Here the two characters have not confided in each other yet, and they appear to be talking figuratively about how near Doyne seems to them:

> "He does seem so near," said Withermore.
>
> "To you too?"
>
> This naturally struck him. "He does then to you?"
>
> She hesitated .... "Sometimes."
>
> "Here," Withermore went on, "it's as if he might at any moment come in ...."
>
> ...
>
> She hesitated again. "Do you ever feel as if he were – a – quite – a – personally in the room?"

> "Well, as I said just now," her companion laughed, "on hearing you behind me I seemed to take it so. What do we want, after all, ... but that he shall be with us?"
> "Yes, as you said he would be – that first time." She stared in full assent. "He *is* with us." (pp. 547-48)

Is all this meant literally or figuratively? There is a tension developing here, and this is felt even more acutely at the end of the story when the presence of the spirit has been more openly dealt with. It is as though the plot meticulously weaves this movement from the figurative to the literal. Even at the very end, however, uncertainty rules, and the reader knows that the literal may easily dissolve into the figurative again. It is in this way that "The Real Right Thing" attains the Todorovian state of the fantastic, refusing to resolve its ambiguity throughout.

"The Jolly Corner", James's better known short story, uses this strategy of literalizing the figurative even more widely. The protagonist, the fifty-six year-old Spencer Brydon, has returned to America after an absence of thirty-three years. He has spent most of his adult life in Europe, and now he has come back to attend to a number of family properties, one of them being the house on "the jolly corner", where he has spent his childhood (p. 946). The only other major character in the story is Alice Staverton, who appears to be a good old friend, and with her Brydon shares a lot of his concerns about the recent changes in New York and the loss of old sights and old values. It is again with her that he shares his growing obsession concerning the question of what kind of person he might have become if he had stayed in New York. This is what he confesses to Alice Staverton: "It comes over me that I had then a strange alter ego deep down somewhere within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud, and that I just took the course, I just transferred him to the climate, that blighted him for once and for ever" (p. 955). Staverton seems highly interested in this confession of Brydon's, and as their dialogue continues and develops, their innocent talk about the alter ego as an abstract possibility starts to take on a new dimension. In the discourse of both characters, the idea of the alter ego is gradually concretized until they start to talk about him as though he were a real person. Brydon, for instance, says, "*He* isn't myself. He's the just totally other person. But I do want to see him .... And I can. And I shall" (p. 956). And it is not long before Staverton joins in, claiming that she has seen Brydon's alter ego in her dream (p. 957).

This strategy of literalizing what is meant in a figurative sense is reinforced through a noticeable preference for words belonging to the discourse of the ghostly. The first time Brydon starts thinking of his alter ego, for instance, this idea "hauntingly remain[s] ... with him" (p. 949). Showing Staverton around his empty family house on the jolly corner, he tells her how the place makes him think of long-lost relatives and "the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth, afloat in the very air like microscopic motes" (p. 952). As the two continue looking around the house, they start talking about why Brydon left New York in the first place, and Brydon argues that the "beauty" of this decision he had made as a young man was that there was no clear reason for it, "'not the ghost of one'" (pp. 952-53). In reply, Staverton uses the same word to talk about something else: "Are you very sure the 'ghost' of one doesn't, much rather, serve –?" (p. 953) Brydon turns

pale on this remark and tries to hide his uneasiness by talking about ghosts jokingly: "'Oh ghosts – of course the place must swarm with them! I should be ashamed of it if it didn't'" (p. 953). What is meant idiomatically at first ("the ghost of a reason") takes on a more literal quality ("the ghost of a person") and leads to a statement about ghosts haunting the empty house. Through this "play back and forth between literal and figurative meanings" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 229), not only is the characters' preoccupation with ghosts emphasized but also a strong sense of ambiguity is created.

As Brydon starts to visit his house on the jolly corner every night, patiently waiting to meet his alter ego, the reader starts to feel the mystery and the uncertainty even more acutely. Just like Withermore in "The Real Right Thing", Brydon is almost sure of the presence of the spirit. Unlike the previous story, however, this time, the encounter with the ghost is described in a rather detailed way. One night Byrdon is highly excited and frightened to notice that one of the doors in the house, which he is sure to have left open, is now closed. He spends quite a long time in front of this closed door, trying to summon up the courage to open it and face the spirit. Collecting his thoughts, he eventually decides that opening the door will be unwise. He heads downstairs to leave the house, but stops short when he notices that this time the door downstairs, which he has intentionally left closed, is wide open. At the same moment his alter ego appears to him. Greatly shocked and overwhelmed, he faces the spirit:

> Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there .... what made the face dim was the pair of raised hands that covered it .... So Brydon ... took him in; with every fact of him now, in the higher light, hard and acute – his planted stillness, his vivid truth, his grizzled bent head and white masking hands, his queer actuality of evening-dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk lappet and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe (p. 973).

In her study on dress and fashion in the work of Henry James, Clair Hughes explains that, contrary to usual expectations, "James's ghosts … are described in terms that are not at all shadowy or other-worldly. His ghosts are dressed, and their costume exhibits a quite worldly specificity of detail" (2001, p. 171). The same can be observed in the highly concrete description of the ghost Brydon faces. What was presented as just an idea or an abstraction at the beginning of the story seems now to have materialized into a real figure. Such a description appears to be providing good evidence for the reality of the spirit, but this does not help to rule out the ambiguity completely. As Hughes remarks in relation to the detailed description of the spirit in "The Jolly Corner", the "actualities [in the ghost's clothing] that shine out of the darkness are traditionally 'ghostly' in their fragmentary glitter, but they are also credible as the details of evening dress that would indeed be visible in light from the street" (2001, p.178). The ambiguity, then, is retained even in this concrete description. Furthermore, it should be remembered that throughout the whole scene of the encounter with the ghost, Brydon is alone in the house, and everything is presented through his focalizing perspective, which may be highly unreliable, given his obsessive state. The scene ends with the alter ego leaping into Brydon's throat and Brydon's subsequent loss of consciousness. Alice Staverton and the cleaning lady find

him the next day lying unconscious on the floor. The end of the story presents another strange dialogue between Brydon and Staverton. Here Staverton fully trusts Brydon's account of his encounter with the alter ego, and more interestingly, she also claims to have seen the spirit the same night in her dream. Her description of the outer appearance of the spirit also seems to coincide with Brydon's description. The story ends with the two characters sharing confidences and feeling even closer to each other. As in "The Real Right Thing", then, there are again two characters sharing an uncanny experience, but this does not help to resolve the ambiguity of the narrative. On the one hand, the supernatural quality of the events seem to be corroborated by the detailed description of Brydon's encounter with the spirit and by Alice Staverton's similar experiences as well as her willingness to believe his account. On the other hand, however, the story presents no finalizing clues as to the reality of these strange occurrences. Instead, it maintains a strong sense of unreliability by having Byrdon as the only witness and focalizer of the supernatural encounter. Alice Staverton's account of her own similar experiences is also open to doubt, given the covert references the story makes to how deeply she has loved Brydon and how constantly – and perhaps obsessively – she has thought about him throughout the years. Moreover, there is no certainty that the "respective figures" Brydon and Staverton describe are "identical" (Esch, 1987, p. 90). It is, therefore, perfectly possible to argue that Staverton is as unreliable a character as Brydon and that the story is primarily an account of the confidences shared by two characters, both of whose mental stability is questionable.

It is interesting to observe that most critics who have commented on either "The Real Right Thing" or "The Jolly Corner" have tended to overlook the ambiguity of these narratives, interpreting the ghost in both stories mainly in symbolic or allegorical terms. Alison Booth, for example, approaches "The Real Right Thing" from the perspective of literary tourism, biography-writing, and publicizing an author's private life in his lifetime and beyond, suggesting that the ghost in the story signifies a warning "against disturbing the ashes of a writer" (2004, p. 225). Donatello Izzo, on the other hand, is interested in the "alluring" as well as "threatening" role of women in stories like "The Real Right Thing", where there is a "triangular relation" involving "overtly heterosexual and covertly homosexual" dynamics (2006, p. 60). Similarly, commenting on "The Jolly Corner", Benjamin Newman focuses primarily on the symbolism of the haunted house, arguing that it stands for the different stages in Brydon's life, which he needs to come to terms with (Newman, 1987). Deborah Esch approaches the same story as an allegory of reading and finding meaning and identity through the narrative (Esch, 1987). A decade later, Barbara Hardy argues that the spirit Brydon encounters is "a ghost of the mind" (1997, p. 193) and that "This is a story about the invocation of a ghost, by imagination" (1997, p. 196). Hugh Stevens, on the other hand, approaches Brydon as a "male hysteric" (1997, p. 136) and interprets the story in the light of narcissism and homoeroticism. Compared to these readings, Shalyn Claggett (2005) and Lee Clark Mitchell (2007) adopt an approach more in line with this study, focusing on sustained confusion and ambiguity as key components of "The Jolly Corner". Neither article, however, approaches ambiguity from a Todorovian perspective, whereby the text refuses to resolve the reader's hesitation concerning the reliability of the narrated events. In their own different ways, they emphasize, instead, the vain endeavor to pinpoint once and for all what the ghost signifies and how the story can be interpreted.

As this brief survey demonstrates, Jamesian scholarship of the past three decades has shown a considerable amount of interest in "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner" and produced interpretations that are highly valid and insightful in themselves. The general tendency, however, has been to favor a natural explanation, treating the supernatural quality of these stories as only a useful device for conveying deeper symbolic meanings. The present study, on the other hand, emphasizes that both stories purposefully foreground their supernatural aspect and strongly sustain the possibility that the spirits the characters encounter are real. Considered from this perspective, "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner" acquire meaning and significance not only through the possibilities they present for symbolic readings but also through the sheer fact that they are ambiguous narratives belonging to the Todorovian genre of the fantastic. It can also be argued that these narratives, through their sustained ambiguity, create a more powerful effect and richer possibilities for interpretation compared to others which resolve their uncertainty in the direction of either the "marvelous" or the "uncanny". In the case of the marvelous, the reader often focuses only on the supernatural events, which have become "real" within the world of the story, and the characters' struggle for survival in the face of the unknown. Although such a narrative creates suspense, the reader is still at ease since he knows deep down that what is described in the story is actually very distant and impossible to happen in the real world. The uncanny may also be said to have a similar distancing effect. Explaining the strange phenomena presented in the world of the story as the fanciful products of a character's troubled mind, the reader may comfortably regard the narrative as describing not a universal but a rare or a special case. The fantastic, however, creates no such feeling of comfort. The reader of a fantastic narrative is in a constant state of hesitation, always conscious of the unnerving possibility that what seems strange and distant might easily become familiar and intimate. This leaves a very powerful and long-lasting effect, which is reinforced further in James's stories through the continual shifts between literal and figurative meanings. As Millicent Bell argues in relation to "The Jolly Corner", "The literalization of metaphor ... is an important semantic technique", aptly making the reader "understand how what can be conceived as a possibility is no less real than what happens" (1991, p. 278).

Following this statement, which applies equally well to "The Real Right Thing", Bell suggests that the narrative ambiguity created through the interplay between the literal and the figurative is not just a technique James resorts to, but "a representation of the story's own theme" (1991, p. 278). Indeed, it is possible to argue that the fantastic mode and the ambiguity constantly sustained in these stories point to a variety of themes signaling modernist concerns about human consciousness and the nature of reality. In his study of the short fiction of Henry James, Richard A. Hocks discusses how the author's late career reflects a preoccupation with "reality in its affective flux" (1990, p. 7). He explains that although "James began his long career as an exponent of psychological realism" (1990, p. 7), his later work often went beyond this, demonstrating an awareness of the limitations of realism in depicting and understanding reality and consciousness (1990, p. 9). "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner", as well as a considerable number of James's other "fantastic" stories, may all be interpreted in this regard. A major theme in these stories concerns the nature of reality – what it is, how it can be understood, and how it relates to human consciousness. Through their ambiguous and unresolved

narratives, these stories divorce themselves from older and simpler accounts of reality and anticipate new and more complex approaches, which also characterize modernism. In the words of Hocks, James's "subtle narrative strategy ... eventually conspires to intensify the condition of ambiguity and deception in a world where the simpler Cartesian division between mind and external phenomena no longer quite prevails, or at least provides us with that consistent line of demarcation we might have wished" (1990, p. 7).

The blurring of this line of demarcation introduces an entirely new perception, where nothing is certain any longer and boundaries are constantly in question. In this respect, uncertainty itself is another important theme in these stories, which situate the reader in a liminal space, never allowing him to opt comfortably for one meaning or another. In his enlightening study of the "ghostly" dimension of Henry James's writing, T. J. Lustig also refers to Todorov's notion of the fantastic, explaining how one can find here themes concerning "'the collapse ... of the limit between matter and mind' and of other limits between word and thing, subject and object, real and unreal, literal and figurative" (1994, p. 21). He then explains how "the great principles of James's fiction" should be understood not in "dualistic" or "unitary" but in "relational or proportional" terms: "[James's thinking] ... seeks neither to fix nor to cancel nor to transcend static oppositions but ... to articulate relationships in terms of connections and distinctions, contrasts and comparisons" (1994, p. 61). This aspect of the author's work is observable especially in his stories like "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner", where the ghostly and the supernatural are key elements of the plot. As demonstrated above, these stories place the reader precisely on the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, withholding the license to cross this threshold of hesitation. Any kind of resolution would provide relief accompanied by a re-affirmation of existing boundaries and categories. These stories, however, intentionally foreground the threshold. Making effective use of "the fantastic as the discourse of the limit" (Armitt, 1996, p. 7), they seriously question given notions about borders and categorical distinctions. Uncertainty and skepticism, therefore, become the defining qualities and themes of these stories. Considered from this perspective, such stories in the Jamesian canon may even be said to signal postmodern concerns, which seriously question all fixities and powerfully promote the dissolution of the boundaries between all kinds of oppositions.

"The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner" are only two of a considerable number of James's short stories dealing with the supernatural in a highly ambiguous way. Especially the short fiction of the author's late career abounds in similar works employing clever narrative strategies to create and sustain a state of hesitation in the reader. By focusing particularly on "The Real Right Thing" and "The Jolly Corner", this article has attempted to explore this quality of James's work and demonstrate that it deserves almost as much attention as the better known and more widely studied aspects of his fiction. Considering James's interest in the "fantastic" more seriously and dealing more closely with his works written in this vein will undoubtedly lead to a better understanding of the author's preoccupation with issues like consciousness, reality, boundaries, and oppositions. This will, in turn, shed further light on how James's work, especially his late literary career, anticipates modernist and even postmodernist concerns, making worthwhile contributions to a better understanding of the author's canon as a whole.

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