THE CONCEPTS OF DEATH AND DYING IN HENRY JAMES

Mihaela PRIOTEASA[*]

Abstract: *Henry James's entire fiction abounds in images of death that develop the plot, give shape to the atmosphere and accentuate the climaxes of his works. The typology of his characters ranges from suicidal artists to murderous lovers and in his tales and novels death comes in every shape: fall, poison, drowning, gunshot, execution or natural causes, offering a whole dimensionality to the final act of passing through the way in which it patterns identity and ultimately creating a gothic spectacle of the interconnectivity between life and death, the dead and the living. Although death has been established to be one of the major literary themes, the Jamesian representation of it is varied and complex. The present paper aims at analysing the author's view on mortality and its consequences on his style and perception of the subject.*

Keywords: *mood, plot, death, mortality*

Although Henry James's novels do not abound in images of corpses or actual moments of death, his fiction is full of death that conducts the plot and the development of the events, offers different nuances to the mood, and emphasizes the climaxes of his novels and tales. James chose to cast in the role of his protagonists a wide range of characters from suicidal artists to "murderous lovers, adventurous heiresses, romantic consumptives, fallen soldiers, intrusive biographers, and faithful keepers of the flame" (Cutting, 2005: 1). As for the method of death, the American author also utilized a large variety of instances and settings (poison, drowning, gunshot, fall, execution or natural causes), some of them even violent, but all having the same outcome – the end of life. Henry James manages to give the readers some of the most notorious narrative hauntings, and is one of the most acknowledged writers to have explored again and again the bizarre connection between the living and the dead. However the death painted by James is varied and complex and is a recurring pattern throughout his novels enhancing his narrative structures and strategies, his own subjects and styles:

> The Jamesian ghostly avoids generic trappings, such as overtly supernatural manifestations, in favor of carefully controlled uncertainty and suggestive blurring of conceptual borders. With its characteristic use of unspecificity and absent centers, James's late style is especially uncanny. His novels and tales derive a haunted quality from being written from the point of view of outsiders, such as children, servants, sensitive bachelors, and Americans adrift in Europe. (Cutting, 2005: 1)

Like the author himself, many Jamsian characters are haunted by their failed lives. Since he stands at the "side" of literary history due to his geographical position (caught between America and England) and to his ambivalent literary canon (caught not only between two centuries but also between two national literatures) James himself was probably haunted by his failure to fully adapt in England on one side and by the Civil War in which he did not fight on the other. Taking into consideration the

[*] University of Craiova, mihaela_prioteasa20@yahoo.com

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importance of haunting as a theoretical concept the success of his famous ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is not surprising at all.

Henry James uses the language of religion in his narrative to power it up to a secularized world since the "sacred" for him is like a condensation of various terms such as abnegation, deliverance, fetishism, dedication, blasphemy, immolation, prohibition, and the cult of the dead that he employs in order to give shape to the narrative form, defending it at the same time from the accelerating changes of modernity. He either includes death as a subtle motif on the surface of his fiction or as a "trademark" to secure the overall tonality and to suggest affiliation to reality: "The organic quality of his style, in which *ideas* are integrated into a complex fabric of narrative structure, contemporary reference, and urbane style, means that *death* cannot be isolated without a degree of violence towards the characters and the whole textual game" (Cutting, 2005: 4). However *The Europeans* (1878) commences with a description of a snowy graveyard and ends with a final sentence that informs of a death and a future marriage.

Even some of James' most genuine works, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *Daisy Miller: A Study* (1878), are famous for their salient use of death which is integrated inside the different aspects and levels of the narrative structure. *Daisy Miller*, James's first great success surprises with the death of the heroine at the finale although it offers closure: Winterbourne socially isolates Daisy and in a few abrupt sentences the readers learn about her sudden temperature that causes her demise form this world. The final pages of the novel, with their account of Daisy's death, seem to encapsulate the essence of the tale as a whole, its equivoque and stylistic equilibrium. The death of the protagonist in the last pages has the purpose of inviting the reader to imagine its meaning:

> It comes as neither a complete surprise nor a foregone conclusion; the narrative has been building up to the death by carefully weaving its possibility in advance into the fabric of plot, characterization, and tone, so that when the death arrives it can make sense. Numerous small signposts to the possibility of a tragic outcome give expression to a sense of fatality that weighs against the vitality of Daisy's youthful, American personality, which is built up with equally deft touches. Whereas she seems determined to live and yet dies at the end of the story, Winterbourne seems never to become fully alive but almost to have died in spirit before it began. The closing pages present her death as a condensed climax, over with all too quickly, while his moribund and chilly nature diffuses, purposeless and unfocussed, throughout the tale. What is the justice, lesson, or tragedy, if any, in Daisy's death? What judgment does it pass on Winterbourne, or on James? How might it explain all that has gone before? These basic interpretative questions, left without clear answer from the narrator, help to define the pleasures of the ending and to explain the popularity of the tale. (Cutting, 2005: 5)

According to Shoshana Felman, in *The Turn of the Screw* the narrative is constructed around the ending, namely Miles's mysterious death, describing the return from the grave of the dead servants:

> If the story has thus managed to lose at once its author, its authority, its title and its origin, *without losing itself* – without being itself suppressed, obliterated or forgotten – it is because its written record has been repeatedly and carefully *transferred* from hand to hand: bequeathed first from the dying governess to Douglas, and then by the dying Douglas to the narrator. It is thus

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> death itself which moves the narrative chain forward, which inaugurates the manuscript's displacements and the process of the substitution of the narrators. By so doing, death paradoxically appears not as an end but rather as a starting point: the starting point of the *transferral* of the story, that is, of its survival, of its capacity to go on, to subsist, by means of the repeated *passages* which it effects *from death to life*, and which effect the narrative. (Felman, 2003: 173)

Death ultimately contributes to the legendary ambiguity of the tale as we do not know for sure what has caused Miles's death (the crush of the governess/the scare that weakened his already frail heart) or if he actually recovered and grew up to become Douglas. The last interpretation is hard to take into consideration although ambiguity is preserved until the final line of the narrative:

> But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day. With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him – it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped. (James, 2015: 84)

Felman concludes that, in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, the element of death with all of its stances is blunt and obvious in every aspect of the novel and it is what defines the origin, development and endpoint of the narrative. Using framing and ambiguity techniques to attract the reader already lured by the supernatural, James's fiction is not uniformly deathly, and thus not generalized to all his authorial phases. However it is interesting to observe how the representations of death span over his entire career although to different degrees.

Depending on the totally opposed perspectives, the scientific and the religious one, death is seen as "an extinction of individual consciousness through irreparable damage to the physical body," or as "a release of the soul from the body to enter a new form of life" (Cutting, 2005: 8). A literary realist and not a religious novelist, Henry James's depictions of death contain layers of irony concerning the transcendence of death. Unlike Gustave Flaubert's realism in *Madame Bovary* (1856) which underlines the physiological aspects of Emma's death and her emotional, mental, and sexual degradation, James's fiction manages to cut off these kind of details and concentrates more on social and psychological relations. However "his novels and tales manoeuvre their characters into conditions determined by social and material realities with which they must come to terms. Again and again, death is one such actuality: a reality felt and ultimately inescapable, however ingeniously represented" (Cutting, 2005: 8). His novels expose a reality of death that is most of the times purified through a filter of self-conscious style and a point-of-view technique that have as main purpose to record social, mental and individual connections.

The concept of death is not represented only as a single, absolute event at the end of a character's lifetime but as a gradual and partial process:

> Even while 'we' nominally go on those parts of us that have been overdarkened become as dead; our extinct passions and faculties and interests, that is, refuse to revive; our personality, by which I mean our 'soul,' declining in many a case, or in most, by inches, is aware of itself at any given moment as it is, however contracted, and not as it was however magnificent; we may die piecemeal, but by no sign ever demonstrably caught does the 'liberated'

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> spirit react from death piecemeal. The answer to that may of course be that such reactions as can be 'caught' are not claimed for it even by the fondest lovers of the precarious idea; the most that is claimed is that the reaction takes place somewhere – and the farther away from the conditions and circumstances of death the more probably. (James, 1999: 119)

This view tends to be more accentuated as James ages since there is an obvious pattern of his endings that try to show the characters go through various emotional, moral, or social traumas equivalent to physical death. Claire de Cintré, the heroine of *The American* (1876-1977), chooses to give up love and the world, at the end of the narrative and commits herself to living in a Carmelite convent, entrapping herself in a self-made tomb:

> The altar was on the hither side of the screen, and between it and the entrance were disposed several benches and chairs. Three or four of these were occupied by vague, motionless figures – figures that he presently perceived to be women, deeply absorbed in their devotion. The place seemed to Newman very cold; the smell of the incense itself was cold. Besides this there was a twinkle of tapers and here and there a glow of colored glass. Newman seated himself; the praying women kept still, with their backs turned. He saw they were visitors like himself and he would have liked to see their faces; for he believed that they were the mourning mothers and sisters of other women who had had the same pitiless courage as Madame de Cintre. But they were better off than he, for they at least shared the faith to which the others had sacrificed themselves. Three or four persons came in; two of them were elderly gentlemen. Everyone was very quiet. Newman fastened his eyes upon the screen behind the altar. That was the convent, the real convent, the place where she was. But he could see nothing; no light came through the crevices. He got up and approached the partition very gently, trying to look through. But behind it there was darkness, with nothing stirring. (James, 2014: 315)

In other examples in James's fiction we find out that as long as physical death has not yet announced its presence, life continues to offer some meaning, even if the narrative line, like in the case of *The American*, is set towards demonstrating its irreversible limitations: Claire will stay inside the convent for the rest of her life, even if she will live in a state of suspended animation. For James's characters life as we know it is a stage they never fully reach. Strether's recommendation to young Bilham in *The Ambassadors* (1903) stands as proof of the Jamsian male character who never lived:

> Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had? …I haven't done so enough before - and now I'm too old; too old at any rate for what I see. …What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. … Still, we have the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don't quite know which. Of course at present I'm a case of reaction against the mistake. … Do what you like so long as you don't make my mistake. For it was a mistake. Live! (James, 2008:5)

In order to be acknowledged, the Jamesian depictions of death and dying need to analyzed from the perspective of having shared systems of meaning, starting with elementary levels of language and grammar and ending with complex discursive practices of genre conventions and character types as they acquire the status of patterns that speak for others and tell their story. The author is the creator and the destroyer of

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his characters' fates but at the same time, he gives his writings a sense of life since the excitation of the senses and of the intellect forms a background for real meaning and value.

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