# A CRITIC APPROACH OF HENRY JAMES SEEN BY NORTHROP FRYE AND DAVID LODGE

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**Rezumat:**

Lucrarea de faţă reprezintă încercarea noastră de a descifra ideile literare pe care Henry James, Northrop Frye şi David Lodge le-au introdus în critică; prin urmare, ne axăm pe *The Art of Fiction* şi *The Art of the Novel*, ambele aparţinând lui Henry James, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, a lui Northrop Frye, şi *The Art of Fiction*, a lui David Lodge. Ne vom apleca în mod special asupra lui Henry James şi asupra conceptelor introduse de el în naratologie, vom face referire la caracteristicile distinctive ale modernismului, curentul literar al cărui reprezentant este şi la felul în care Frye şi Lodge privesc opera Maestrului dintr-o perspectivă critică. Scopul este acela de a familiariza cititorii cu autorul american Henry James şi de a înţelege complexitatea lucrării sale.

**Cuvinte cheie**:

Critică, stil indirect liber, fluxul conştiinţei, inteligenţă centrală, informator, observator.

**Abstract:**

The present paper represents our attempt to decipher the literary ideas that Henry James, Northrop Frye and David Lodge brought in criticism, therefore our main focus is on *The Art of Fiction* and *The Art of the Novel,* both belonging to Henry James, *The Anatomy of Criticism*-by Northrop Frye and *The Art of Fiction* of David Lodge. Particular attention is going to be given to Henry James and the concepts that he introduced in narratology, we will refer to the distinct features of Modernism, the literary current which has H. James as its representative and to the way Frye and Lodge regard "The Master's" work from a critic point of view. The purpose is to familiarize the readers with the American author Henry James and to understand the complexity of his work.

**Key words:**

Criticism, free indirect style, stream of consciousness, central intelligence, informer, observer.

We have chosen this topic for we are aware of the importance of the writer and critic Henry James in the context of Modernism. He was an American writer, naturalized in Great Britain, he is the one that contributed



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significantly to the development of this literary current, Modernism, when it was at the beginning. In criticism, he is the one that revolutionized narrative by the introduction of terms such as *central intelligence, informer (ficelle) and reflector (observer).* The aim of our paper is to underline the major points that define Henry James using the criticism of two authoritative voices such as the Canadian Northrop Frye and the British David Lodge.

Moreover, the present paper aims to answer the following questions:

-Why is Henry James representative for Modernism?

-What are the characteristics of modernist writing?

- How do Northrop Frye and David Lodge perceive his work from a critic point of view?

According to Henry James, ”art grows due to discussions, experiments, curiosity, it evolves after various attempts, due to the exchange of opinions and the comparison of different points of view”(James *The Art of Fiction* 1963:392). His novels are the living proof that they encapsulate all the ingredients above, therefore, his works should be regarded from the perspective of Henry James' major contribution to the development of the novel. Not only is he one of the first theoreticians of this literary genre, but also the creator of what is called ”modern psychological novel”. Actually, James had very few items of previous knowledge about modern novels, consequently he was the designer of his own theory and he approached this topic integrating the tools of his own writing, using his own experience of modernist writer. In fact, in 1906, towards the end of his career as a novelist, James started the extremely difficult labour of gathering all the materials for the complete edition of his works (*The New York Edition*) –this activity was to last until 1909; in the *Prefaces* written on this particular occasion, he reflected on the aesthetic value of the novel, especially on the technique of writing novels and on the solving process of narrative problems which may or may not find their answer in his own creation.

Written after his novels, the *Prefaces* are recognized as theoretical studies and, for a long time, they have been considered the supreme critical authority regarding James's works. In time, this status has changed ever since literary criticism focused on James's work itself, carefully examining secondary proofs and trying to interpret them wisely and more objectively. Even if we do not agree with R. F. Leavis that the *Prefaces* can be misleading and can take us to errors in meaning, what is certain today is that the work of Henry James interpreted according to his own aesthetic and



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moral judgement is being questioned more and more (Leavis 1962:171-5). The *Prefaces* continue to have their own importance, because they are the basis for a ”poetics” of the novel and we support this point of view, without falling into intentional fallacy.

James’s remarks concerning the effects obtained by the use of narrative techniques will later be developed in what we call *point of view*. In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory,* Gerald Prince underlines that:

“*Few narrative features have been discussed as extensively as point of view –the physical, psychological, and ideological position in terms of which narrated situations and events are presented, the perspective through which they are filtered –and few have been associated with as rich a terminology (from central intelligence, vision and focalization to filter and slant).*

*There is general agreement that the filtering or perceiving identity, the holder of point of view, the focalizer can be situated in the diegesis or out of it. In the former case, akin to Chatman’s “filter”, the point of view emanates from a character (the reflector, central intelligence or central consciousness so valued by Henry James) or from some nonanthropomorphic existent (e.g. a camera)*” (Herman, 2008: 442).

All James’s experiments refer to the dramatization or the objectification of the novel; this is a complex procedure, for it does not limit itself to dialogue, but it involves the exploration of the psychic life. By refusing the role of a commentator, James succeeds in psychological analysis by the dramatization of the conscience of a character who, controlling the entire action, assimilates and processes everything. *Central intelligence*, *third person reflector*, in James’ terms and *the point-of-view character*, in current terminology, refer to this character whose judgement does not necessarily coincide with the author’s.

According to James, *the central intelligence* is the character that is endowed with omniscience, knowing everything that happens in the novel. The *infomer (ficelle)* is the one that brings essential pieces of information that change the course of events, but his role is limited, being an episodic appearance. The *observer (reflector)* is the one that simply records facts and analyses them.

To begin with, Henry James is seen differently as far as his belonging to a literary current is concerned. Some critics believe that he is



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premodernist, others –modernist. According to *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Modernism is a "literary movement, spanning the period from the last quarter of the XIX-th century in France and from 1890 in Great Britain, America and Germany, to the start of the Second World War"(Drabble 1969:682-3). The modernist novel is often non-chronological, with experiments in the representation of time such as sudden jumps, temporal juxtapositions or "spatialization of time".

In *20th Century Literary Criticism –A Reader*, David Lodge points out that "more than every single writer, Henry James may be said to have presided over the transformation of the Victorian novel into the modern novel, and at the same time to have laid the foundations of modern criticism"(Lodge 1972:43). The same idea is emphasised by Codrin Liviu Cuţitaru:

"*La sfîrşitul victorianismului şi debutul modernismului, americanul (naturalizat în Anglia!) Henry James are intuiţia excepţională că marile bătălii epice se vor duce, în viitor, mai curînd pe teritoriul fenomenologiei narative decît pe cel - cumva tradiţionalist - al naraţiunii propriu-zise.*"[1]

In a discussion with Virginia Woolf, Thomas Hardy remarked about modernist writers: "They've changed everything now...we used to think there was a beginning and a middle and an end." (Woolf 1985:97). The observation of Hardy was correct, being confirmed by later critics who concluded that by the middle of 1920s, the narrative features of the Victorian and Edwardian period have been significantly challenged and reshaped. What did this change do? Actually, it affected form and structure, rather than subject. Modernist writers were concerned with subjects such as exile, the ethics of empire, the anonymity of human life, shifting gender relations and attitudes to sex. Modernist innovations are predominantly present at anglophone writers. The origins of the modernist movement "can be retraced to the turn of the century. Its beginnings might even be located more exactly: between Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*(1897) and the novella he wrote two years later, *Heart of Darkness*"(Randall Stevenson 1998:316-21). In *Heart of Darkness,* Marlow

[1] "At the end of Victorianism and the beginning of Modernism, the American (naturalized in England!) Henry James has the exceptional intuition that the great epic battles will be held, more presumably, on the territory of narrative phenomenology than on the –more traditional one –of narrative itself."(Cuţitaru, Codrin Liviu, 2007: np, translation mine)



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tells his listeners with confidence that "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation" and they should believe his words for "you see me, whom you know" (Conrad 1995:50). Such doubts are representative for modernist epistemological uncertainties and its scepticism of conventional realism is connected to the reliability of communicating "life sensation" or "truth" independent of its subjective construction of an individual observer. On the one hand, in Victorian writing, there were omniscient narratives – appropriate to an age when people believed in an omniscient God; on the other hand, modernist fiction mediates the perceived world through the idiosyncratic outlook of an individual perceiver. Showing admiration for what he called Conrad's use of a "responsible intervening first-person singular", Henry James also employed certain characters as "intense *perceivers*" –focalizers– to provide a "structural centre" for early twentieth-century novels such as *The Ambassadors* (James 1914: 275; 1962: 71, 85).

Instead of upholding the realist illusion, the Modernists break narrative frames or move from one level of narration to the other without warning; the works may be reflexive (about their own writing) or they may place a story inside another (a device known as *interior duplication* or *mise-en-abyme*, placing into the abyss).

Instead of plot events, there is an emphasis on character's consciousness, unconsciousness, memory and perception (after 1900, the ideas of the philosopher Henry Bergson and the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud became important tools and points of departure for writers and artists). Works are often oriented around a centre of consciousness and characterized by the use of such techniques as *free indirect style* and *stream of consciousness*. In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge attempted and succeeded in clarifying the meaning of these terms: the *stream of consciousness* was a phrase coined by William James, psychologist brother of the novelist, Henry, in *Principles of Psychology,* to characterize the continuous flow of thought and sensation in human mind (Lodge 1992: 41-5). In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory,* Alan Palmer tries to decipher the meaning of the terms *stream of consciousness* and *interior monologue*, mentioning that the two narrative expressions have different origins but have now become inextricably linked. Although some definitions emphasize the random, associative, illogical and seemingly ungrammatical free flow of thought, others underline "more controlled and direct thought non-conscious, but also conscious thought; verbal, but also



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non-verbal thought. Some specify cognition only, while others include various combinations of cognition, perception, sensations and emotions." (Palmer 2008:570-1). The same critic claims that "there is no clear consensus on the relationship between the two terms in question. Some theorists use the terms interchangeably. Others regard one as a particular type or subset of the other. Some attach different and separate meanings to each". The most common distinction is this, according to Palmer:

"*Stream of consciousness describes the thought itself and/or the presentation of thought in the sort of third-person passage, (...) characteristic of Woolf and the early episodes of Ulysses. Interior monologue (or what Cohn terms the autonomous monologue) describes the long, continuous, first person passages or whole texts that contain uninterrupted, unmediated free direct thought such as "Penelope" (Molly Bloom's famous monologue in the last episode of Ulysses) or the first three sections of Faulkner's* ***The Sound and the Fury*** *(1929).*"

Later, it was borrowed by literary critics to describe a particular kind of modern fiction which tried to imitate this process, exemplified by James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf.

David Lodge brought viable arguments in order to support the idea that there are two main techniques for presenting consciousness in prose fiction: *interior monologue* and *free indirect style*. One the one hand, a literary work which has the fingerprint of interiour monologue has the following marks: the grammatical subject of the discourse is an "I" and we overhear the character verbalizing his/her thoughts as they occur. On the other hand, the free indirect style is a method which renders thought as reported speech, in the III-rd person, past tense, but keeps the kind of vocabulary that is appropriate to the character and deletes some of the tags like "she thought", "she wondered", "she asked herself", that a more formal narrative style would require.

It is free indirect style that particularly characterizes Henry James's writing and it is especially the case of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The narrators are often strangely limited third-person or unreliable first-person narrators, or there are multiple, shifting narrators.

Instead of using closure and the fulfilment of reader expectations, Modernists often work towards open endings or unique forms: they utilize enigma, the ellipsis, the narrative gap and they value ambiguity and



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complexity. In this respect, Henry James' prose excels in the technique of the mystery, building up realities of the "mind" and less of historical "observation". Therefore, we only grasp pieces of reality, fragments, segments and we give them coherence and meaning through intuition and analysis. That is why "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (James *The Art of Fiction* 1951:393).

Being preoccupied with the structure of the novel, the scope, theory, principles and techniques of literary constructions, the Canadian critic Northrop Frye encapsulated in his book, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), four essays having two aims: to "give my reasons for believing in such a synoptic view" and "to provide a tentative version of it which will make enough sense to convince my readers that *a view*, of the kind that I outline, is attainable." (Frye 1957: 6).

Based on Matthew Arnold's idea of letting the mind play freely around a subject in which there has been much endeavour and little attempt at perspective, Frye believes that criticism is not only a part of a larger activity, but an essential part of it. According to Northrop Frye, "the subject-matter of literary criticism is an art and criticism is evidently of an art, too."(Frye 1957: 3).

In *First Essay. Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes,* Chapter *"Fictional Modes: Introduction"*, Frye underlines the differences in works of fiction, caused by the different elevations of the characters in them, as it is stated in the second paragraph of Aristotle's *Poetics* (Frye 1957:33). When referring to James and his use of ghosts in fiction in *The Turn of the Screw*, Frye analyses systematically, pointing out that in a true myth, there can obviously be no consistent distinction between ghosts and living beings, in romance –a ghost:

"*as a rule is merely one more character: he causes little surprise because his appearance is no more marvellous than many other events. In high mimetic, where we are with the order of nature, a ghost is relatively easy to introduce because the plane of experience is above our own, but when he appears he is an awful and mysterious being from what is perceptibly another world. In low mimetic fiction, ghosts have been, ever since Defoe, almost entirely confined to a separate category of "ghost stories". In ordinary low mimetic fiction, they are inadmissible, "in complaisance to the scepticism of the reader", as Fielding puts it, a scepticism which extends only to low mimetic conventions*."(Frye 1957: 50).



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From this perspective, the later works of James are perceived by Frye as "ironic fiction", the ghost coming back as a fragment of a disintegrated personality. Carrying out a thorough analysis of the types of this ironic and anti-allegorical imagery, Frye identifies four categories:

1. **the typical symbol** of the metaphysical school of the Baroque period, the **conceit** or deliberately strained union of normally disparate things;

2. **the substitute image of symbolism**, part of a technique for suggesting and evoking things rather than explicitly naming them. It is characterised by the technique of avoidance applied in order not to explicitly name the specific item/object/person etc.;

3. **objective correlative**, the kind of image evoked by Eliot that sets up an inward focus of emotion in poetry and, at the same time, substitutes itself for an idea;

4. **the heraldic symbol**, which is considered by Frye closely related to objective correlative, but not identical, for it is the central emblematic image which comes most quickly to mind when we consider the term "symbol" in modern literature. The specific example that Frye offers is James's golden bowl, which refers to the implied similarity between the crack in the golden bowl, bought my his possessor from a second hand shop in order to become an object of admiration in his house, and the "crack" in the character's personality which exists and can be covered by no means. Frye brings further explanation, for the heraldic symbol "differs from the image of the formal allegory in that there is no continuous relationship between art and nature", for "the heraldic emblematic image is in a paradoxical and ironic relation to both narrative and meaning"(Frye 1957:92). To bring further examples to clarify the meaning, the critic suggests that the heraldic symbol combines the qualities of Carlyle's intrinsic symbol with significance in itself and the extrinsic symbol which points quizzically to something else.

James is seen as a "mythopoetic writer" in the last period of creation, for he becomes bewilderingly complex. But this complexity is meant to reveal and not to disguise the myth. By mythopoesis, we generally understand, according to http://www.thefreedictionary.com/mythopoesis, "the creation of myth".

Frye launches a paradoxical statement:



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"*In prose, as in verse, the writers most frequently called musical are usually the ones most remote from actual music*."(Frye 1957: 267).

Referring to the author of *The Portrait of a Lady,* the critic claims that "the long sentences in the later novels of Henry James are *containing sentences*, all the qualifications and parentheses are fitted into a pattern, and as one point after another is made, there emerges not a linear process of thought but a simultaneous comprehension". The thing that is defined is turned around and explained from multiple points of view.

Regarding the characteristics of James's writing, Frye places him in the traditional sphere, together with Defoe, Fielding and Austen, while Borrow, Peacock, Emily Brönte, Melville are somehow peripheral. Based on the fact that no author can get along without ideas, Frye underlines that not "all of them have the patience to digest them in the way that James did", for the novelist shows his exuberance "by an exhaustive analysis of human relationships."(Frye 1957: 311).

We were at the beginning intrigued by Frye's *The Archetypes of Literature* (1951), for he claims that "every organized body of knowledge can be learned progressively; and experience shows that there is something progressive about the learning of literature (...). Art, like nature, is the subject of systematic study, and has to be distinguished from the study itself, which is criticism. It is therefore impossible to 'learn literature': one learns about it in a certain way, but what one learns, transitively, is the criticism of literature." (Frye 1972: 421) We consider that his point of view is totally justified, for what we really try to decipher is the specificity of each author, the current which she/he should be integrated in, the style, technique used etc. He strongly believes that he should acquire the methodological discipline and coherence of the sciences in studying literature. In *The Archetypes of Literature,* he argues with various degrees of "displacement", of certain archetypes in literature in all periods and cultures. This theory of the Canadian critic was developed with cold lucidity and wit and later integrated in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.

We must take into account the fact that Frye was the object of considerable controversy, for his scornful eye on value judgement; what he did was to transfer the concept of value from the individual to the collective work, the "total order of words" –literature itself. We admit that we have rarely encountered such extended generalizations as can be found in Frye's work: "Literature imitates the total dream of man" (*Anatomy of Criticism*) or



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"*Poetry unites total ritual, or unlimited social action, with total dream, or unlimited individual thought*."

David Lodge wrote about Frye and underlined that there are a number of objections to Frye's criticism, he is considered "excessively schematic", he "neglects the historical, particular, verbally unique aspects of literary artefacts" and "archetypal criticism, so far from being scientific, is neither verifiable nor falsifiable". Frye brought viable arguments to defend himself, we could not agree more with Lodge that he is "one of the most stimulating, cultured and witty of contemporary literary critics." (Lodge 1972: 421)

What do Henry James, David Lodge and Northrop Frye have in common? They are some of the most authoritative names in literary criticism, James and Lodge were also writers, they are anglophones and we cannot imagine the literary scene without their contribution. Furthermore, the concepts that they introduced proved to be valid, passing the test of time, of course after being the subject of debates. Henry James is a representative writer for modernism, for he is the one that set the basis of this current starting from his own writing style and hi own critic theories. He values ambiguity, complexity, open endings as far as his novels are concerned, he uses free indirect style and he is very much interested in creating characters with a vivid psychic life. The focus is on inner movements, not on the narrated events.We are particularly indebted to Lodge and Frye for a better understanding of the complex work of Henry James.

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