

# Processes of Empathy and Othering in Literature: Towards a New Ethics of Reading

*Anna Lindhé*

## *Abstract*

We often hear that literature's ability to elicit empathy validates its ethical value in society and in education; in this context, the moral philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, whose position on the importance of narrative empathy to civic and higher education is well known, immediately springs to mind. Less often do we hear that literature's ethical potential resides in its ability to block empathy and create the other. This essay develops an ethical-didactic approach to literature that takes into account this ostensibly negative aspect of reading, suggesting that there is an ethical potential in literature's invitation to respond to the other as other, or, more specifically, in the joint processes of empathy and othering that readers participate in when they read. Rather than relying on empathy alone for an ethics of reading, this essay locates an ethical dimension in this readerly double bind of empathy and othering. My argument is that if readers observe their own participation in this dilemma, they may catch sight of an aspect of themselves—a blind spot—that may increase their awareness of their own role and responsibility in acts of othering not only within literature but also beyond. Using Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* as a case study, this essay explores how literature can be taught and read with an emphasis on the student's own implication in the creation of the other. Such an approach can facilitate the development of empathetic and critical citizens.

Keywords: empathy; othering; ethics; the emotions; the teaching of literature; Henry James; *The Turn of the Screw*

[I]t is not a man with red hair and a white face whom we fear [in *The Turn of the Screw*]. We are afraid of something unnamed, of something, perhaps, in ourselves. (Woolf 1999: 160)

'One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with

Lindhé, Anna. 2021. 'Processes of Empathy and Othering in Literature: Towards a New Ethics of Reading.' *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 20(2): 225–248.

regard to this marriage?’ (Eliot 1997: 261). When the omniscient narrator in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) suddenly intervenes in the diegesis to drop the by now famous question, ‘why always Dorothea’, s/he points the reader to a central problem at the heart of literature: the uneven distribution of empathy and attention between characters. Halting the narrative progression to turn the reader’s attention to Casaubon, the narrator indicates that the empathy and attention that have been devoted to Dorothea have occurred at the expense of Dorothea’s husband. Eliot famously expressed a desire for her writing to help readers to ‘be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves’ (Haight 3: III); but as her question indicates, reading literature does not merely teach us to empathize but also to withhold empathy. As much as literature invites us to feel ourselves into the other, we are also involved in creating new others, thus implicating readers in processes of empathy *and* othering.

This double bind of empathy and othering creates new opportunities to reflect on the value of literature in education and beyond. The present essay locates an ethical dimension in this readerly dilemma, presenting the idea that if readers observe their own participation in this dilemma, they may catch sight of an aspect of themselves—a blind spot—that may increase their awareness of their own role and responsibility in acts of othering not only within literature but also beyond. Such a turn towards the ways in which readers themselves participate in othering processes provides an opening for the teaching of literature to encourage self-examination as well as to explore the troubled emotions that may have been activated vis-à-vis the new others. Even if the discussions of the place of the emotions have come to assume a more prominent position in literary studies in recent years,<sup>1</sup> negative emotions, such as disgust, are rarely addressed (Ngai 2007: 6). Acknowledging the readerly implication in narrative structures of othering gives readers the opportunity to reflect on the emotions that are triggered in relation to the withholding of empathy and how they enable the creation of the other. Alerting readers to their own habits of othering thus provides the teaching of literature with occasions to explore the darker aspects of humanity.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Felski 2008; Hogan 2011; Hogan 2015; Falke 2016; Moi 2017; Meretoja 2018.

An ethics of reading as it is tentatively developed here turns on the moment when readers recognize that they have participated in an othering process and in the very act of empathizing been involved in turning a character into an other, a stranger.<sup>2</sup> Many novels provide such moments, and this study could thus arguably select any random narrative to explore this double bind of empathy and othering. But the act of circumscribing the interior lives of some characters in favor of a ‘central consciousness’ was a problem that, as Alex Woloch puts it, weighs ‘heavily’ on ‘the consciousness of the novel’ towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (2003: 21) and a problem that Henry James specifically addressed. In his writings, James explores the question that Eliot raises in *Middlemarch*: attending to one character’s ‘case’, as he calls it in one of his prefaces to his novels, occurs at the expense of others (2003: 9).

*The Turn of the Screw* (1898)—a novella in which others are palpably *sacrificed* for the sake of the development of a central consciousness—provides a particularly good starting point for the exploration of an ethics of reading as it is understood here in that it implicates us in the sacrifice of an other (an other’s other) and alerts us to the fact that we are not (entirely) innocent bystanders but complicit. If Eliot steps out of the narrative framework of the ongoing story to alert the reader to this dilemma, James invites the reader to step into the narrative framework and inhabit the perspective of the central consciousness to experience the double bind of empathy and othering for him- or herself. If students acknowledge this dual readerly position, they may feel summoned to reflect on their own potential to occupy the position of bystander—or even perpetrator. Such an insight could be transformative and affect the way one relates to self and other. Literature offers more than the possibility to empathize with others; it affords the opportunity to widen our field of perception even further by alerting readers to their own habits of othering and through this self-recognition become ethically responsible. Using *The Turn of the Screw* as a case study, this essay explores how literature can be taught and read with an emphasis on the reader’s own implication in the creation of the other.

---

<sup>2</sup> Eliot’s direct address to the reader in *Middlemarch* provides such a moment when she alerts readers to what is given up or sacrificed as they attend to Dorothea; immersed in her life, they fail to see her husband. Eliot provides another such moment in *Silas Marner*. See Lindhé 2016a.

Such a focus can be used to develop empathetic and critical citizens as well enhance their awareness of literary form.

*Literature, ethics, and empathy*

No discussion of empathy in literary education can start without Martha Nussbaum. For her, the empathy induced by reading literature is essential to educating citizens of the world. The narrative imagination – the ability to imagine the lives and the suffering of people who are different from themselves – is, she asserts, ‘an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs’ (1997: 90). Nussbaum’s approach to the ethics of reading is an example of the liberal-humanist strand in literary ethics which ‘perceive[s] literature in terms of teaching or communicating moral values’ (Meretoja 2018: 30) and emphasizes ‘empathetic identification with character’ (Meretoja 2018: 19) as a way to understand something about self and other. Through empathy—or the act of seeing oneself in the distant other and the other in oneself—literature improves perception, guiding readers to appropriate ethical responses and sensitizing them to the predicaments of other people (Nussbaum 1995: xvi). Nussbaum writes: ‘It is an achievement to see a soul in that body, and this achievement is supported by poetry and the arts, which ask us to wonder about the inner world of that shape we see—and, too, to wonder about ourselves and our own depths’ (2010: 102). But literature does not always provide the opportunity to wonder about that inner world since empathy with characters is sometimes blocked, creating occasions for othering and thus for the activation of more troubled emotional responses.

Nussbaum, who builds her ‘ethical theory’ primarily on the virtuous emotions of ‘sympathy, identification, and compassion’ (Ngai 2007: 340), has been criticized for leaving too little room for emotions other than empathy.<sup>3</sup> In her book *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (2018), Hanna Meretoja, although relying to

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Altieri is quibbling with Nussbaum over philosophy’s predisposition to link emotions and action. He says ‘[t]hose emotions are good or laudable which produce actions that can be approved in ethical or prudential or even virtue-based frameworks’. To Altieri, the problem with such an ambition is that only those emotions that ‘will successfully guide specific actions’ are valuable (2003: 17).

some extent on Nussbaum in her own development of an ethics of reading, argues that she is being too narrow in her approach. Meretoja discusses the affective, often unsettling responses that Holocaust literature elicits from the reader, particularly in the kind of literature that engages ‘with the minds of Holocaust perpetrators’ (2018: 218). She writes: ‘Not just empathy, but a whole range of affective responses—from shame and anger to a sense of affection and solidarity—can make ethically valuable contributions to our ethical imagination’ (2018: 132), pursuing the thought that ‘imaginative engagement’ with ‘ambiguous or problematic perspectives, can be ethically valuable’ (2018: 20).

The Nussbaumian or liberal-humanist approach to the ethics of reading is sometimes contrasted with another dominant strand in literary ethics: the poststructuralist strand, which is in many ways (but not exclusively) inspired by Emmanuel Lévinas’s understanding of alterity. This approach often rejects narrative empathy altogether, perceiving literature as wholly ‘Other’ (Meretoja 2018: 30) and something therefore that we can never ultimately come to understand. In this context, ‘the idea of recognition—the widespread belief that we learn something about ourselves in the act of reading’ (Felski 2008: 12)—would be an unethical if not impossible outcome of the reading process. In fact, the concept of recognition in literary studies, although seeing somewhat of a revival, has by and large been considered a naïve and dangerous logic, as have claims to self-knowledge (Felski 2015: 36). This attitude is, according to Rita Felski, powered by the fear that recognition violates the ‘alterity’ and singularity of the literary text or that any attempt at recognition must be an ‘instance of misrecognition’ (2008: 12–13).

Meretoja suggests that this attitude ‘problematically mystifies literature as something radically “Other” that evades interpretation and thereby detaches it from our everyday processes of understanding the world, our lives, and those of others’ (2018: 30). To completely discard empathy in favor of the irreducible otherness of literature is to deny literature its unique ability to move readers and enable them to move into the perspective of the other. The moment of self-recognition that the ethics of reading as it is understood here pivots around may thus never occur in a Lévinasian reading since any form of identification or recognition is, or risks turning into, appropriation, according to this perspective.

In this essay, recognition is understood as essential for an ethics of reading as it takes shape in this essay. Involving ‘a moment of personal

illumination and heightened self-understanding' (Felski 2008: 30), recognition is the point where we connect literature to our own lives and observe something about ourselves that we might not have seen before. The ethics of reading as it is suggested here invites readers to understand not that understanding is impossible but that our understanding of ourselves is always limited—and that literature can help us to see these limitations. In emphasizing literature as a source of knowledge and self-reflection—and empathy as constitutive of an ethics of reading—the present essay has points of contact with Nussbaum and Meretoja but diverges from their perspective in at least one significant way. Meretoja's ethics may allow 'us to understand the affective dimensions of the ethical potential of perspective-taking in wider terms than the Nussbaumian model' (2018: 20, 132); however, whereas Nussbaum and Meretoja both identify the ethical potential in the imaginative act of perspective-taking, my focus is on the ethical undercurrent in narrative moments where we enter into one character's perspective but are simultaneously barred from another in a way that blocks our empathy and creates the other's other. To sum up, the ethics of reading developed here proceeds from the notion that narrative empathy is a prerequisite for ethics, but I place more emphasis than Nussbaum on how narrative othering, as an effect of empathy, can contribute towards a new ethics of reading.

The ethics of reading pursued in the present essay focuses on the ethical moment readers face when they realize their own complicity in the creation of the other. In such contexts, not only empathy but an array of emotions is elicited from the reader by the other's other, negative emotions that literary studies and the teaching of literature would do well to consider. In her book *Ugly Feelings*, cultural theorist and literary critic, Sianne Ngai attends to what she considers to be minor negative feelings such as envy, paranoia, irritation, anxiety, and disgust, feelings that are, she asserts, 'explicitly amoral and noncathartic' and that offer 'no satisfactions of virtue, however, oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release' (2007: 6). Ngai turns to these ugly feelings 'to expand and transform the category of "aesthetic emotions," or feelings unique to our encounters with artworks' (2007: 6) and analyses how they are 'specific to capitalism' in that they manifest 'suspended agency' (2007: 12), suggesting that these emotions do not 'solve the dilemma of social powerlessness [so much] as diagnose [it] powerfully' (2007: 353). For Ngai, then, these ugly feelings do not lend themselves to any ethical

processes. In the present essay, however, the negative emotions that are potentially triggered in the reader by the other's other offer possibilities for self-transformation. Although Ngai's conclusion may thus not be relevant to the reading practice that is presented here, her thoughts on disgust are relevant for the present discussion. Disgust, according to Ngai, blocks the emotion that Nussbaum and others rely on for the development of an ethics of reading, namely empathy. But because it is central to the reading experience—and, it seems, to narrative empathy—disgust should thus assume a more prominent place in the debate about the value of literature in society and education.

To attempt a definition of empathy is fraught with difficulties as it has come to mean so many different things; but one place to start is obviously with its origins. Translated from the German term *Einfühlung* ('in-feeling or feeling into') by Edward Titchener, the word 'empathy' came into the English language as late as late as 1909 (Coplan & Goldie 2011: xii). The 'feeling into' or feeling with another individual was of course not a new phenomenon at the time and had earlier been referred to as sympathy. Although these two words may have captured approximately the same thing earlier, 'sympathy tends now to describe a feeling *for*, rather than the feeling *into* that characterizes empathy' (Scott 2020: 3). For the purpose of this study, I will use the term empathy in the sense of 'feeling into' or 'feeling with' and sympathy as 'feeling for' another person's suffering (Keen, 2007: 4–5). It is vital here to point out that when I refer to empathy it is as the process of inhabiting another's perspective and does not have to involve sympathy. This is an important distinction to make since the step into the narrator's position in *The Turn of the Screw* does not necessarily mean that readers sympathize with the experiencing subject but, immersed in her perspective, they nevertheless perceive together with her.<sup>4</sup>

Empathy often plays a significant role in the defense of literature, offering an almost 'magical guarantee' of its 'worthiness' (Keen 2007: 62). Janet Alsup points out that empathy 'seems to be the central topic of interest when reasons for teaching and reading literature are bandied about' (2015: 34). The idea that the act of reading literature develops

---

<sup>4</sup> The entering-into the governess' perspective does not necessarily involve the activation of any easy or 'simple' empathy on the part of the reader either. For a problematization of empathy with unlikable or perpetrator characters in first-person perspective novel, see Meretoja 2018: 232–239.

empathy for and understanding of unknown others and cultures is often considered an important aspect of promoting ‘intercultural competence’ in the English Foreign Language classroom, for example (Delanoy et al. 2015: 8). And, as discussed above, it is because of the invitation to enter into the perspective of people who are different from themselves that Nussbaum gives literature a central role in society and in higher education.

Literary theorists have nevertheless begun to question the seemingly self-evident idea that empathy is always a good thing. Susanne Keen has played a decisive role in challenging the ubiquitous idea that ‘novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world’ (2007: xv). In her pioneering book *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Keen paved the way for the subsequent work in literary empathy studies.<sup>5</sup> The potentially negative aspects of empathy have thus been given more attention as critics have started to realize empathy’s ‘troubling effects’, which include, in film scholar Jane Stadler’s words, ‘the potentially negative consequences of empathizing with flawed or dangerous characters, using empathic insight to do harm, or having an aversive reaction to the vicarious experience of others’s pain’ (2017: 420).

The idea that empathy is always a good thing and that ‘we should cultivate [it] because it makes us better people’ (Prinz 2011: 211) has also been questioned within philosophy and psychology. Psychologist Paul Bloom says, ‘Most people believe that empathy is a good thing, and many psychologists think that empathy is a *very* good thing’ (2016: 55). But Bloom himself is not so sure. He claims that empathy is ‘inadequate as a moral guide’ (2016: 10), suggesting that to ‘make the world a better place’, ‘relying on empathy is the wrong way to do it’ (2016: 15). He points out empathy’s bias:

Empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now. This makes us care more about them, but it leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with. (2016: 9).

It is this flipside of empathy that I examine in relation to literature (whose invitation to care about certain characters may leave us blind to the inner lives of many other characters) since it offers a new way of reflecting on the ethical value of literature.

---

<sup>5</sup> See also Hammond and Kim (2014) and Meretoja (2018).

*Henry James and the reverse side of the medal*

The problem of the uneven distribution of empathy and attention discussed by Bloom and brought to our attention by Eliot was a problem that was on the mind of Henry James. For James, the artistic process was not an innocent act but a 'difficult, dire process of selection and comparison, of surrender and sacrifice' (2011: 6). In this painful activity of selection, of fixing boundaries and drawing lines, some things have to be sacrificed. The creation of a 'central consciousness' towards which readers are oriented without the supervision of an omniscient narrator who can direct the reader's attention has its costs, as it occurs at the expense of many other characters. These others are necessary to the expansion of the interiority of the central consciousness and thus primarily fulfil a function within the novel (James 2003; Woloch 2003).

Alex Woloch suggests that James draws attention to the 'gap' between this purely functional aspect of minor characters and their 'implied being' (2003: 24) in his preface to *The Wings of the Dove*. In Woloch's words: 'Forced to circumscribe the interior lives of many characters in the elaboration of a singular, central consciousness, the novel has to radically delimit and distort the exterior manifestation of "roundness and fullness"' (2003: 24). The minor characters thus become 'apparitions' 'which shadowily reflect the fullness that has been excluded' (Woloch 2003: 24). This injustice is why James exclaims that: 'They too should have a case, bless them', since they (the minor characters in *The Wings of the Dove*), despite being minor, have 'an orientating consciousness', a 'head and a heart' (Woloch 2003: 23). According to Woloch, however, James comes to the inevitable and, to James himself, disturbing conclusion in his preface that the roundness and fullness of some characters must be sacrificed for the sake of the development of a central consciousness.

James, however, seems also to propose a solution to this dilemma, a dilemma he leaves for the reader to resolve. In the preface to *What Maisie Knew*, this dilemma is signaled through his reference to the medal or medallion. Every medal has two sides, of which one symbolizes the glory and honor whereas the other exhibits its contrasts, its sacrifice perhaps:

No themes are so human as those that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connexion of bliss and bale, of the things ... so dangling before us forever that bright hard medal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody's right and ease and the other somebody's pain and wrong. (2011: 143)

The ‘right and ease’ of one person is connected to the ‘pain and wrong’ of the other. The image of the medal is also present in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*. Here James envisions the medal hanging free, so that the reader can cast a glance at both sides at the same time, encouraging a double vision: ‘could I but make my medal hang free, its obverse and its reverse, its face and its back, would beautifully become optional for the spectator. I somehow wanted them correspondingly embossed, wanted them inscribed and figured with an equal salience’ (2003: 9). For James, the artistic-ethical vision seems to involve the hope for the readerly embrace of both obverse and reverse. The image of a medal, hanging free, where both sides are equally important reveals his commitment to both his ‘centre’ and his ‘circumference’. James’s heart may have been big enough for all his characters, but the novel cannot make room for them all. Some have to be sacrificed. James leaves it up to the readers to acknowledge this sacrifice and to ponder their own responsibility and complicity in the sacrificial plot of *The Turn of the Screw*. An aesthetic problem thus becomes the reader’s ethical problem to ponder in his novella.

*‘if he were innocent what then on earth was I?’: Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw*

*The Turn of the Screw*, the well-known story about a young governess who becomes convinced that the two children in her care are possessed by ghosts from their past, often sparks contradictory readings, sometimes provoking unease and frustration in readers. Some would probably say that this sense of disturbance has to do with the appearance of the ghosts and the inability of the reader to determine whether they are real or figments of the narrator’s imagination. In fact, this was seen as the central problem of the novella for some time. This problem, often referred to as the apparitionist/non-apparitionist controversy, refers to two competing views: is the novella a ghost story or is it a psychological study of a mentally unstable young woman?<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For decades, critics were divided into two camps: those who believed that the ghosts are real and those who supported Edmund Wilson’s repression theory. The debate dates back to at least 1934 when Wilson launched his Freudian reading of the novella in ‘The Ambiguity of Henry James’, claiming that the ghosts are not real, that the young governess is in fact ‘seeing ghosts because she is in a psychopathic state originating in the repressed passion for the master’; see

Namwali Serpell locates an ethics in precisely this question—or rather in the readerly oscillation between these two alternatives. Serpell reads *The Turn of the Screw* in terms of mutual exclusion, which means that the novella cannot be read as both a ghost story and as a story about a mad governess. Arguing that the narrative flings the reader between these two mutually exclusive options, she suggests that it is the uncertainty produced by these two alternatives that produces the beginning of an ethics. Immersion, she suggests, ‘in the consciousness of ... the governess is absolutely vital to the uncertainty produced’ by *The Turn of the Screw* (2008: 245). We cannot but immerse ourselves in the governess’s perspective, she contends, and hence we regard the ghosts as real. However, as we return to ourselves where we may hesitate as to the reality of the ghosts, another narrative possibility that emerges is that the ghosts do not exist and that the governess is in fact mad.

Serpell’s reading shows us an alternative to the two major ethical perspectives discussed above by suggesting that the ethical value of reading does not reside in empathy (or in identification with the governess, which would produce knowledge of self and other) or in the encounter with alterity (which would produce ‘utter ethical unknowability’) (2008: 226) but, to repeat, in the uncertainty produced by the reader’s oscillation between these two possibilities. For the ethics I propose here, the reader also needs to accept the invitation to step into and immerse him- or herself in the perspective of the governess. And just as Serpell maintains, it is not the act of empathizing with the governess that necessarily produces an ethics, but rather—and this is where my approach differs from Serpell’s—the act of perceiving one’s own involvement in processes of empathy and othering. *The Turn of the Screw* helps the reader to do just that. In fact, the sense of unease referred to above may actually stem not so much from the uncertainty produced by the two narrative alternatives that Serpell and others suggest are offered by the text but more from the double bind of empathy and othering that readers find themselves in while reading. If uncertainty is the source of the ethical value of *The Turn of the Screw*, I would say that is the uncertainty produced by suspecting one’s own

---

Heilman 1999: 178. Christine Butterworth-McDermott argues that ‘a third alternative is possible: the apparitions are neither real nor hallucinations. Rather they are literary contrivances designed *wilfully* and *consciously* by the Governess to manipulate the reader’ (2006: 43). Later, other dilemmas would come to dominate, focusing on the text’s other ambiguities.

involvement in othering processes that constitutes the beginning of an ethics.

*The Turn of the Screw* centers around a young woman who assumes a position as governess to two young children, Miles and Flora, on an isolated country estate. Soon after the governess's arrival at the estate, the ghostly figure of a man with red hair and pale face appears to the governess and, shortly thereafter, the ghost of a woman. The housekeeper, Mrs. Grose identifies them from the governess's descriptions as former employees of the estate, now dead. These two—the valet Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the children's former governess—appear to have been closely involved with the children prior to the governess's arrival. The governess-narrator becomes 'convinced that the ghosts have come back to pursue their nefarious intercourse with the children, to take possession of their souls and to corrupt them radically' (1982: 95). She therefore takes it upon herself to save the children from what she believes is the evil influence of these two figures. Before long, the evil that she identifies in the ghosts she also detects in the children, and she becomes intent on making them confess complicity with the ghosts: 'I'll get it out of him [Miles]. He'll meet me—he'll confess. If he confesses, he's saved' (76). The story ends dramatically with Flora falling ill, having to leave the estate in a hurry, and Miles dying in the arms of the narrator.

Although the governess is the principal central consciousness, there are two more narrators in *The Turn of the Screw*. The novella is framed by a prologue that includes an unnamed narrator and a man named Douglas. They have gathered, along with a few others, in a house at Christmas, taking turns to tell ghost stories. In fact, it is Douglas who reads the governess's story to the crowd around the fire from a manuscript on which the story of the governess's experiences is jotted down. The very moment Douglas begins to read from the manuscript, we are inside the governess's mind and stay with her point-of-view for the remainder of the story. The reader is thus confined within the first-person point-of-view of the single and singular mind of the governess with no alternative perspectives to provide relief from her shut-in mind, reinforcing the claustrophobic feeling connected with reading this text.

A turn inwards—a concern with subjectivity and exploring the depths of the human psyche—is one of the defining features of modernism, but this exploration is restricted to the mind of one at the expense of 'the others', the apparitions, in *The Turn of the Screw*. The moment the

apparitions of Quint and Miss Jessel enter the story, the governess immediately otherizes them. Quint is ‘a horror’, frightening and disgusting (22) and Miss Jessel is ‘horrible’ and ‘vile’, seen as an ‘alien object’ (28). The ghosts quickly become the governess’s other—in relation to the reader, they become the other’s other, towards whom the governess’s and thus perhaps the reader’s aversions are gradually directed. They are, as the governess herself puts it, ‘the others, the outsiders’ (51). As we progress further into the story, we also become entangled in another complexity: the othering of children. Before long, the evil that the governess identifies in the ghosts she also detects in Miles and Flora, who are first described as sweet and innocent, ‘incredibly beautiful’ and ‘divine’, but are soon perceived as evil and wicked by the governess (59). The novella’s invitation to hear, see and feel with the governess—in effect, to empathize—is also the novel’s invitation to *otherize* Miles and Flora, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint and (mis)read evil into their character/s.

Having been thoroughly immersed in the governess’s perspective, it may not be until towards the end of the novella that readers realize that they have been involved in the demise of a child. At the very end of James’s novella, the governess exclaims: ‘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’ (85). As readers are holding their breath, a child stops breathing (cf. Cosineau, 2005: 138). For one reader, in an early review of the novella, the entanglement in the othering of children was too much:

*The Turn of the Screw* is the most hopelessly evil story that we have ever read in any literature, ancient or modern. How Mr. James could, or how any man or woman could, choose to make such a study of infernal human debauchery, for it is nothing else, is unaccountable ... The study, while it exhibits Mr. James’s genius in a powerful light, affects the reader with a disgust that is not to be expressed. The feeling of perusal of the horrible story is that one has been assisting in an outrage upon the holiest and sweetest fountain of human innocence, and helping to debauch—at least by helplessly standing by—the pure and trusting nature of children. Human imagination can go no further into infamy, literary art could not be used with more refined subtlety of spiritual defilement. (qtd. from Felman 1982: 96–97)

Although an individual and historically situated response to the experience of reading *The Turn of the Screw*, the reader-reviewer’s response captures the readerly dilemma that the ethics of reading pivots around here: the

simultaneous process of empathy and othering that we participate in when we read. The immersion in the governess's perspective produces a sense of implication in an othering process. 'Assisting in an outrage', 'helping to debauch', 'helplessly standing by' are expressions that capture the performative experience of reading, the sense that the act of reading has made something happen.<sup>7</sup> The reader-reviewer may have expected the story to contain evil elements; after all, *The Turn of the Screw* signals its status as a ghost story practically from the first page,<sup>8</sup> but he may not have anticipated feeling himself *implicated* in an evil. What is thus noteworthy about his response is that, as Shoshana Felman points out, 'what is perceived as the most scandalous thing about this scandalous story is that *we are forced to participate in the scandal*, that the reader's innocence cannot remain intact: there is no such thing as an innocent reader of this text' (1982: 97). Maybe as a way of protecting himself from this knowledge, the reviewer displaces evil onto the story itself: to him, *The Turn of the Screw* is the 'most hopelessly evil story'.

Rather than accepting his involvement in an evil process, this reader-reviewer finds a way to establish his own innocence, just like, it seems, the governess, who vaguely suspects that she is not entirely innocent but who nevertheless does not act on this intimation. At the close of the story, the governess has an epiphanic moment of uncertainty, in which a question raised by the governess also becomes the reader's opportunity to ponder his or her involvement in othering processes: 'It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he [Miles] *were* innocent what then on earth was I?', asks the narrator-governess (83). Had the governess but known herself, the tragic ending might have been forestalled; but tragedy is, as Felski puts it, 'a genre famously preoccupied with documenting the catastrophic consequences of failure to know oneself or others' (2008: 28). Then again, if misrecognition implies that a less flawed perception can be attained, that our assessment can be scrutinized and found wanting' (Felski 2008: 28), then the governess's misrecognition can be the reader's to learn from.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the performative aspect of James's work and the Jamesian reader's ethical responsibility for the act of reading, see Buelens 1997.

<sup>8</sup> It was generally received as such prior to Edmund Wilson's influential theory of the governess's repressed sexuality. According to Peter G. Beidler, 'virtually all of James' contemporaries read it as a spine-chilling ghost story'; qtd. from Brüttsch 2015: 232.

*Towards an ethics of reading*

This is where an opening towards an ethics of reading emerges. The reader-reviewer may have felt that the reading experience implicates him in an othering process, a sacrifice. But his next step is to accuse the writer and the story of an evil that he himself partakes in, thus freeing himself from the burden of complicity and responsibility that James, I argue, leaves his readers with. As the reader-reviewer's experience testifies, the reader is left in a particularly unprotected or vulnerable state and with the impression that he or she has been involved in something not quite moral, a crime or else, perhaps even been corrupted. That readers are left to themselves at the end of the novella is reinforced on the formal level through the use of the frame narrative convention—or rather because the reader is *not* returned to the frame narrators and their interlocutors around the fire at the end of the novella. We are now the sole recipients of the governess's story. Critics have suggested that the absence of the end-frame reinforces the text's ambiguities. Peter Barry suggests that the frame is 'clearly' 'single-ended in this case because if we went back to the fireside group, many of the crucial ambiguities which are the essence of the tale would have to be explained or debated' (2009: 236). But another effect of this absence is that readers are left alone with themselves, inviting self-reflection on the immersive (othering) experience they have just been through.

For the ethics of reading proposed here, the reader needs to accept the invitation to step into and immerse him- or herself in the perspective of the governess (cf. Serpell). In sharing the governess's subject position, readers share something else with her too, whether they want to admit it or not: the involvement in othering processes, in the deadly othering of a child.<sup>9</sup> However, readers may be reluctant to making this connection between themselves and the governess. Indeed, why would anybody want to associate (oneself) with ethically suspect characters? Readers of *The Turn of the Screw* may protect themselves from this connection and students may even be prevented from doing this, not only because such a logic of

---

<sup>9</sup> This argument presupposes that we view characters as real people, which is, needless to say, a contentious issue in literary theory. However, for psychologist Jenefer Robinson (2005: 45), readers' belief in the reality of fictional characters is not a problem but a fact. For her, the question of the reality status of characters is irrelevant. Although philosophers, she asserts, make distinctions between 'real and imagined' situations, 'our psychology does not'.

recognition or identification is often deemed naïve, but also because of the application of the narratological category of the unreliable narrator.

This category, coined by Wayne Booth and often applied to the governess (1983: 315),<sup>10</sup> may serve the didactic purpose of helping students to make sense of the textual ambiguities and the governess's seemingly irrational behavior, but it may also take readers away from reflecting on their own role and responsibility in the act of reading, on their own ethics of reading.<sup>11</sup> In fact, this category places the reader in a morally elevated position in relation to the governess. Marcus Amit suggests that a reader needs to feel a certain (moral) superiority in order to identify an unreliable narrator (2006). Turning the governess into an unreliable narrator creates distance and a hierarchical relation between the reader and the governess, taking the reader away from rather than towards responsibility and self-examination.

Recognition is not a naïve form of reading but a process that can tell us something about aspects of our humanity that we may not want to know about. Recognizing themselves in the governess can help readers to see aspects of themselves that are difficult to observe in life and accept about oneself: the inclination to otherize and dehumanize and that we often participate in different forms of othering processes in life without always realizing it, that we may even be convinced that we are innocent—just like the governess herself, perhaps, who was convinced that she saved the children from an evil, while she was in effect part of creating an evil. *The Turn of the Screw* may even help readers to see that the one who locates evil in the other may end up committing the worse evil. Maybe *The Turn of the Screw* then can help us realize that which we so often fail to see in life: that the alleged evil of the other may be our own (Lindhé 2016b).

There is thus value in recognizing oneself in ethically suspect characters.<sup>12</sup> Eric Leake, who refers to this process as 'difficult empathy',

---

<sup>10</sup> It may thus very well be that the unreliable narrator is not a response to textual ambiguities inherent in the text itself but has rather to do with the reader. See, for example, Nünning (1999) on the reconceptualization of the category of the unreliable narrator.

<sup>11</sup> Cosineau (2004: 44) suggests that rather than asking us to consider the psychology of the governess, *The Turn of the Screw* 'alerts us to the possibility that the deeper ethical interest' may in fact reside in the way it 'explores our own psychology as a *community* of readers'.

<sup>12</sup> See also Meretoja 2018.

suggests that this process ‘pushes us to not only see others differently but also perhaps see ourselves differently and more expansively through problematic others and their social conditions’ (2014: 184). What is more, if readers dissociate themselves from the governess, labelling her as mad and/or unreliable, they turn the governess into the other. Then readers are involved not only in the narrative othering of the ghosts and the children but also in the othering of the governess, moving further away from reflecting on their own responsibility and complicity in acts of othering and perpetuating, in a sense, the evil process that the governess initiated. In fact, perpetuating, too, a process that literature is often assumed to counteract.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, James confronts readers with themselves and their involvement in a sacrificial process, inviting readers to assume the double vision that he conjures up in his preface through the image of the medallion, a double vision broad enough to encompass the other as well as the other’s other.<sup>13</sup> Alerting the student to the flipside of their imaginative engagement with the governess may help them ponder the possibility that they may not always be innocent bystanders in what they hear, read, or experience but complicit. Students could thus be encouraged to examine the consequences of their own reading and their participation in the othering of the ‘others’ in *The Turn of the Screw*.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> The double vision whereby one acknowledges the perspective that is subdued or sacrificed could of course also be used as the starting point for bringing marginalized characters to the center, so that readers can develop empathy or imaginatively engage with these characters. This is a step taken by many writers, of course. For example, the othering of the female characters in *King Lear* and *Jane Eyre* prompted Jane Smiley and Jean Rhys to focus on Goneril and Regan and Bertha Rochester in their respective novels, *A Thousand Acres* (1995) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and thus invite readers to enter into and empathize with these marginalized perspectives. As essential as this step is to both feminist and postcolonial readings, for an ethics of reading to emerge as it is understood in this essay, the students need to respond to the dilemma inherent in the readerly involvement in processes of othering before pursuing empathy with the other’s other.

<sup>14</sup> In her book on the teaching of literature, Bruns (2011) speaks about the importance of ‘immersive reading’ but also that students need to learn how to emerge from that experience to distance themselves from the text and reflect on where they have been.

Here is thus an opportunity to call attention to troubled emotions that are activated in the reader by the fictional other's other, that is, by the characters to whom we are not allowed empathetic access. As was discussed above, disgust is central to the way in which the governess responds to 'the others' at Bly. The children are 'contaminated', 'diabolical', 'corrupt', and 'sick'. A tone of disgust also permeates the governess's response to Peter Quint, whose face triggers repulsion in the governess, 'a sudden sickness of disgust' (25). Miss Jessel, as discussed above, is perceived as an 'alien object', wholly different, and her presence at Bly as illegitimate. Ngai refers to disgust as the 'ugliest of "ugly feelings"': 'For disgust is never ambivalent about its object'. It is never disposed to generate, she adds, a 'confusion between subject and object' (2007: 335). Disgust in fact 'strengthens and polices' the boundary between subject and object (2017: 335) and 'seeks to include or draw others *into* its exclusion of its object, enabling a strange kind of sociability' (2007: 336). If the first-person perspective draws the reader into the inner life of the governess, disgust, which expects agreement (2007: 337), operates to further pull the reader towards the governess but *away* from the 'others'.<sup>15</sup> If not enabling a 'strange kind of sociability', then at least the disgust lavished on the others in *The Turn of the Screw* may serve to reinforce the connection and a sense of community between readers and the governess.

We could thus call attention to how empathy and disgust are interrelated, how empathy may even pave the way for disgust and is thus not always a good thing. By alerting students to their own entanglement in the complex web of empathy and disgust, opportunities arise to reflect on how these emotions contribute to the construction and perpetuation of the other. The turn towards the ethics of the students' own reading practice towards, in this particular case, their involvement in narrative processes of othering and the troubled emotions that may be activated can move them towards self-examination.<sup>16</sup> As was discussed above, disgust seems particularly present in the creation of the other. If we, for example,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ngai asserts that negative emotions 'are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings "away from" rather than philic strivings "toward"' (2007: 11).

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the ethical value of narrative othering in relation to a problematic and allegedly racist text like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, see Lindhé forthcoming.

encourage the students to attend to this emotion, they may be more attentive and attuned to it when it emerges in real life in relation to self or other. In the eventuality that disgust is triggered in relation to another in lived life, a reader who has been invited to recognize processes of othering in literature and his or her own role in them may be prone to ponder whether such a response is justified and whether the disgust responds to the object (compare the others in *The Turn of the Screw*) or whether it responds to someone else's perspective or story (here the governess's) *about* the object.

The creation of the other in literature can thus have an ethical-didactic value and constitute a resource in the literature classroom if the students are invited to catch sight of themselves in the double bind of empathy and othering. Does empathy or the mere act of listening to another's perspective implicate me in the creation of that other's other? And, if so, do I want to support or prevent such othering from occurring? What is my responsibility in the act of reading or listening towards not just the other, with whom I am invited to empathize, but also towards that other's other, whom I may be invited to otherize? A literature classroom that reflects on the reader's own implication in othering may incite some students to ponder their own role and responsibility in literature as well as in life. Acknowledging their participation in narrative othering processes may thus increase readers' awareness of such processes in daily life—and their involvement in them as both subjects and objects. For example, understanding how disgust—an emotion that 'undeniably has been and will continue to be instrumentalized in oppressive and violent ways' (Ngai 2007: 340)—operates in *The Turn of the Screw* to demarcate bodies as others may perhaps also heighten readers' sensitivity to more subtle forms of oppression.

Attending to the students' emotional responses to literature does not have to occur at the expense of the literary text. To use the emotions that arise in the reading experience as a starting point gives the teacher an opportunity to direct students to the narrative structure and to narrative theories. For example, if a student suggests that she finds a certain character distasteful, the teacher may encourage the class to return to the literary text to examine what may have provoked such a response. The students could be introduced to basic narratological concepts and to narrative techniques that are used to shape the reader's responses and reactions such as perspective, conflicts between characters, and plot-

related techniques such as the tension between story and discourse, and alert them to how these techniques both elicit and inhibit empathy. In that way, the student's sensitivity towards and understanding of literary form can also be developed at the same time as a connection to life and the emotions is made while avoiding a situation where the literary text disappears from view or takes on a subordinate role in the classroom discussion.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the idea raised at the beginning of this essay about a possible ethical dimension in the obverse of empathy in literature. Literature's appeal to our empathy is essential, of course; but the act of reading shows us that we are not always empathetic, that we cannot always feel or think ourselves into the inner life of an other—and that we also participate in the creation of a new other in the very act of empathizing. The reading experience thus helps us to come in contact not only with our ability to empathize or bring to life but also with our ability to otherize. A literature classroom that attends to this twofold experience of reading offers the students the possibility to access unknown parts of and troublesome emotions in themselves and others and hence get in touch with the darker aspects of what it means to be human. Relying on empathy alone for an ethics of reading risks neglecting the ethical value of narrative processes of othering and implicitly suggests that the human inclination to otherize can and should be corrected by the act of reading literature, when literature relies on both of these processes, on both empathy and othering and on the tension between them, for its ethical effects.

*The Turn of the Screw* shows us that the empathetic experience is intimately bound up with processes that create new others, inviting us not only to see the connection between processes of empathy and othering, between good and evil, but also our readerly involvement in both. It is precisely in responding to this human dilemma that a new ethics of reading begins. In confronting readers with this dilemma, Henry James—and George Eliot—help to lay the foundation for the development of an ethics of reading that does not rely on empathy alone but takes into consideration the flipside of empathy without rejecting it. There is always, as James knew, a reverse side of the medal. If students discover this dimension of literature, they may come away from the reading experience with the sense of knowing more about themselves, and about the alien within, or that which Virginia Woolf called the 'unnamed' in ourselves.

*References*

- Alsup, Janet. 2015. *A case for teaching literature in the secondary school: Why reading fiction matters in an age of scientific objectivity and standarization*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Amit, Marcus. 2006. Camus's *The Fall*: The dynamics of narrative unreliability. *Style* 40(4): 314–335.
- Barry, Peter. 2009. *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. 3rd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Booth, Wayne C. 1983. *The rhetoric of fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bruns, Cristina Vischer. 2011. *Why literature: The value of literary reading and what it means for teaching*. New York: Continuum.
- Brütsch, Matthias. 2015. Irony, retroactivity, and ambiguity: Three kinds of 'unreliable narration' in literature and film. In *Unreliable narration and trustworthiness: Intermedial and interdisciplinary perspectives*, edited by Vera Nünning, 221–243. Berlin, Munich and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Buelens, Gert. (Ed.). 1997. *Enacting history in Henry James: Narrative, power, and ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Butterworth-McDermott, Christine. 2006. James's fractured fairy-tale: How the governess gets Grimm. *The Henry James Review* 28: 43–56.
- Coplan, Amy, and Peter Goldie. 2011. Introduction. In *Empathy: Philosophical and psychological perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, ix–xlvii. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cosineau, Thomas. 2004. *Ritual unbound: Reading sacrifice in modernist fiction*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Delanoy, Werner, Maria Eisenmann, and Frauke Matz. 2015. Introduction: Learning with literature in the EFL classroom. In *Learning with literature in the EFL classroom*, edited by Werner Delanoy, Maria Eisenmann, and Frauke Matz, 7–15. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Eliot, George. 1997. *Middlemarch*. Ed. David Carroll. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Original work published 1871–1872.
- Falke, Cassandra. 2016. *The phenomenology of love and reading*. New York and London: Bloomsbury.
- Felman, Shoshana. 1982. Turning the screw of interpretation. In *Literature and psychoanalysis: The question of reading: Otherwise*, edited by

- Shoshana Felman, 94–207. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Felski, Rita. 2008. *The uses of literature*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Felski, Rita. 2015. *The limits of critique*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Haight, Gordon S. (Ed.). 1954–1978. *The George Eliot letters*. 9 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hale, Dorothy. 2011. Aesthetics and the new ethics: Theorizing the novel in the twenty-first century. In *Why study literature*, edited by Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Louise Brix Jacobsen, Rikke Anderson Kraglund, Henrik Skov Bielsen, and Camilla Møhring Reestorff, 195–209. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Hammond, Marie Meghan, and Sue J. Kim. (Eds.). 2014. *Rethinking empathy through literature*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Heilman, Robert B. 1999. The Freudian reading of *The turn of the screw*. In *Henry James, The turn of the screw*, edited by Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren, 177–184. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm. 2011. *What literature teaches us about emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- James, Henry. 1999. *The turn of the screw*. Eds. Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company. Original work published 1898.
- James, Henry. 2011. *The art of the novel: Critical prefaces*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Original work published 1934.
- James, Henry. 2003. Preface to the New York edition. In *The wings of the dove*, 1–25. New York: The Modern Library.
- Keen, Suzanne. 2007. *Empathy and the novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leake, Eric. 2014. Humanizing the inhumane: The value of difficult empathy. In *Rethinking empathy through literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, 175–185. New York: Routledge.
- Lindhé, Anna. 2016a. The paradox of narrative empathy and the form of the novel, or what George Eliot knew. *Studies in the Novel* 48(1): 19–41.
- Lindhé, Anna. 2016b. On the (possible) connection between empathy and evil in literature: Henry James's *The turn of the screw*. In *Empathy's*

- potential for healing and harm: Promises, pedagogy and pitfalls*, edited by Veronica Wain, Quanta Gold, and Pam Morrison, 45–52. Interdisciplinary Press.
- Lindhé, Anna. 2021. ‘Some knowledge of yourself’: *Heart of darkness* in the twenty-first century literature classroom—An ethical approach. In *Joseph Conrad and postcritique: Politics of hope, politics of fear*, edited by Jay Parker and Joyce Wexler, 211–226. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meretoja, Hanna. 2018. *The ethics of storytelling: Narrative hermeneutics, history and the possible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moi, Toril. 2017. *Revolution of the ordinary: Literary studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. Himayatnagar: Orient BlackSwan.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2007. *Ugly feelings*. Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press.
- Nünning, Ansgar. 1999. Unreliable, compared to what? Towards a cognitive theory of ‘unreliable narration’: Prolegomena and hypotheses. In *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologien im Kontext/Transcending boundaries: Narratology in context*, edited by Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach, 53–73. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1990. *Love’s knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. *Poetic justice: The literary imagination and public life*. Boston: Beacon.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1997. *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2010. *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Robinson, Jenefer. 2005. *Deeper than reason: Emotion and its role in literature, music, and art*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Scott, Maria C. 2020. *Empathy and the strangeness of fiction: Readings in French realism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Serpell, Namwali. 2008. Mutual exclusion, oscillation, and ethical projection in *The crying of lot 49* and *The turn of the screw*. *Narrative* 16(3): 223–255.

- Stadler, Jane. 2017. The empath and the psychopath: Ethics, imagination, and intercorporeality in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*. *Film-Philosophy* 21(3): 410–427.
- Woloch, Alex. 2003. *The one vs. the many: Minor characters and the space of the protagonist in the novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1999. Henry James's Ghosts. *The Turn of the Screw*. In *Henry James, The turn of the screw*, edited by Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren, 159–160. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.