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# The Unstable Narrative: an Explication of Ambiguity in Works by Henry James, Thomas Mann, and Richard Wright

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

The Unstable Narrative: an Explication of Ambiguity in  
Works by Henry James, Thomas Mann, and Richard Wright

submitted by

Kristen Elia 2014

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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## INTRODUCTION

Dorrit Cohn, a leading narrative theorist, works with explicating narrative consciousness with regard to what she calls narrative realism, the most frequent mode found in fictional texts. Cohn and I share a particular interest in how narrative discourse constructs fiction in the way that it portrays narrative consciousness and also narrative voice. Perhaps Cohn articulates it best when she writes: “If the real world becomes fiction only by revealing the hidden side of human beings who inhabit it, the reverse is equally true: the most real, the ‘roudest’ characters of fiction are those we know most intimately, precisely in ways we could never know people in real life” (Cohn *Transparent Minds*, 5). Especially in the creation of a realist fiction, the narrative structure must be able to accurately demonstrate the inner consciousness of a fictional character. Whether the narration relies on a character to narrate the story intradiegetically or a third person narrative voice to shape it extradiegetically, this “roundness” is a creation of what we call voice in a realist fiction.

This study will be an exploration into the ways in which a chosen group of texts, all narrated in third person, employ narrative structures with two distinct and separate narrative voices, usually narrator and protagonist. While the two narrating voices in each work are different, with regards to role, function, and also degree of omniscience, in each tale the voices display an interesting connection; it is almost as if there is an underlying and unwritten dialogue present in the narration between the two narrating agents. There is already some discussion in the field of narratology as to these instances of narrative structuring. I would refer my reader to the works of Susan Lanser, Dorrit Cohn, Jose

Ortega, and also Gerard Genette, all narrative theorists whose works address this interesting relationship between two distinct narrative voices operating in tandem to create a complex narrative structure. Each of these theorists has evaluated fictional realist texts for the specific strategies and methods being utilized, and how effective they are in creating narrative realism in fictional works. However, I have found few instances where this narrative structure's methods and functions are explored for their greater effects upon the novel. It is my goal then to further the intellectual exploration of these theorists to explore how these narrative structures influence the reader, the portrayal of the characters, and the overall tone of the novel.

In order to complete this study I will need to draw on the work of Cohn and other narrative theorists to some degree. However, I will also need to demonstrate how this theoretical approach furthers the exploration of narrative strategy. Let me begin by taking a critical eye to one of Cohn's most thought provoking narrative explications. The following comes from Dorrit Cohn's book *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Cohn writes, "*Death in Venice* concentrates fully on the inner adventures of its writer-protagonist, with Aschenbach's mind rendered largely by means of psycho-narration, and only occasional moments of quoted or narrated monologue" (Cohn 26-27). She cites this passage from *Death in Venice*:

Too late, he thought at this moment. Too late! But was it too late? This step he had failed to take, it might quite possibly have led to goodness, levity, gaiety, to salutary sobriety. But the fact doubtless was, that the aging man did not want the sobering, that the intoxication was too dear to him. Who can decipher the nature and pattern of artistic creativity? Who can comprehend the fusion of disciplined

and dissolute instincts wherein it is so deeply rooted? For not to be capable of wanting salutary sobering is dissoluteness. Aschenbach was no longer disposed to self-criticism; the tastes, the spiritual dispositions of his later years, self-esteem, maturity, and tardy single-mindedness disinclined him from analyzing his motives, and from deciding whether it was his conscience, or immorality and weakness that had prevented him from carrying out his intentions.

Cohn observes, “The narrator distances himself from Aschenbach immediately by questioning the directly quoted exclamation “too late,” and by then interpreting the failed action as a symptom of abnormal behavior—a form of behavior held contrary to the norms held by the narrator” (Cohn 28). She goes on to prove that the narrator’s voice is further distanced from Aschenbach’s through “a highly abstract analytical vocabulary,” and “a conceptual language shows that a dominant narrator presents the inner life in a manner as far removed from the psychic experience itself” (Cohn 28). This distancing between the narrator and Aschenbach, for Cohn, demonstrates “the narrator’s superior knowledge of the character’s inner life and his superior ability to present it and assess it” (Cohn 29).

I fully subscribe to Dorrit Cohn’s assessment of this passage from Thomas Mann’s novella *Death in Venice*. There are clearly two distinct narrating voices operating within this passage. One, Aschenbach, who is operating in free indirect discourse, and another third-person narrator, a character presented as outside or separate from the story.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In order to accept both voices in these passages as narrating agents, consider Wayne Booth’s commentary on third person narrators from his essay “Distance and Point-of-View: An Essay in Classification.” Booth here claims that any third person narration, maintaining a specific depth with regards to an insider’s view, is worthy of being equally as important as first person narration. “We should remind ourselves that many dramatized narrators are never explicitly labeled as narrators at all. In a sense, every speech, every gesture, narrates; most works contain disguised

However, Cohn's explication does not comment on how the narrator's interruptions and judgmental commentary of Aschenbach's private thoughts and actions might guide a reader to a certain reading of the text. The stronger voice of the narrator, which all but dominates Aschenbach here in this scene, initially guides the reader to share in a harsher judgment of Aschenbach's morality and character. Cohn does not suggest that other interpretations of which narrator is speaking, and when, could exist; she does not suggest that there is an ambiguity at all in where or when readers perceive Aschenbach's thoughts as being interrupted. My argument is that in this passage, there is an ambiguity as to who is narrating what and when for the reader. If we accept that this ambiguity exists and is necessarily an employment or creation of the author, what then is the value of this created narrative ambiguity?

**A Case Study: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*:**

In order to best demonstrate how a reader's response to this particular passage could be changed or altered depending on when or how the reader perceives the omniscient narrator's interrupting Aschenbach's moral turmoil with his intrusive commentary, let us demonstrate different perceived instances of this narrative intrusion. One instance, Cohn's view, is here demonstrated:

ASCHENBACH: Too late, he thought at this moment. Too late!

NARRATOR: But was it too late? This step he had failed to take, it might quite possibly have led to goodness, levity, gaiety, to salutary sobriety. But the fact

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narrators who...tell the audience what it needs to know, while seemingly merely to act out their roles. The most important unacknowledged narrators are however, the third-person 'centres of consciousness' through whom authors filter their narrative...they fill precisely the function of avowed narrators (Booth 177). We should remind ourselves that any sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator...(Booth 187).



doubtless was, that the aging man did not want the sobering, that the intoxication was too dear to him. Who can decipher the nature and pattern of artistic creativity? Who can comprehend the fusion of disciplined and dissolute instincts wherein it is so deeply rooted? For not to be capable of wanting salutary sobering is dissoluteness. Aschenbach was no longer disposed to self-criticism;...

In reviewing Cohn's reading of the text, when the narrator's voice interrupts Aschenbach's thoughts, by providing his own response to Aschenbach's deliberation, early on in the selection the reader (or narratee) may initially be guided to share in the harsh and judgmental critique that the narrator is relaying. Here's another view:

ASCHENBACH: Too late, he thought at this moment.

NARRATOR: Too late! But was it too late? This step he had failed to take, it might quite possibly have led to goodness, levity, gaiety, to salutary sobriety. But the fact doubtless was, that the aging man did not want the sobering, that the intoxication was too dear to him...

The second reading of the text, where the narrator comes in with an exasperated "Too late!" demonstrates an instance of a strong intrusion of the narrator on Aschenbach's private thoughts. However in this instance it is possible that a reader might question the narrator's motives and thus reliability. For if the reader reads this instance as a moment of pure exasperation and disbelief of Aschenbach's inner mental moral battle, the reader may wonder what more Aschenbach would have had to say privately. The second "too late" thus becomes a pure interruption and repression of Aschenbach's point of view, as the first "too late" is only a momentary instance of Aschenbach's free direct speech. The reader thus is left believing there was more to what Aschenbach was thinking that they

have now been denied access to through the narrator's interruption. The reader perhaps here sees the narrator as an extremely judgmental and invasive being, and will begin to distrust the narrator's commentary, due to the desire to know more of how Aschenbach's mind is working at this moment. By recognizing the control of the narrator, the reader will be mindful of ways in which they may distance themselves from such a judgmental and harsh critic of the protagonist. And still another:

ASCHENBACH: Too late, he thought at this moment. Too late! But was it too late? This step he had failed to take, it might quite possibly have led to goodness, levity, gaiety, to salutary sobriety. But the fact doubtless was, that the aging man did not want the sobering, that the intoxication was too dear to him.

NARRATOR: Who can decipher the nature and pattern of artistic creativity? Who can comprehend the fusion of disciplined and dissolute instincts wherein it is so deeply rooted? For not to be capable of wanting salutary sobering is dissoluteness.

Aschenbach was no longer disposed to self-criticism;...

In considering the third instance for the narratorial interruption, one might instead view the narrator as softer and perhaps a slyer judge of Aschenbach. The reader may see Aschenbach as sharing the narrator's judgment. In perceiving the narrator's interruption as beginning with the reflective questions the reader is presented with an Aschenbach who is engaged in a moment of self-criticism from the start. It is entirely possible that Aschenbach is in such a state of moral turmoil and that he takes a moment to question himself in his criticism. His critique here is strongly manifested in describing himself as "the aging man," who "did not want the sobering." The narrator's voice slides in more subtly in this instance with the reflective/rhetorical questions. In reading the narrator's

voice in these questions the reader is perhaps accepting a view that the narrator is still judging Aschenbach, however it is a judgment that the reader can prescribe to, as it seems to be a view related to what Aschenbach is voicing. The narrator's commentary following the questions, in this reading, becomes subtly softer than the previous readings. The questions manifest themselves as an attempt perhaps to describe for the reader what exactly is going on with Aschenbach's thought process here. It is still a criticism, yet it is a criticism that more closely aligns itself with the self-criticism manifested in this reading of the passage.

What this exercise aims to demonstrate is that where and when a particular reader perceives the narrating voice as dominating or entering into the text will determine his or her view of both the narrator and protagonist. This sort of narrative structure lends itself to multiple readings or interpretations of the same text; therefore, it invites a measurable amount of ambiguity as to where authorial consciousness leaves off and reader consciousness begins. How does this created ambiguity in narration affect a reader's response to the text?

### **Reader-Response Theory:**

This ambiguity is the result of a reader's ability to derive meaning from a text, a meaning that is not fixed exclusively within the text. This ability of the reader to construct a meaning beyond the words on the page is the very basis of reader-response theory. As Jane Tompkins writes: "Reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its 'effects,' psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has not effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader" (Tompkins ix). The central

issue for reader-response critics is textual instability. Tompkins concludes that reader-response critics, “whether they intended to or not, eventually destroy” (Tompkins x) any textual objectivity, or fixed meaning. The idea that there is no objectivity implied by a written text further credits the idea (or rather theory) of textual ambiguity. If a written text has no objective, fixed meaning, then a reader’s response is an effect of ambiguities within the narrative structuring; the literary style and structured writing enables readers to have multiple interpretations of the same text. “The range of interpretations,” writes Wolfgang Iser in his essay *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, “that arise as a result of the reader’s creative activity is seen...as proof of the text’s ‘inexhaustibility’” (Iser 55).

Stanley Fish proposes that meaning for a text cannot be derived from comparing one interpretation to another, rather meaning, for Fish, is defined as the comprehensive understanding that a reader comes to in reading a text:

But what if that controversy [in differing interpretations] is *itself* regarded as evidence, not of an ambiguity that must be removed, but of an ambiguity that readers have always experienced?...In other words, the lines first generate a pressure for judgment...and then decline to deliver it; the pressure, however, still exists, and it is transferred from the words on the page to the reader who comes away from the [text] not with a statement, but with a responsibility. (Fish 166)

This “responsibility” Fish refers to is the reader’s responsibility to make a choice for his own understanding of the text. Fish here impresses on us the importance of ambiguity created by narrative structure; emphasizing that this ambiguity, whether an intended creation of the author’s writing or not, is inherently present in the manifestation of

multiple interpretations through the act of a reader reading. In other words, readers and critics must give up the search for an inarguable reading of texts, as a reading inherent in the text is really unattainable.

Fish does hint, however, at the idea that an author consciously constructs a narrative to guide a reader to a certain reading of the text. "If the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense be uniform; that is, it will proceed in terms of the system of rules all speakers share" (Fish 84). Fish here is indicating that in the process of reading, a reader reacts to the words on the page in one way or another because he is responding according to a system of language rules that are familiar to both author and reader. The author, in making certain tensions, contradictions, and/or uncertainties present in the narrative, will necessarily have some control over the reader-response.

That an author is able to construct a controlling agent for how a reader will perceive a text does not mean that the reader is not free to construct a meaning unanticipated by the author, or even that readers will reach a consensus in interpretation of the narrative. According to Fish's argument, Thomas Mann's crafting of *Death in Venice*, through a common system of language, is a conscious process, whether successful or not, of trying to at least prompt a reader's interpretation in one direction or another. As readers and critics, we cannot know an author's intentions for sure, nor for that matter can we assume that authors are always aware of the possibility that their meaning might be ambiguous. According to Cohn, an author's conscious intentions may also be in contention with their subconscious impulses (Cohn 8). While an author might think their writing clearly promotes a certain reading, it produces another. Take for

example F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Many modern literary critics consider Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, to be completely unreliable.<sup>2</sup> Yet we have firm evidence that Fitzgerald never intended for any unreliability in the narration. The correspondence between Fitzgerald and his editor, Max Perkins, shows Perkins is convinced that Carraway's narration is the best method for presenting true insight into the story: "You adopted exactly the right method of telling it, that of employing a narrator who is more a spectator than an actor: this puts the reader upon a point of observation on a higher level than that on which the characters stand and at a distance that gives perspective" (Fitzgerald and Perkins 86).

### **Road Map to Ambiguity**

Reader-response criticism shows strong support for a text's ability to display multiple interpretations, and for the argument that, through multiple interpretations, a certain narrative ambiguity arises. However, my study will seek to claim that multiple readings of a text are not the only manifestations of ambiguity in narration. Ambiguity in narration can also pervade a text through comparing the narration of the narrator to the narration of the characters. Narrative ambiguity will manifest itself in contradictions, tensions, and also uncertainties that arise through such textual explications. What will be important for this study to define is how the narratives create such ambiguity, and how the ambiguity affects the reading of the work. This study will incorporate an investigation into the narrative structures of Henry James's *The Bostonians*, Thomas Mann's *Death in*

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<sup>2</sup> I would refer my reads to Kent Cartwright's essay "Nick Carraway as an Unreliable Narrator," *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Linda Pavlovski. Vol. 157 (2005); Thomas E. Boyle's essay "Unreliable Narration in 'The Great Gatsby,'" *Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (1969); R. W. Stallman's "Gatsby and the Hole in Time," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1 (1955); Gary Scrimgeour, "Against *The Great Gatsby*," *Criticism*, 8 (1966); Richard Foster's "The Way to Read *Gatsby*," *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*. (1970).

*Venice*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Notably, these are all texts written in the post-Freudian and post-Victorian periods, where ambiguity in interpretation reigned.

The case for narrative ambiguity in Henry James's novel *The Bostonians* was sparked by the range of critical responses the novel elicited with regard to its narration. Some of James's earliest critics read the work as a melodrama, with Basil Ransom as the victorious hero whose voice was the medium for James, while most of James's more recent critics agree that the novel is a satire and that it is the third person satiric narrator alone who speaks for James. However, in this chapter, it is my argument that to view the narrator as unified with the author is to misunderstand the complex narration of the novel. Through specific methods of narration, which are explicated and evaluated in great detail, the narrator's narration is revealed as untrustworthy and ambiguous. He feigns both omniscience and ignorance, he makes authoritative judgments and also tentative speculations, and he is constantly shifting his narration among different character perspectives. As a result, the reader is left unsure of what information they can trust and what they must be skeptical of. In this way James's complex narration demands an actively thinking and questioning reader. The resulting ambiguity, about what narration can be trusted or where the reader's sympathies are meant to lie, is a product of James's dedication to presenting the novel as a realist fiction, a conversational text the reader is just as much a part of as any of its characters.

In explicating the narrative structure in Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*, we find two strong narrating agents operating at once to tell the tale, the protagonist Aschenbach, and the third person narrator. As the narrative progresses the distance between Aschenbach and his narrator increases, in tandem with Aschenbach's giving in

to his “immoral” indulgences. Through specific narrative techniques, which are explicated in great detail throughout the chapter, Aschenbach and his narrator become pitted against one another with regards to their opinion over the plight of the artist. Ambiguity arises in the text through contradictions, tensions, and judgments in the specific narrative methods, but also in the end the novella’s conclusion is cloaked in ambiguity. Since its publication, the novella has sparked a great deal of critical commentary regarding whether or not it is sympathetic towards Aschenbach. My study seeks to prove that the novella’s ambiguous conclusion is exactly that: it remains ambiguous. With narrator and protagonist taking such strong stances on either side of the argument of the artist, there is no clear answer or authoritative judgment. This ambiguity will cause the reader to question where Mann (as an artist himself) stands on the issue. Aschenbach’s plight in many ways becomes Mann’s, and in this way the novella takes on an autobiographical significance for the artist.

The exploration of ambiguity in the narration of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is catalyzed by the great amount of critical reception, which has cast the narrator of the novel as the transparent and necessary spokesperson for Bigger, the novel’s protagonist. In this chapter, my study takes a position contrary to the popular opinion of the novel’s critics. The narrative is anything but transparent. Throughout the novel, the narrator’s voice holds an authorial dominance, and under the guise of translator for the “inarticulate” protagonist, the narration changes and distorts Bigger’s consciousness. Bigger’s narration, when compared to the narrator’s narration and commentary, reveals certain discrepancies and distortions that create ambiguity for the attentive reader. In the end these distortions in the narration do not seem to be the result of authorial intention, and rather seem an



accidental effect of the complex narrative style. In trying to make Bigger into too much of a symbolic martyr for the cause, the narrator weaves a complex narrative that seems too contrary and too opposed to its protagonist.

Although the execution of ambiguity in narration is individual to each of the three works, it catalyzes the reader to respond to the uncertainty of the meaning of each work.

HENRY JAMES'S *THE BOSTONIANS*: AMBIGUITY IN THE ACT OF READING

Henry James's 1886 realist novel *The Bostonians* fell about midway through the novelist's career. The tale surrounds the tense triangular relationship among a politically conservative Mississippi lawyer, Basil Ransom; a radical social reformer and feminist, Olive Chancellor; and a young, beautiful and vivacious speaker, Verena Tarrant. The novel follows the struggle between Basil and Olive as they fight to control Verena, each for their own purposes. Ever since its publication the novel has sparked a great deal of critical attention. The topics for commentary range from the conflicting values of marriage, family, and the feminist perspective of late nineteenth century America to the innovative and complicated narrative technique employed by James.

The complex narration, which many critics have attributed to a disunity of the narration, has provoked starkly different thematic receptions of the novel: "Deciding on whether the novel is antifeminist or the reverse becomes difficult because of James's complex point of view and because of the absence of a single positive character... James slides in and out of the consciousness of each of the main characters—sometimes with a clue to the reader, more often than not—so that identifying the author's voice is not an easy matter" (Maxwell 19). Joan Maxwell dictates that earlier critics of the novel "tended to read the work as melodrama, assuming that Basil Ransom was the victorious hero who spoke for the author"<sup>1</sup> while most critics now agree that "the work is satiric throughout; that the satire is two-pronged, targeting the male protagonist's Southern chivalric world

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<sup>1</sup> See critics for Basil Ransom as hero and authorial narrator: Charles Anderson's essay "James's Portrait of the Southerner." *American Literature*, 27 (1955); Louis Auchincloss's *Reading Henry James* (1975); Lionel Trilling's *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (1955); Philip Rahv's "Introduction" *The Bostonians* (1945); and also Walter Wright's *The Madness of Art: A Study of Henry James* (1962).

as well as Olive Chancellor's world of Boston reform; that it is the satiric narrator, alone, and not Ransom, who speaks for James" (Maxwell 18). In many of the more recent critical responses regarding the narration of *The Bostonians*, critics suggest that James's voice and opinions are at times voiced through the narrator.<sup>2</sup> However, to judge James's voice as one in the same with either Basil Ransom or the third-person narrator is to misunderstand how exactly the complex narration is functioning for James. The narrator in *The Bostonians* is as much a part of the text of the story as any other character.

For James the separation of narrator and author is crucial for his creation of narrative ambiguity. Wayne Booth perhaps describes James's narrative purposes best, as "There can be no intensity of illusion if the author is present, constantly reminding us of his unnatural wisdom. Indeed, there can be no illusion of life where there is no bewilderment...and the omniscient narrator is obviously not bewildered" (Booth 45). James's purpose, of presenting a realist rendition—"the intensity of illusion"—of the events in *The Bostonians*, could not be achieved if the audience understood the narrator's voice as belonging to the author. My understanding of Booth's "intensity of illusion," in connection with the narration of *The Bostonians*, is that if the realist novel's illusion is sufficiently intense then it is realism. The narrator in *The Bostonians* is occasionally bewildered, and is therefore not omniscient, and is therefore not the same person as James, the author. James himself commented on his narration in *The Bostonians*. In a letter to Mary (Mrs. Humphry) Ward, dated 26 July 1899, he writes:

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<sup>2</sup> I would refer readers to the following works for opinions that the narrator is a medium for James's voice: Sallie J. Hall's "Henry James and the Bluestockings: Satire and Morality in *The Bostonians*." *Aeolian Harps: Essays in Literature*. (1976); Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to Fiction*. (1978); Lillian Faderman's "Female Same-Sex Relationship in Novels by Longfellow, Holmes and James." *The New England Quarterly*, 51 (1978); and Alfred Habegger's "The Disunity of *The Bostonians*" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24 (1969).

...there are as many magnificent and imperative cases as you like of presenting a thing by “going behind” as many forms of consciousness as you like—all Dickens, Balzac, Thackeray, Tolstoy...are huge illustrations of it. But they are illustrations of extreme and calculated selection, or singleness, too, whenever that has been, by the case, imposed on them. My own immortal works, for that matter, if I may make bold, are recognizable instances of *all* variations. I “go behind” right and left in...“The Bostonians,”...(Horne 319).

Much of the resulting ambiguity in the narration of *The Bostonians* is owed in part to the fact that the narrative itself, through the complex and shifting style of the narration, is constantly calling upon the reader to question who is speaking, what information is given, and how reliable is the information being given. In *The Concept of Ambiguity—the Example of James*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines narrative ambiguity with regards to the narrator’s voice as “...a land where we cannot know whether the narrator is reliable or not and whether the events he records are to be taken on trust or to be treated with ironic disbelief” (Rimmon-Kenan 15). Why is this such a crucial idea to understand? Considering how narrative functions in a literary work becomes essential for this study of narrative ambiguity in *The Bostonians*. For this study it will prove beneficial to explicate the many complicated ways in which the narrator narrates.

Each explicated instance of the narrator’s narrative style belongs either to direct or indirect methods of narrative discourse. These terms are defined by Janet McKay in her text *Narration and Discourse in American Realist Fiction*. She defines direct discourse as instances in which the narrative is relayed through characters’ speeches and conversational exchanges with one another. McKay writes “Directly reported discourse

offers the narrator ample opportunity to guide the reader's perceptions, but the comments of the narrator are rigidly separated from the actual words of the participants" (McKay 55). Indirect discourse is defined as instances of indirectly reported speech and thought that can include summaries of speech that contain the character's sentiments but not necessarily their own direct words. A great deal of *The Bostonians*' narration comes from instances of indirect discourse.

Indirection, as a technique of narration, manipulates the reader's perceptions of characters and events within the novel. Indirect reports create both distance and ambiguity. In directly reported dialogues, the reader may be uncertain about the implications of what a character says, and in this sense is aided both by narrator comment and the reaction of the other participants in the conversation, but in indirectly reported discourse the reader must constantly ask whose linguistic responsibility the indirect report represents. (McKay 57)

James's narrative structure employs instances of both direct and indirect narrative discourse. With each explicated instance to follow it will be important to consider whether it is a moment of direct or indirect discourse.

From quite early on in the novel the reader is made aware that the narrator is conscious of his audience. Among the first instances of direct commentary from the narrator to the reader, the reader is almost amused by the narrator's acknowledgment of his audience. Consider the following passage:

It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound, which is to be associated in the present instance with nothing vulgar or vain. This lean,

pale, sallow, shabby, striking young man, with his superior head, his sedentary shoulders, his expression of bright grimness and hard enthusiasm, his provincial, distinguished appearance is, as a representative of his sex, the most important personage in my narrative; he played a very active part in the events I have undertaken in some degree to set forth. And yet the reader who likes a complete image, who desires to read with the senses as well as with the reason, is entreated not to forget that he prolonged his consonants and swallowed his vowels... (James 2-3).

The immediate reader response to this passage is appreciation for a narrator who appears dedicated to presenting his readers with a more complete description of the scene and protagonist than would usually come across in simply dictating the narrative events and conversations. His acknowledgment of the limitation of the act of the reader reading instead of listening to Basil's dialect as the narrator does seems almost a polite apology to the reader; suggesting a sincerity and honesty on the part of the narrator.

However, at the same time one might read the narrator's description with a sarcastic tone. The sarcasm is two pronged; directed at both Basil and the reader. He states that his "initiated reader" will have no difficulty in recreating Basil's accent. However, even just that clarification must make the reader hesitate. The narrator, in making the reader pause and question whether he is "initiated" immediately sparks a discomfort between the narrator and his audience. He makes it clear that he only addresses those readers who are learned enough to understand what sound his "charming dialect" would evoke. And yet at the very end of this passage, the narrator produces the sounds of the dialect as best as he can through narration. In this view it is clear that the

narrator is subtly condescending towards his reader's intelligence as he frames his condescension by complimenting a thorough reader, who would want to create a fuller description in their own mind. The narrator's reiteration of the actual sounds of Basil's dialect for the reader is condescending in that he opened the passage declaring that his intelligent readers would not need such clarification; thus with the clarification at the end of the paragraph the reader is left wondering if the narrator is mocking his intelligence.

Just as the narrator takes a sarcastic approach in defining his relationship with his reader, so too is his description of Basil cast in a rather ironic tone. It is subtle, but the attentive reader will note that from the very first line of this passage the narrator quietly impresses a judgmental tone upon the reader. It is the *narrator* and not the "charming dialect" which makes the reader begin to associate vulgarity and vanity with Basil. Why would the narrator spark such a negative association for Basil, whom he dubs "the most important personage in my narrative"? Consider for a moment the narrator's description of Basil: "This lean, pale, sallow, shabby, striking young man, with his superior head, his sedentary shoulders, his expression of bright grimness and hard enthusiasm, his provincial, distinguished appearance is, as a representative of his sex, the most important personage in my narrative." The narrator's sarcastic tone is pronounced in this instance. The adjectives the narrator uses to describe Basil are all at once contradictory. "Lean, pale, sallow, shabby" is opposed to "striking young man." "Superior head" on "sedentary" shrinking shoulders again is a conflicting description. Even the assertions that he appears "provincial" and at the same time "distinguished" seem at odds with each other. This conflicting and rather ambiguous description of the male protagonist seems extremely contrary to the "chivalric hero" that earlier critics had understood him to be.

The narrator's irony is highlighted in this instance by finally classifying this man as "a representative of his sex." Comparing Basil's significance as a "representative" to his significance as "the most important personage in my narrative" seems a paradox. Calling him the most important person would suggest Basil as the hero, while the term representative suggests he is important to the novel only symbolically. In other words Basil is not here to be a full and developed character, or the hero for that matter, rather his purpose in the narrative is simply as a representational figurehead, a stand in for the male, in an otherwise female dominated text.

The narrator's sarcasm is not limited to Basil. When introducing Verena, the narrator once again subtly guides the audience in how to view her character:

Though it would seem to you eminently natural that a daughter of Selah Tarrant and his wife should be an inspirational speaker, yet as you knew Verena better, you would have wondered immensely how she came to issue from such a pair. Her ideas of enjoyment were very simple; she enjoyed putting on her new hat, with its redundancy of feather, and twenty cents (trolley fare) appeared to her a very large sum. (James 72)

It is clear that the narrator is trying to project a strong bias onto the reader, a bias that obviously views Verena as a frivolous and simpleminded girl, as his description of her is dripping with sarcasm. The statement that twenty cents "appeared to her a very large sum" is patronizing towards Verena; which, lest the reader should miss it, the narrator emphasizes with the parenthetical clarification that the amount is mere trolley fare.



Similar to the passage describing Basil, the narrator in this instance is also sarcastic about his audience. The first line of the passage directly addresses the reader: “Though it would seem to you” and “yet as you knew Verena better.” However when the reader considers what the narrator declares they should understand to be true about Verena, the sarcasm appears pronounced. “Though it would seem to you eminently natural that a daughter of Selah Tarrant and his wife should be an inspirational speaker” is rather insulting to the attentive reader. The reader would not have expected that Verena’s talent for speech would have anything to do with her genes, especially from her “mesmeric healer” of a father who: “didn’t know how to speak...He couldn’t hold the attention of an audience, he was not acceptable as a lecturer” (James 69) nor her mother who seems both mentally and emotionally unstable. The narrator’s approach to the reader is one of condescension. By all accounts the narrative has presented a very clear reading of the Tarrants, Dr. Tarrant is more of a fraud than a healer, which Mrs. Tarrant herself is aware of: “she was full of suspicion of the ladies (they were mainly ladies) whom Selah mesmerized” (James 70-71). This “clarification” by the narrator will put the attentive reader ill at ease with the narrator. The reader may begin to feel judged by the narrator as well, as his commentary assumes that the reader is also prejudiced against Verena. Here the narrator is addressing his audience by basically saying I know you are a person who believes in eugenics, and that you will catch my sarcasm here because you are a bigot. The ideal “narratee” for this narrator’s address is a bigot, whose intolerances he can manipulate into sharing his prejudice against Verena. However, since the attentive reader is not this ideal narratee, in that they are not this bigot, they will feel out of sorts with the narrator as his address does not apply to them.

Once the reader has recognized this tension, catalyzed by the narrator, he might be apprehensive about trusting the narrative. If the reader cannot trust the narrator, can they even trust opinions they draw from the reading? This underlying apprehension forces the reader to keep a more critical eye. However, it is eminently important for the reader to understand that the narrator is an observer, just like the reader. He is not part of the story he narrates. Even though he has control over what information is presented to the audience, his relationship to the tale is similar to the reader's. The reader observes as the narrator does, the reader gets to judge and contemplate just as the narrator does. This motivation for the reader to assume the role of the observer could certainly be a result of the ambiguity in the narrative; as readers we are always taught to seek answers and search for as much information as possible, in that way this active observational response is almost reflexive for the reader given the ambiguity in the narrative. Ambiguity is unsettling for readers; we want there to be meaning and definite answers. However, this reader response lends itself to various interpretations and a deeper uncertainty about the author's meaning. In attempting to create a realist fiction about conversations and relationships it only makes sense that an observer would face obstacles in obtaining a complete picture. For instance in any conversation neither party is privy to another's private thoughts, nor can one ever be sure of the sincerity of another's speech.

The narrator for *The Bostonians* purports to function in many ways with the same limitations: limitations he is perpetually aware of. In order to distance himself from his audience he is constantly balancing a fine line between an authoritative and a tentative approach in dictating his narrative. At times he claims omniscience, at others he claims

his knowledge is limited. This phenomenon is demonstrated by an instance of the narrator's comments on Basil Ransom:

I shall not attempt a complete description of Ransom's ill-starred views, being convinced that the reader will guess them as he goes, for they had a frolicsome, ingenious way of peeping out of the young man's conversation...I suppose he was very conceited, for he was much addicted to judging his age. (James 181)

Here the narrator is tentative to present a concrete opinion of Ransom, his "conceited" judgment is a supposition based upon Ransom's own conversations. Yet just a few sentences later the narrator authoritatively offers the reader information that Ransom has never shared: "He liked his pedigree, he revered his forefathers, and he rather pitied those who might come after him. In saying so, however, I betray him a little, for he never mentioned such feelings as these" (James 181). This information concerning Basil's pride is presumably a private feeling Basil would not have shared aloud. The narrator's moments of omniscience appear almost random, that he picks and chooses when he'll be inside the characters' heads. Consider the following passages with this in mind: "No stranger situation can be imagined than that of these extraordinary young women at this juncture; it was so singular on Verena's part, in particular, that I despair of presenting it to the reader with the air of reality" (James 365-366). "...he played a very active part in the events I have undertaken in some degree to set forth" (James 2). In both these cases the narrator subtly reveals to his audience that the events being described through his narration are not fully relayed, as though the story is artfully and purposefully being edited for the reader. This understated admittance of his limitations as a narrator forces the reader to wonder about what details are being omitted. As a narrator he knows and

tells more than a mere observer could know. Yet in many instances he demonstrates that he knows and tells only what an observer could know. The reader as an observer is compelled to make their own judgments with regards to these omissions or moments of limited narratorial scope, about what is really happening in the narrative.

The narrator's narration often confounds the reader in that instead of consistently relaying the thoughts of one character, he shifts constantly among the thoughts of different characters. Just when readers think they might have started to understand the motivations and thoughts of one character, they are caught off-balance and disoriented as they are thrust into the thoughts of another. He does not always make it clear who is speaking either, and at times his own voice becomes intermingled with the voices of the characters.

She played it with extraordinary simplicity and grace; at the end of ten minutes Ransom became aware that the whole audience—Mrs. Farrinder, Miss Chancellor, and the tough subject from Mississippi—were under the charm. I speak of ten minutes but to tell the truth the young man lost all sense of time. He wondered afterwards how long she had spoken; then he counted that her strange, sweet, crude, absurd, enchanting improvisation must have lasted half an hour.

(James 64)

Here the reader is presented with the narrator summarizing Basil's perceptions of others listening to Verena's speech. The narrator credits his intrusive narration (Basil could have presumably dictated all this in his own direct narration) to the fact that Ransom is obviously too dazed by Verena's effect on him to report the scene accurately; what he perceives as ten minutes passing in reality was a half hour. This intrusive commentary is

another instance of the narrator asserting his control over the narrative and the reader's understanding of it. He is coy about the facts of the scene. He pretends with Basil that the speech lasted only ten minutes, while describing Basil's thoughts as drifting away from actually listening to Verena's speech. He keeps the length of time ambiguous until Basil himself "counted" her speech as lasting, in reality, half an hour. As the third party narrator he knows the actual time and could clear up any confusion immediately. Instead he leaves the audience to struggle with the facts of the scene for themselves, it could easily be interpreted that what Basil perceived as thirty minutes was really ten. Perhaps it is not so important that the reader grasp how long Verena's speech actually lasted, rather that this confusion is sparked and exacerbated in many ways by the narrator.

A depiction of the narrator's narrative style would not be complete without mentioning his apparent inherent need to impose his own judgment on the characters' thoughts and actions, whether explicitly or subtly. Consider the following passages describing Olive Chancellor: "Miss Olive Chancellor, it may be confided to the reader, to whom in the course of our history I shall be under the necessity of imparting much occult information, was subject to fits of tragic shyness during which she was unable to meet even her own eyes in the mirror" (James 7). And also "But this pale girl, with her light green eyes, her pointed features and nervous manner, was visibly morbid; it was plain as day that she was morbid. Poor Ransom announced this fact to himself as if he had made a great discovery" (James 8). The first passage spoken by the narrator by comparison to Basil's description of Olive paints Olive in a much more pardoning light. While both describe Olive's pronounced shyness, Basil's words seem a harsh judgment that her nervousness was "visibly morbid; it was plain as day that she was morbid;" while the

narrator's description seems almost a polite defense of Olive as he calls her nervousness a "tragic shyness" which she held even against herself. Simply by comparison the words of the narrator seem a defense of Olive against Basil's harsh critique. The narrator's defense of Olive is further supported by the fact that he sarcastically undercuts Basil's critical judgment as he states: "Poor Ransom announced this fact to himself as if he had made a great discovery" while supporting his own assertion by dubbing it "occult information:" information that would not be discernible to anyone but a narrator who has privileged access to Olive's psyche and emotions.

It is worth noting that many critics have attributed the idea of Olive's morbidity as belonging to the narrator's opinion.<sup>3</sup> How is it that the narrator's sarcastic tone in this instance could be read by these critics as the narrator's support for Basil's description of Olive? The confusion regarding how a reader will perceive the narration is a mark for the novel's ambiguity: an ambiguity as an effect of the complex narration. In order to paint a fuller picture of the narrator's techniques and methods as causing ambiguity consider the following passage:

'Pray, who shall judge what we require if not we ourselves? We require simply freedom; we require the lid to be taken off the box in which we have been kept for centuries. You say it's a very comfortable, cosy, convenient box, with nice glass sides, so that we can see out, and that all that's wanted is to give another quiet turn to the key. That is very easily answered. Good gentlemen, you have never been in the box, and you haven't the least idea how it feels!'

The historian who has gathered these documents together does not deem it necessary to give a larger specimen of Verena's eloquence,

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<sup>3</sup> I would refer readers to Clinton Oliver's essay "Henry James as a Social Critic" *The Antioch Review* Vol. 7, No. 2 (1947); Diana Schaub's essay "Sisters At Odds" *The New Atlantis Review* (1995); and also Wendy Gram's *Henry James's Thwarted Love* (1999).

especially as Basil Ransom, through whose ears we are listening to it, arrived, at this point, at a conclusion. He had taken her measure as a public speaker, judged her importance in the field of discussion, the cause of reform. Her speech, in itself, had about the value of a pretty essay, committed to memory and delivered by a bright girl at an ‘academy’; it was vague, thin, rambling, a tissue of generalities that glittered agreeably enough in Mrs. Burrage’s veiled lamplight. From any serious point of view it was neither worth answering nor worth considering, and Basil Ransom made his reflections on the crazy character of the age in which such a performance as that was treated as an intellectual effort, a contribution to a question... Its importance was that Verena was unspeakably attractive, and this was all the greater for him in the light of the fact, which quietly dawned upon him as he stood there, that he was falling in love with her... This did not make the sequel of her discourse more clear to him; her meaning faded into the agreeable vague, and he simply felt her presence, tasted her voice. Yet the act of reflection was not suspended; he found himself rejoicing that she was so weak in argument, so inevitably verbose. The idea that she was brilliant, that she counted as a factor, only because the public mind was in a muddle, was not an humiliation but a delight to him; it was a proof that her apostleship was all nonsense, the most passion of fashions, the veriest of delusions, and that she was meant for something divinely different—for privacy, for him, for love. He took no measure of the duration of her talk; he only knew, when it was over and succeeded by a clapping of hands, an immense buzz of voices and shuffling of chairs, that it had been capitally bad, and that her personal success, wrapping it about with a glamour like the silver mist that surrounds a fountain, was such as to prevent its badness from being a cause of mortification to her lover. (James 257-258)

The first paragraph of the passage is Verena’s speech, which as the narrator will soon indicate, is heard through Basil’s ears. As we move into the second, larger portion, of the

passage the narration is confused with a muddling of direct and indirect discourse. The first sentence seems a moment of direct narrator discourse, as he steps away from the present moment of narration to clarify for the reader that “the historian who has gathered these documents together” does not deem it necessary to continue listening to Verena’s “eloquence.” The narration continues in the narrator’s direct discourse as he references that this pause in listening to Verena’s speech is natural as well, since it is the moment Basil Ransom had also decided to stop listening. The narrator then prefaces what will be Basil’s indirectly reported discourse by clarifying that Basil has stopped listening, believing that he has understood her “measure as a public speaker” and has judged how important she is for the reform movement. The next sentence appears to be a moment of Basil’s indirectly reported discourse, which continues for some length as he judges the weight of the words of her speech as nothing more than a “pretty essay.”

As the passage continues the line becomes blurred between direct narrator discourse and Basil’s indirect discourse. There are a few occasions when the narrator’s more direct commentary is noticeable as he states “he felt” or “he knew,” as he attempts to summarize or classify Basil’s perhaps unspoken feelings and emotions for Verena. However whether this passage is primarily read for either direct discourse or indirect discourse will have a great effect on how the reader feels about Basil Ransom. In accepting that the narrator’s voice directly relates the majority of the passage the narrator’s sarcastic and ironic tone towards Basil is indicated. The final sentences of the passage, in which Basil is sure that Verena’s speech had been “capitally bad” and that any appreciation the gathering might have held for Verena’s speech, is simply the crowd’s politeness, so as not to offend her lover. If these words are read with the voice of



the narrator, then the final assertion drips with sarcasm. In reading the passage as indirectly related discourse, Basil's assertions are not so much cloaked in sarcasm as they are in delusion.

In either case there is a powerful moment of ambiguity in this passage that is prevalent throughout the novel. The indirectly reported discourse of the protagonists involves some very interesting technical complications. Not only does the narrator's voice mingle with the characters' speech and thoughts, but characters commentate on one another. As such the reader comes to understand that it is not the substance of the speeches or reported thoughts that are important, but rather the impact that they have on other characters. This impact often becomes confused because of the narrator's intrusions and constant undercutting of the protagonists' ability to narrate objectively: whether he is pitying Olive, or being highly sarcastic about Basil, or making Verena seem a silly trifling girl incapable of an intelligent thought of her own, his judgments cast doubt for the reader over what is reported and by whom. The narrator's judgment of each of the protagonists lessens their credibility, for the reader, as narrators and commentators for the events of a story centered around conversations: "James thus intensifies the reader's experience by requiring him to confront the complexity involved in the relationships of the characters to one another and to the moral issues central to those relationships" (McKay 86-87). It is the narrator who presents these character relationships which are so central to the novel, but without the reassurance of a trustworthy and objective narrator, the reader must be actively attentive, judgmental, and questioning for himself.

The narration of *The Bostonians* in many ways pushes for a stronger reader-engagement and interpretation with the text, which seems so in line with the ideals of

presenting a realist fiction all about the methods and motivations of conversation. The narration never truly sees directly through the perspectives of the protagonists, rather it casts an ambiguous narrative around the perspectives, which is always cloaked in doubt as the narrator toys with his omniscience or limited scope.

Despite the uncertainty the narration projects over the plot and characters of *The Bostonians*, a reader *can*, and will, form their own reading of the novel. An engaged reader, after explicating the novel's more ambiguous narrative passages, will form a particular opinion and reading of the substance and impact of the text, especially with regards to which characters to sympathize with and how the reader relates to the narrator. This liberty in the reader's response to the novel will certainly result in a variety of readings, often readings that conflict. Thus the ambiguity in *The Bostonians* is largely rendered through the reading experience. By contrast the next chapter addressing the narration of *Death in Venice*, finds that ambiguity is a result of the nature of the novella itself; through close reading many of the complex narrative passages the reader comes to find that ambiguity is inherently a part of the written text itself.

THOMAS MANN'S *DEATH IN VENICE*: UNRESOLVABLE AMBIGUITY

Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice* tells the story of Gustav Aschenbach, a renowned author in his fifties who travels to Venice in the hopes that it will cure his writer's block. In Venice he becomes utterly obsessed by a beautiful young boy, Tadzio, and the passionate emotional response Tadzio's aesthetic beauty ignites in his soul. Despite a cholera epidemic, Aschenbach is unable to leave Venice as he cannot bear to leave Tadzio. As his obsession progresses his psyche begins to decline, and as a result of the lethal effects of cholera he eventually dies.

Deemed by many critics to be "one of the fixed stars in the canon of modern German literature" (O'Neill 17), Mann's novella has received a great deal of critical acclaim and analysis since its publication. The topics of commentary on the novella range from Mann's representation of art and the role of the artist, to Aschenbach's development as a character, to Aschenbach's story as an autobiographical connection to the life of Thomas Mann himself. For the purposes of this study, my focus will engage a more stylistic explication of the novella, namely the narrative discourse Mann employs.

Consider the following quotation by Thomas Mann on the distinction between the author and narrator of a fictional work:

Narrating is something totally different from writing, and what distinguishes them is an indirection in the former...as when...a gentleman announces himself and makes speeches who, however, is in no way identical with the epic author but rather an invented and shadowy observer. (qtd. in Cohn 124).

The narration Mann describes here is the type of narration he employs in *Death in Venice*. The importance of Mann's distinction between the narration and the writing of a fictional story becomes clear as we understand that, in the case of *Death in Venice*, Mann as the author is operating behind his narrator, not as his narrator. The narrator is a tool who operates as part of a complex narrative strategy for Mann throughout the novella. In understanding this distinction it is important to remember that Aschenbach's story is the creation of the author, and the narrator's task is simply to narrate the story; thus: "we can therefore hold him [the narrator] accountable for his narrative *manner*, not his narrative *matter*..." (Cohn 125). This study will focus on the relationship between the narrator and protagonist, as demonstrated through narrative discourse and the resulting ambiguity that the narration casts upon the novella.

The narrator's voice is immediately apparent from the first few lines of the novella: "Gustav Aschenbach—or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday—had set out alone from his house in Prince Regent Street, Munich, for an extended walk. It was a spring afternoon in that year of grace 19—, when Europe sat upon the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months" (Mann 3). He opens the tale by anchoring his narrative fully in a realist setting; through the date and description of a Europe in turmoil his contextual background for the story grants him a narrative authority. From these opening lines he also takes care to introduce his audience to Aschenbach, whose story he will narrate. Yet no sooner does he introduce Aschenbach by one name than he immediately renames him: "Gustav Aschenbach—or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday—." The parenthetical statement might cause the reader to pause and consider the narrator's tone

in this instance. We could see these qualifying words as the narrator adapting to Aschenbach's new title, perhaps forgetting for a moment how Aschenbach would be introduced to a new acquaintance. An equally strong approach would be to read the statement with a sarcastic and mocking narrative tone. In this view the words seem almost a jocular aside to the reader. The narrator will not call Aschenbach by his title again throughout the story, thus it might be that it is Aschenbach who prefers this title, but the narrator himself sees it as a silly, stuffy aristocratic title given to Aschenbach only because of his age, which the narrator does emphasize as being somewhere after the age of fifty: "since his fiftieth birthday," which in this view is another subtle dig at the protagonist. The narrator's words in this instance present a certain degree of narrative ambiguity. An attentive reader in this instance might be thrown, unsure how to evaluate the narrator's relationship to the protagonist from the very outset of the tale.

The narrative ambiguity persists into the first chapter. As Aschenbach is taking his stroll the narrator elaborates on the novelist's writer's block and his suppressed desires for travel and adventure:

Yet whether the pilgrim air the stranger wore kindled his fantasy or whether some other physical or psychical influence came in play, he could not tell; but he felt the most surprising consciousness of a widening of inward barriers, a kind of vaulting unrest, a youthfully ardent thirst for distant scenes—a feeling so lively and so new, or at least so long ago outgrown and forgot, that he stood there rooted to the spot, his eyes on the ground and his hands clasped behind him, exploring these sentiments of his, their bearing and scope. True what he felt was no more than a longing to travel; yet coming upon him with such suddenness and passion

as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination... Then the vision vanished.

Aschenbach, shaking his head, took up his march once more along the hedge of the stone-mason's yard. (Mann 5-6)

Here the narrator presents the reader with a vivid description of Aschenbach's emotionally stirred psyche. After a few bouts with writer's block, Aschenbach's soul and imagination seem to have been inspired by the devilish looking man he spies in the cemetery. Through an almost stream of consciousness narrative, the narrator makes sure to emphasize the difference between Aschenbach's passions and his common sense. There are many contrasts presented in this lengthy inner monologue. In the decision between traveling and remaining at home writing, the narrator presents Aschenbach's struggle as a battle between his passion and common sense. Though the narrator in this instance seems to be directly portraying Aschenbach's back and forth struggle between the urge to travel and the duty to continue his work, the language with which he narrates the scene might suggest another instance of subtle judgment and or narrative framing on the narrator's part. He describes the passions as "youthful," "fantasy," "unrest," "seizure," and "hallucinations." As the story continues, the narrator will incorporate these words once again in his judgment of Aschenbach's temptation towards indulgences and his eventual fall from morality. Though unbeknownst to the reader at this moment in the tale, this instance will frame the relationship between the narrator and protagonist from here on out as a back and forth struggle with Aschenbach's thoughts and actions pitted against the narrator's ethical and cultural standards.

Dorrit Cohn has noted in her essay "The Second Author of *Der Tod in Venedig*" that the relationship between the protagonist and the narrator is "one of increasing

distance” and that this distance is solely based on an “ideological or evaluative level of the story, without in the least affecting the point of view (in the technical sense of the word) from which the story is presented” (Cohn 126). I tend to agree with Cohn on this point. As the novella progresses, the narrator begins to pull away from simply relaying Aschenbach’s tale to inserting his own commentary, opinions, and judgments for the narrator’s understanding. Consider the following passage as the narrator comments on Aschenbach’s writing in Venice:

...and fashioned his little essay after the model Tadzio’s beauty set: that page and a half of choicest prose, so chaste, so lofty, so poignant with feeling, which would shortly be the wonder and admiration of the multitude. Verily it is well for the world that it sees only the beauty of the completed work and not its origins nor the conditions whence it sprang; since knowledge of the artist’s inspiration might often but confuse and alarm and so prevent the full effect of its excellence. Strange hours, indeed, these were, and strangely unnerving the labor that filled them! Strange fruitful intercourse this, between one body and another mind! When Aschenbach put aside his work and left the beach he felt exhausted, he felt broken—conscience reproached him, as it were after a debauch (Mann 45-46).

This instance yet again presents a moment of narrative ambiguity for the reader. The narrator takes a moment here to directly address the audience. He pauses the narration of Aschenbach’s observing Tadzio to flash forward to a future moment describing the public reception of Aschenbach’s work. A first reading of the instance initially lends itself to a favorable interpretation by the narrator as he states: “that page and a half of choicest prose, so chaste, so lofty, so poignant with feeling, which would shortly be the wonder

and admiration of the multitude.” However, in the very next statement, the narrator’s words appear to undercut his previously stated admiration: “Verily it is well for the world that it sees only the beauty of the completed work and not its origins nor the conditions whence it sprang; since knowledge of the artist’s inspiration might often but confuse and alarm and so prevent the full effect of its excellence.” This contradictory narration will surely confuse the attentive reader. Is the narrator’s first statement pure admiration for the artist’s masterful writing? Or is it simply an instance of sarcasm towards Aschenbach and his reading public? Also, if knowledge of Aschenbach’s sources for creative inspiration might “confuse and alarm” the public, why reveal them so poignantly to his own audience? Whether they are read with sarcasm or contradictions, the narrator’s words present the reader with a moment of confusing ambiguity. At this moment in the plot Aschenbach has not yet fallen to his “Dionysian” temptations; he is simply feeling the first twinges of inspiration for Tadzio’s beauty. Yet the narrator chooses this moment to jump forward to a moment in the future, long after Aschenbach’s story will end, to introduce his own commentary and judgment of the protagonist and to signal to the reader their ideological separation.

As the novella progresses, the narrator’s commentary and subsequent distancing from Aschenbach become more pronounced:

“Too late! Too late!” he thought as he went by. But was it too late? This step he had delayed to take might so easily have put everything in a lighter key, have led to a sane recovery from his folly. But the truth may have been that the aging man did not want to be cured, that his illusion was far too dear to him. Who shall unriddle the puzzle of the artist nature? Who understands that mingling of



discipline and license in which it stands so deeply rooted? For not to be able to want sobriety is licentious folly. Aschenbach was no longer disposed to self-analysis. He had no taste for it; his self-esteem, the attitude of mind proper to his years, his maturity and single-mindedness, disinclined him to look within himself and decide whether it was constraint or puerile sensuality that had prevented him from carrying out his project. (Mann 46-47)

It is difficult to determine, in this paragraph, where and when the narrator is speaking from outside Aschenbach and when he is employing free indirect discourse. This translation, by Lowe-Porter, seems to indicate, through use of quotation marks, that Aschenbach's voice speaks only the "too late" exclamations.<sup>4</sup> However, might this whole debate not also be an instance of the protagonist's inner monologue, much like the travel or not to travel debate? One could argue that Aschenbach's voice carries all the way up until the rhetorical questions, even calling himself the "aging man." If, say, Aschenbach's voice continues into a more private inner monologue with the self-questioning "But was it too late?" then it seems as if Aschenbach's voice here is directly contrasted with his narrator's assertion that "Aschenbach was no longer disposed to self-analysis." Surely it is possible that in this moment the narration could be attributed to free indirect discourse. If a reader views the narration in this way, they may begin to view the narrator as quick to cast judgment upon Aschenbach. In this light, the generalizing rhetorical questions are viewed as the narrator interrupting Aschenbach's thought process as he wrestles with the

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<sup>4</sup> Passage in original German text: Zu spät! dachte er in diesem Augenblick. Zu spät! Jedoch war es zu spät? Dieser Schritt, den zu tun er versäumte, er hätte sehr möglicherweise zum Guten, Leichten und Frohen, zu heilsamer Ernüchterung geführt (Mann 93).

\*Note the absence of the quotation marks in the original German. It is interesting that Lowe-Porter, as a translator, has chosen to add such quotations, distinctly identifying "Too late! Too late" as Aschenbach's direct discourse.

decision to speak to Tadzio or not. The reader is no longer privy to Aschenbach's mental struggle and instead is only presented with the narrator's rather critical judgments: "the aging man did not want to be cured, that his illusion was far too dear to him." Left wondering what Aschenbach might have been thinking or debating in this moment, the reader may be more sympathetic towards Aschenbach and more skeptical of the narrator.

However, if one interprets the stylistic cues, as the translator did when she inserted quotation marks, as denoting the difference between Aschenbach's and the narrator's voices, a different reading of the moment arises. With this reading, the narrator is the one to prompt the questioning: "But was it too late?" The narrator goes on to act as the voice of Aschenbach's consciousness, in Aschenbach's stead as he asserts that Aschenbach is no longer up to self-criticism. While one might argue that the narrator takes a certain liberty here in acting as a judging consciousness *for* Aschenbach, the reader may be more willing to accept the critical narration as necessary if Aschenbach will not question himself. In this way the reader may begin to share in the narrator's critical view of Aschenbach's character. The point where the reader decides to read the narrator's interjection affects how the reader perceives Aschenbach and his psyche in this moment. Any uncertainty in where to read Aschenbach's vs. the narrator's voice certainly makes a case for narrative ambiguity.

Throughout the novella the narrator will dub Aschenbach with increasingly negative and insulting names. These epithets are present from the very first chapter through to Aschenbach's death: "traveler," "the adventurer," "the contemplative," "the aging man," "the lonely one," "our sufferer," "the watchman," "the observer," "the afflicted," "the stubborn one," "the crazed one," "the besotted," "the dreamer," "the

unhappy man,” “the confused,” “the devotee,” “the stricken one,” “delusional,” “the solitary,” and “degraded.” These epithets show a strong distancing between the narrator and the protagonist. By removing Aschenbach’s name and referring to him in such generalized terms, the narrator might confuse the reader. In referring to Aschenbach by characteristics and traits the narrator perceives Aschenbach as taking on in certain instances, the narrator is able to subtly impose his own judgments and opinions of Aschenbach on the reader. The numerous, varied, and ever-changing generalizations are also instances of ambiguity in the narration in that they are by their very nature inconsistent. With so many titles and references to the protagonist, a reader might have trouble keeping up with the subtle digs and judgments imposed in this generalizing narration. Throughout the novella the reader becomes tasked with the ability to readily recognize Aschenbach by these epithets, and in doing so the reader may become immune to reading the inherent judgments by the narrator.

One final passage to consider, in the case for ambiguity, is Aschenbach’s dying monologue and the narrator’s descriptive introduction to Aschenbach’s speech. It will be beneficial to view both voices in comparison:

[*Narrator*] There he sat, the master; this was he who had found a way to reconcile art and honors; who had written *The Abject*, in a style of classic purity renounced bohemianism and all its works, all sympathy with the abyss and the troubled depths of the out-cast human soul. This was he who had put knowledge underfoot to climb so high; who had outgrown the ironic pose and adjusted himself to the burdens and obligations of fame; whose renown had been officially recognized and his name ennobled, whose style was set for a model in the schools. There he

sat. His eyelids were closed, there was only a swift, sidelong glint of the eyeballs now and again, something between a question and a leer; while the rouged and flabby mouth uttered single words of the sentences shaped in his disordered brain by the fantastic logic that governs our dreams. (Mann 70).

[*Aschenbach*] For mark you, Phaedrus, beauty alone is both divine and visible; and so it is the sense way, the artist's way, little Phaedrus, to the spirit...For you know that we poets cannot walk the way of beauty without Eros as our companion and guide. We may be heroic after our fashion, disciplined warriors of our craft, yet are we all the women, for we exult in passion, and love is still our desire—our craving and our shame. And from this you will perceive that we poets can be neither wise nor worthy citizens...Our magisterial style is all folly and pretence, our honorable repute a farce, the crowd's belief in us is merely laughable. And to teach youth, or the populace, by means of art is a dangerous practice and ought to be forbidden. For what good can an artist be as a teacher, when from his birth up he is headed directly for the pit? We may want to shun it and attain to honor in the world; but however we turn, it draws us still...Knowledge is all-knowing, understanding, forgiving...It has compassion with the abyss—it *is* the abyss. So we reject it, firmly, and henceforward our concern shall be with beauty only...But detachment, Phaedrus, and preoccupation with form lead to intoxication and desire...so they too, they too, lead to the bottomless pit. Yes, they lead us thither. (Mann 70-71).

In comparing these two passages (the narrator's description of Aschenbach's psyche and emotions followed by Aschenbach's own emotional speech), there are many

instances of ambiguity present in the narration. The narrator's voice here in this passage is perhaps best described by Cohn when she states: "the narrator indulges in a kind of ideological overkill that produces an effect contrary to the one he is ostensibly trying to achieve" (Cohn 129). Cohn's indicated judgmental overkill is tangibly apparent. This dramatic overkill will certainly jar the attentive reader. After reading Aschenbach's speech, the reader comes to find that what the narrator has called his "disordered brain" and "logic that governs our dreams" seem to constitute a very powerful moment of self-awareness and admission by Aschenbach. Aschenbach in this moment is not the Aschenbach who "no longer had a mind for self-criticism"; rather, he is highly critical of his own actions and willingly accepts his fate. While both voices express a rather similar critical opinion of Aschenbach at this moment, the narrator feels the need to cast his protagonist's words as dream logic in order to disqualify the meaning of Aschenbach's speech as the utter nonsense of a degraded man. Also, leaving the novelist here, at the end of his life, as the author of only *The Abject* (early in the second chapter the narrator mentions him as the author of two other great works as well), which details the story of a man in need of moral and ethical resolution, seems overly critical. The attentive reader may find this extremely sarcastic introduction confusing, as Aschenbach's self-criticism is closely aligned with the narrator's and at times even more judgmental. Aschenbach's speech is extremely clear as he describes the artist being forced to choose between two paths which both ultimately lead to the abyss. Even if he evades "detachment," he will inevitably succumb to indulging in his passions. Aschenbach's acknowledgment of the artist's fate of falling to the "abyss" supports the narrator's comparison of Aschenbach to

*The Abject*; namely that he has failed his public by failing to live up to the truths of his own work as he becomes his own abject man.

It is also interesting to note that this is one of the only instances where the reader is presented with an entirety of Aschenbach's direct speech, without interruption, or utilization of the narrator's voice. This startling moment of Aschenbach's own discourse is made all the more remarkable in that it is a revelation that seems to appear out of nowhere. Throughout the text the reader is presented with Aschenbach through the narrator's perspective, only getting snippets of Aschenbach's direct speech or thought every now and again, and always immediately followed by the narrator's voice either relaying, interpreting, or qualifying Aschenbach's speech. Just moments before this revelation, Aschenbach is presented as still engrossed in an obsessive need to admire Tadzio. The reader has been, until this point, accepting that Aschenbach's mind was slipping away, that he had lost his reason and logic to passion and obsession. However, in this moment, Aschenbach's retrospective cognition seems remarkably well-reasoned.

In comparing the voice of the narrator to Aschenbach in this instance, a reader may be unsure about whose words to trust in the end. Are they to view Aschenbach as a man who fell into moral depravity as a result of his choices? Or are they to view Aschenbach's plight as the inevitable plight of the artist, who is pulled between passion and discipline, and cannot escape the abyss? The direction from which the narration comes is no longer ambiguous; we know, here, where the narrator is speaking and where Aschenbach speaks for himself. But the choice we are forced to make, ethically, between the two of them is confounding.

The conclusion caps what has been an overall ambiguity in the novella's narrative discourse. Recall Mann's quotation about the distinction between author and narrator in fiction: "Narrating is something totally different from writing, and what distinguishes them is an indirection in the former..." This very distinction between the act of writing and the act of narrating leads to the kind of ambiguity we detect in the novella's conclusion. As the narrator trends towards separating himself from Aschenbach, we are presented with the "indirectness" in narration Mann here alludes to. Instead of an author operating behind a narrator, and a narrator behind a protagonist, in the case of *Death in Venice* the narrative presents three separate entities. Through the use of generalizations, rhetorical questions, and assertions of his opinions and interpretations in narrating Aschenbach's story, the narrator's narration seems almost authorial in nature. With this assumed authority the narrator's discourse could be taken for the act of "writing" in that a reader might perceive the narrator as operating with the author, an opinion shared by many of Mann's literary critics.<sup>5</sup> However, there are many critics, especially in more recent analyses of the novella, who suggest the narrator's voice is distinctly separated from Aschenbach and also Mann. Critics such as Cohn and Patrick O'Neill claim that Aschenbach's world is constructed, not merely reported, by Mann's ironic narrator: "In *Der Tod in Venedig* the theoretical distinction between the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes of narration is systematically blurred...the product of a narrator whose primary interest is far less in any narrower sense than it is a highly ironic—and self-ironic—*presentation*" (O'Neill 37).

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<sup>5</sup> I would refer my readers to Ellis Shookman's anthology on *Death in Venice's* critical reception *Thomas Mann's Death in Venice: A Novella and Its Critics*. For critical opinions that link Mann with his narrator see especially: Bruno Frank and Werner Hoffmeister.

The variance in the criticism on the narration in the novella is a mark for the novella's narrative ambiguity, an ambiguity that is culminated through the novella's conclusion. It is possible to read the conclusion in two completely different ways. If one reads Mann as operating through, and in accordance with, the narrator's voice then Aschenbach's dying speech is viewed as inauthentic, refusing to own up to choices which led to his own fate. Instead he blames his fall on a plight that is faced by all artists alike. However, in choosing to separate Mann from the narrator, Aschenbach's monologue seems to take on a weighty significance for the novella, almost as if an epic moral. In this way the narrator's harsh and critical judgment of Aschenbach throughout the novella is called into question. The narrator is presented as unwilling to accept Aschenbach's revelation, prompting the reader to question his authority and objectivity as a third party narrator in early moments of the text.

As we pick apart the narration the separation between the three narrating entities (author, narrator and protagonist) becomes pronounced. In dissecting the conclusion, the narrator and Aschenbach are cast as pitted against one another with regards to their opinion of the fallibility of the artist and the values and morals he should emulate. The strength and authority the narrator holds over the narration throughout the majority of the novel, coupled with the powerful, yet brief message of Aschenbach's final monologue cloaks the novella's conclusion in uncertainty; the reader is unsure of whether or not to trust the narrator's portrayal and commentary of Aschenbach's fall and is also uncertain of whether or not to feel sympathy for Aschenbach. In setting narrator and protagonist against each other in such a way, with no definitive indication of who to stand with in the end, the narrator's authority is no longer present in the narration. The author now



becomes a stronger presence as the attentive reader will question where he stands; for in order to get to the true allegiance the reader will necessarily look to who controls the narrative, and that is ultimately who *writes*, which is always the author.

Mann himself becomes a character participant in the events of the novella; he is comparable to Aschenbach as an artist himself, and at the same time he is comparable to the narrator who feels the pull of discipline, rationality and morality. In this way the novella can be viewed as autobiographical in that the author shares in the dilemma of the artist as well. The autobiographical association makes Mann into another character in the novella, who feels the pull of the narrator's discipline and strict standards against Aschenbach's choice to indulge his passions. The novella's conclusion in this sense lacks a definitive indication towards either discipline or passion as Mann, the artist himself, cannot reach a determination. The unavoidable abyss that Aschenbach describes seems immanent, and in this way the author is able to guide the reader's sympathy for the artist.

RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*: DISCREPANCIES IN PERSPECTIVE

Richard Wright's 1940 naturalist novel *Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old African American youth, who commits two heinous murders and is subsequently tried and executed for his crimes. Though the novel in no way defends or excuses Bigger's actions, it does attempt to explain them as an effect of his terrible environment, extreme poverty and the insufferable social conditions, which exacerbated the extreme racial divide in Chicago in the 1930s.

In *Native Son* Wright's use of narration proves to be a powerful controlling device for how readers perceive the text and its protagonist. Many critics of the novel have suggested that Wright is able to portray Bigger as a human being with a flawed moral character as a creature of his environment, through a narrative constructed solely of Bigger's thoughts and actions. Wright writes in his essay "How Bigger Was Born":

Wherever possible, I told Bigger's life in close-up, slow motion. I had long had the feeling that this was the best way to "enclose" the reader's mind in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him. Then again, as much as I could, I restricted the novel to what Bigger saw and felt, to the limits of his feeling and thoughts, even when I was conveying *more* than that to the reader. I had the notion that such a manner of rendering made for a sharper effect, a more pointed sense of the character, his peculiar type of being and consciousness.

Throughout there is but one point of view: Bigger's. This too, made for a richer illusion of reality. I kept out of the story as much as possible for I wanted the

reader to feel that there was nothing between him and Bigger; that the story was a *premiere* given in his own private theater. (Wright, "How Bigger Was Born" 41)

Many literary critics have agreed with Wright, in that they see that the narrative is diligently rendered through Bigger's perspective alone, through the aid of a third-person-limited narrator. Katherine Fishburn writes: "*Native Son* is told entirely from the viewpoint of Bigger Thomas, the narrator; we never know what is in the minds of other characters" (Fishburn 12). Many critics support the idea that the third person narrator operates to elicit the reader's empathy for Bigger: "The role of the narrator is to soften the reader's harsh judgment of Bigger by establishing an affinity between the reader's consciousness and Bigger's, and thus ensuring that we feel Bigger's fate as our own" (Joyce 65).

There is a popular opinion among critics that the third-person narrator is necessary for the text, as he operates as a translator of Bigger's thoughts for the reader. The argument is that Bigger is inarticulate when it comes to telling his own story, making him unable to dictate his thoughts clearly to the reader. Joyce writes:

Although the narrator identifies completely with Bigger...he is not to be confused with Bigger. Because Bigger is inarticulate and incommunicative throughout most of the novel, the narrator reveals the seething world of Bigger's psyche, illuminating motives and thoughts Bigger fails to perceive. Vacillating between extreme sullenness and an explosive temper, Bigger lacks the introspection that brings self-knowledge. The narrator at the most crucial points of action and self-recognition, becomes a sort of translator, or refiner, of the stifled muddled intensity of Bigger's inner life. (Joyce 65)

Congruent with the idea that Bigger needs a translator simply because he is inarticulate and incommunicative, critics like Robert Butler and John Reilly suggest that Bigger needs a more articulate voice to drive Wright's message for the novel home for the reader:

Such a point of view has some of the clarity of omniscient narration without distancing the reader excessively and sacrificing immediacy. It also has some of the intensity and directness of first person narration without becoming overly subjective and sacrificing clarity. The narrative perspective was ideally suited for Wright's purposes in *Native Son* because he wanted (1) to center his story on a character who was too inarticulate and submerged in turbulent experiences to tell his own story effectively but also (2) to tell that story in a powerfully immediate way so that the reader would be "enclosed" in a "new world." The world of the ghetto as perceived firsthand by one of its victims. (Butler 74)

This function of the narrator is something Dorrit Cohn classifies as "psycho-narration" in her text *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*:

...one of the most important advantages of psycho-narration over the other modes of rendering consciousness lies in its verbal independence from self-articulation. Not only can it order and explain a character's conscious thoughts better than the character himself, it can also effectively articulate a psychic life that remains un verbalized, penumbral, or obscure. Accordingly psycho-narration often renders, in a narrator's knowing words, what a character "knows," without knowing how to put it into words. (Cohn 46)

According to Wright's avowed purpose for the narration of the novel, it seems that the author's strategy was to use psycho-narration to verbalize for Bigger when Bigger could not do so for himself. However, to suggest that Bigger does not and cannot narrate for himself, and that the narrator's voice is always a completely transparent and collaborative rendering of Bigger's thoughts and emotions, is a misreading of the text. While a first reading of the novel might lend itself to experiencing the narrative as a direct portrayal of Bigger's thoughts and emotions, a closer inspection of the third person narration reveals, in many instances, a distorting and ambiguous narrative.

Throughout the novel the narrator's voice, a voice that is alien to Bigger's, dominates the story. Under the guise of "translator" for the inarticulate protagonist, the narration changes—and by extension—distorts Bigger's consciousness. Moreover, as the narrator "translates" Bigger's consciousness, he subtly distances himself from his protagonist; instead of narrating directly from Bigger's point of view the narrator narrates from an outside perspective. His narration adopts a form of subtle judgment, and unless the reader recognizes this action of the narrator looking *at* Bigger instead of *through* Bigger, the narration is easily mistaken as completely transparent and objective for Bigger. This study will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the narrator operates and functions in the act of telling Bigger's story, and the resulting discrepancies and distortions that create narrative ambiguity.

This reading of the narrative structure in *Native Son* may seem directly contrary to Wright's stated authorial intention for the narration. However, further on in his essay, Wright suggests that his own intentions in his writing are not so unambiguous: "As I wrote for some reason or other, one image, symbol, character, scene, mood, feeling

evoked its opposite, its parallel, its complementary, and its ironic counterpart. Why? I don't know. My emotions and imagination just like to work that way" (Wright 42). While I respect Wright's subjective opinion, that the narrator is a transparent and collaborative spokesperson for Bigger, I do not hold it to be the final judgment on the quality of the narration in *Native Son*.

In many instances throughout the text, Richard Wright's desire to represent Bigger's consciousness through the use of the narrative technique of psycho-narration is noticeable. The narrator is presented as a transparent spokesperson for Bigger most often when his commentary is placed alongside Bigger's direct discourse. Consider the following passage:

Gee, what a fool she was, he thought, remembering how Mary had acted.

Carrying on that way! Hell, she *made* me do it! I couldn't help it! She should've known better! She should've left me alone, God dammit! He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being; he had not known her long or well enough for that. He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame in him. But when he thought hard about it it seemed impossible that they could have. He really did not know just where that fear and shame had come from; it had just been there, that was all. (Wright 96-97)

The audience is initially presented with Bigger's direct thoughts in a stream-of-consciousness narrative, indicated by the first person "I" exclamations. The narration transitions to the narrator's voice with "He did not feel sorry for Mary." The narrator's indirect discourse in this passage seems clearly in line with Cohn's definition of psycho-narration. The narrator's description of Bigger's emotions seem to be an accurate report

of Bigger's psyche, with an explication into the causes of such emotions, which Bigger himself cannot express.

A reader may fully subscribe to the fact that the narrator narrates through Bigger's perspective in this instance, fully aligning his perspective with Bigger's. However, just a few lines later the narration subtly shifts perspectives, separating the narrator from Bigger's perspective. Consider the following passage: "It was not Mary he was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried" (Wright 97). In this instance the reader begins to feel bifurcated. Initially the reader is presented with hard evidence from Bigger's direct discourse and the narrator's psycho-narration, that Mary's actions had driven Bigger to kill her because of the shame and fear they had evoked within him. The attentive reader will readily connect these admissions to earlier instances in the narrative, recalling Mary's flirtations with Bigger in the car, her insistence that Bigger sit beside her at the dinner table, and also her silly singing of the negro "spiritual" songs, all which made Bigger so uncomfortable, shamed and embarrassed. All these instances eventually culminate in Bigger having to carry the intoxicated Mary to her bedroom, and then accidentally suffocating her so that she would not wake the house resulting in Bigger being discovered in her room. The reader, along with the help of the narrator's psycho-narration, can come to this understanding, an understanding which Bigger himself does not fully realize. However, once the narrator suggests that it was not Mary he was reacting to, the narrator's commentary begins to take an interpretive liberty. Instead of Bigger's actions being explained as caused by

Mary's demeaning actions, the narrator editorializes Bigger's subconscious thoughts for the reader. The second passage spoken by the narrator takes on a generalizing tone; he talks of many "Marys" instead of the singular Mary Dalton. It is important to note that the narrator implies it has something to do with "Marys" and not just white people in general. The fact that Bigger is reacting to a female prompts the reader to recall Bigger masturbating to the images of the white women in the movie theater with Gus. He suggests that Bigger's emotions have been conditioned by the presence of the tantalizing white females from the movie screening and also the posters in his room at the Dalton home, asserting Bigger's actions were simply mechanistic in nature. The "lessening of tension" after killing Mary could almost be comparable to an orgasmic response. There is a certain amount of ambiguity present in this passage. A reader could interpret that Mary elicits Bigger's fury because of what she represents, in that she has made him feel degraded and shamed, emotions he has always associated with white people in general. On the other hand a reader may understand Bigger's fury as a purely physical manifestation of his inherent angry and animalistic nature. In this view he is likened more to a killing machine than a thoughtful human being. Through this narrative abstraction the reader is left unsure of how to understand Bigger in this moment as he attempts to justify his actions.

In the third book of the novel, Bigger's motivations for killing Mary are brought up once again as Bigger talks over the events of the crime with his lawyer Max. During the course of their conversation Max asks Bigger whether or not Bigger felt sexually attracted to Mary: "Did you like her?" to which Bigger responds furiously: "*Like* her? I *hated* her! So help me God, I hated her!' ...I hate her now, even though she's dead! God



knows, I hate her right now...and I ain't sorry she's dead'" (Wright 296). Without hesitation Bigger directly states that Mary's actions inspired Bigger's hatred. In this moment with Max Bigger *himself* recalls these actions as he is able to connect Mary's actions as the root cause for his behavior: "She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry...she wanted me to tell her how Negroes live. She got into the front seat of the car where I was...Maybe she was trying to be kind; but she didn't act like it. To me she looked and acted like all other white folks..." (Wright 296-297).

When Bigger comes out with this admission the reader recalls the earlier passage in which the narrator's abstract narration clouded Bigger's own understanding over his actions. If the narrator was really channeling Bigger's inchoate thoughts, surely he would have channeled exactly the feelings Bigger here furiously explodes with when talking to Max. The fact that the narrator does not suggests that either 1. the narrator does not understand his protagonist and the hatred that he is clearly feeling, or 2. the narrator is unwilling to divulge for his audience what Bigger is truly feeling in the moment. By clouding the description of Bigger's self-understanding earlier in the novel, and suggesting that Bigger could have been driven by physical motivations, strongly characterizes Bigger as an animal rather than a human being. Bigger himself weighs in on this idea in his conversation with Max after Max questions whether Bigger had planned to rape Mary: "I was drunk and she was drunk and I was feeling that way...Yeah; I reckon it was because I knew I oughtn't've wanted to. I reckon it was because they say we black men do that anyhow'" (Wright 296-297). Bigger is himself aware not only that he was sexually aroused, but also that the arousal had something to do with Mary's being

forbidden fruit; as such there was no need for the narrator to treat the arousal as something occurring to him purely physically, outside his own consciousness and understanding. Surely if the narrator had presented this reading of a thoughtful Bigger, who was teased and shamed by Mary's ridiculous actions, it could have provoked a real sense of empathy, as opposed to pity, for Bigger.

Through the noticeable abstractions in the narration the narrator separates himself from Bigger. In order to judge and editorialize Bigger's consciousness the narrator must step away from Bigger's psyche. The abstract narration is so distinctly different from the earlier moment of indirect discourse that it is almost as if the reader can visualize that the narrator has taken a step outside of Bigger's consciousness in his editorializing moment. Keep this idea in mind when considering the following passage:

...he knew that the fear of robbing a white man had had hold of him when he started that fight with Gus; but he knew it in a way that kept it from coming to his mind in the form of a hard and sharp idea. His confused emotions had made him *feel instinctively* that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness. He had fought Gus because Gus was late; that was the reason his emotions accepted and he did not try to justify himself in his own eyes, or in the eyes of the gang...The moment a situation became so that it exacted something of him, he rebelled. That was the way he lived; he passed his days trying to defeat or gratify powerful *impulses* in a world he feared. (Wright 36; my italics)

This passage comes at a moment when Bigger is rationalizing why he did not want to rob Mr. Blum's (a white man) delicatessen. Comparable to the previous passage Bigger is described as being in a state of emotional turmoil and misunderstanding. At first this passage seems as though it could be a moment of psycho-narration. However just a few lines in, the narrator clues the reader in to the fact that the narrator is taking certain interpretive liberties over Bigger's thoughts and emotions as he states: "But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him...his fear was hidden from his consciousness." By this very admission the narrator is going to describe emotions and thoughts not present even in the deep recesses of Bigger's consciousness. In other words, the narrator admits that he is not translating here; he is speculating. The attentive reader will understand that in this act of speculation the narrator has once again separated himself from Bigger's consciousness. He no longer is narrating through Bigger's perspective; rather he is narrating outside of Bigger's perspective. It is almost as if the narrator is standing outside of, apart from Bigger, narrating and judging *at* Bigger. This effect highlights a certain alienation from Bigger, an alienation not expected from Bigger's avowed transparent spokesperson.

The separation is subtle, and would perhaps go unnoticed, except perhaps in this instance for two important clues, which would probably have resonated strongly with Wright's contemporary readership at the time of the novel's publication. The two phrases (indicated by italics) were common to describing a black person's emotions or actions. It is interesting that Wright chose to connect Bigger's thoughts and emotions to impulsivity and instinct in this novel. In many ways these words connect Bigger to an animal, an individual who reacts on gut instinct rather than a capable and thoughtful human being. It

is ironic that the novel's narrator reveals such a racial bias in his narration, in a book written by an African American. While the focus of this study is not Richard Wright's racial identification, it is important to understand how this revealed bias portrays Bigger's "otherness" vis-à-vis the narrator. Wright's narrator, the avowed spokesperson for Bigger casts a separation between himself and his protagonist, lessening his credibility as a transparent speaker for Bigger.

Throughout the text the narrator's actions assume a completely authoritative stance in regard to who will tell Bigger's story, and how Bigger's story will be told. One of the most effective strategies he uses in convincing the reader of his authority is his assumed, or rather, feigned omniscience of Bigger's mind; when in actuality he is limited in his understanding of Bigger. The narrator, time and again throughout the novel, makes clear that he and Bigger are from two different worlds:

To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it. (Wright 97)

The narrator here generalizes Bigger amongst a group of people different from the narrator himself. Throughout the passage, it becomes clear that "Bigger and his kind" refer to Bigger's racial group, as they are directly contrasted with the "white force" and

are alienated by which neighborhood they are “prescribed.” This passage is deeply evocative of the distinction between Bigger and his narrator as the narrator here qualifies that in addition to understanding Bigger, he also understands “his kind.” Here, once again the narrator has stopped narrating *through* Bigger as he takes an authoritative stance to narrate *outside* of Bigger. The repeated indicators of “they” when talking about Bigger and black people emphasize the distance the narrator has taken from Bigger’s perspective. The distance is clearly discernible in the very next lines when the narrator switches back to Bigger’s perspective in a moment of psycho-narration:

There were rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him. He would dream of making a stand against that white force, but that dream would fade when he looked at the other black people near him. Even though black like them, he felt there was too much difference between him and them to allow for a common binding and a common life. Only when threatened with death could that happen; only in fear and shame, with their backs against a wall, could that happen. But never could they sink their differences in hope...But he felt that such would never happen to him and his black people, and he hated them and wanted to wave his hand and blot them out.

(Wright 97-98)

Here the narrator has transferred back into Bigger’s perspective; the thoughts, emotions and “longings” described belong to Bigger and not a generalized notion of Bigger and “his kind.” Despite the altering of perspectives, there is also a discrepancy arising in the way that the narrator associates Bigger with all black people in the first passage, only to immediately set Bigger as distinctly apart from them in the second. There is a great deal

of ambiguity present in this passage as the reader is left questioning 1. Why the narrator is shifting perspectives so frequently? and 2. How does Bigger see himself in relation to his racial group?

James Baldwin, an African American novelist, critic and contemporary of Richard Wright's, comments on how this ambiguity comes to portray Bigger: "Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people..." (Baldwin "Notes of a Native Son," 27). The ambiguity created by the narrator's lumping Bigger together with all other black people, and Bigger's own description that he feels alienated and altogether different from his racial group, results in the Bigger Baldwin here describes. This ambiguity creates confusion for the reader as Baldwin goes on to describe that, even though the novel is dedicated to tracking Bigger throughout the course of the narrative: "we know as little about him when his journey is ended as we did when it began; and, what is even more remarkable, we know almost as little about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him" (Wright 27).

As a result of the tension in the narration, at the end of the novel Bigger is more of a symbol than a conscious and thoughtful human being. Even though the narrative has tracked Bigger, and supposedly his consciousness, throughout his ordeal, beginning with killing the rat and ending with his execution, the reader does not know or understand Bigger any better as a person than when he was first introduced. Bigger in many ways cannot succeed as the social martyr because the narrative does not accurately portray a completed picture of Bigger's consciousness. The brief snippets of Bigger's direct discourse are either blatantly contradicted by the narrator's commentary, or clouded in ambiguity through abstract narration. The result of the narration is thus not a full or

complex protagonist who is deeply affected by the socially racist environment, but rather a character who is reinforced by stereotypes and fits neatly into his socially defined role as the angry black man who can only combat his situation with violence. Baldwin acknowledges this opinion in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” when he states:

For Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth...The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. (Baldwin 18)

## CONCLUSION

Ambiguity in narration presents itself in each of the three works by James, Mann and Wright. In each case ambiguity arises in the narrative through the relationship between the narrator and the characters. Though different in each work, ambiguity is most often demonstrated through tensions, contradictions, discrepancies, and also uncertainties in the textual explications. Whether these instances of ambiguity are an intentional creation of the author or not, each has a certain effect on a reader's response and understanding of the work.

In *The Bostonians*, the narrative ambiguity presents itself as an effect of the narrator's untrustworthy and unstable narration. Through specific methods of the narrator's narration, such as constantly shifting points of view, his shifting position of omniscience or ignorance, and also his ironic and sarcastic relationship to the reader, the narrator creates ambiguity in the reader's understanding of the story overall. However, despite this uncertainty in how to read the novel, a reader *will* come to their own understanding/reading of the novel. Eventually the reader will have to make a decision on how to approach their relationship to the narrator, and that relationship itself will determine their reading of the novel.

Differently in *Death in Venice*, the ambiguity in narration does not manifest itself most prominently in the reader's experience of reading the text; rather the ambiguity arises as part of the written text itself. The uncertainty is a result of the tension between the narrator and protagonist as each narrates the story. The struggle mimics the events of the novel as Aschenbach struggles with the plight of the artist, pulled between discipline



and the moral and ethical standards of the day, as represented by the narrator, and indulgences, passions, and emotions, as represented by his attraction to Tadzio. The ambiguity in the novella results in a narrative triangle among writer, narrator and protagonist. In the end the reader pulls Mann himself into the work, questioning where his own sympathies as an artist lie in the struggle. In the end a reader may not come to a certain reading or understanding of where the artist should be pulled, as the narrative itself reveals an ambiguity which Mann himself, as the creator of both Aschenbach and the narrator of the novel, cannot definitively resolve without destroying the balance of the work.

Finally in *Native Son*, the ambiguity in the narration manifests itself largely as a part of the tension in the act of narrating between narrator and protagonist. The authorial dominance of the narrator's voice, and also the assertion by Wright himself that the narrator is an objective and necessary spokesperson for Bigger, seem suspect when compared to Bigger's direct discourse in the narration. When we compare the narrator's commentary to Bigger's speech, we find discrepancies of both degree and kind, and we start to call the narrator's understanding of Bigger into question. In trying to make Bigger into a martyr for the purposes of Wright's protest novel, the narrator's narrative presents Bigger as less of a thoughtful and conscious human being and more of a symbolic creature, whose only response to his situation is violence. The discrepancies and ambiguity in this way contradict Wright's efforts for a protest novel for the situation of black people in 1940 in Chicago.

It is my hope that this study will encourage others to explore how narrative ambiguity functions for and also affects other fictional works. The three works were

chosen for this study because, in one way or another, each elicited a certain moment in my own reading which caused me to pause and consider how exactly I was supposed to understand the information I was presented with. In each of these three works there was a third person narrator, whose complex narrative style forced a stronger reader engagement with the text. I often found myself pausing to judge, question, and reevaluate situations in the narratives for both clarity and reliability. Through exploring the literary criticism of these works I came to find I was not the only one experiencing this kind of reading experience. In fact many of these narratives had inspired multiple, often conflicting, reader interpretations and understanding of the narration. These multiple readings of the narration often resulted in multiple readings of the text overall: i.e. Basil Ransom as the chivalric hero, Aschenbach as a completely fallible and immoral artist, and also Bigger as a martyr and hero for the black protest novel.

This is certainly not an ambiguity limited to these three texts. Prominent and differing cases of narrative ambiguity are a phenomenon in other fictional works as well and greater credence needs to be given to the study of this style of writing and narrative patronage. Further discussion and research of this narrative experience by narrative theorists and reader-response theorists are merited. To unpack ambiguity, not merely to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the meaning or reception of a work, is to ascertain the specific value of that ambiguity in itself. In that way one is finally putting clear meaning to the poignant yet imprecise delivery of the story; it is there I believe we find the narrative's truth.

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