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### The Text as Gameboard; The Critic as Player

Joan Talty  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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# The Text as Gameboard; The Critic as Player

by Joan Talty

*And so the word is not the thing. It is an abstract of the thing. And no matter how many words we use to talk about anything, there is always something more we can say, at least at our present level of knowing. The pinch is still there after we have described it all we can. We could talk about a peanut all our lives but there would still be more to say the day we died.*

*Living With Change: The Semantics of Coping*

Last spring a group of readers found they had a lot of words to talk about. Their mission was to uncover the meaning, the "buried treasure," within Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet." The language within this short story made the mission a complex game, with each reader a player.

Eric Berne discusses the nature of social game theory in *Games People Play*. He defines a game as "an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome" (48). A game is characterized by players making maneuvers in order to receive a payoff. The payoff consists of a personal reward, a satisfaction of some sort. As readers, our payoff would be the understanding of the text. The maneuvers, or personal choices we make in solving the text, would determine the nature of the payoff.

As a student of communication, I became obsessed with the literary text itself, the gameboard. A text is a collection of words, and words are mere symbols open to individual interpretation. Ogden and Richards, in their famous "Triangle of Meaning," explain that a word itself is only indirectly related to the user and to the user's meaning, or referent (Adler-Rodman 52). Furthermore, each user will have unique referents for the same word. Thus, how each of us filters words in James's text to fit our own view of reality will depend on the individual experiences we bring to the text. Our games will involve unique strategies.

Ironically, the text itself is a story about critics attempting to uncover "the string the pearls were strung on, the buried treasure, the figure in the carpet" of Hugh Vereker's literary work (311). The narrator himself senses that Vereker hides the meaning of this work when he states, "I see—it's some idea about life, some sort of philosophy. Unless it be, . . . some kind of game you're up to with your style, something you're after in the language" (288-289). In this way, the story's narrator, as critic, plays

the same game as the reader. But just as Vereker has an advantage over the narrator, the narrator has an advantage over the reader. He controls the language of the text, and in doing so determines what the reader will ultimately know about the story.

What is "the figure in the carpet"? Are there, in fact, any truths to be found in this story? The ultimate truth is that people often interpret language, especially vague words, on a personal basis. The search for meaning drives the reader to make sense of the story for herself, for "until language has made sense of experience, that experience is meaningless" (Farb 192).

The story becomes meaningful to me through looking at how language use creates a game for critics inside and outside the text. A careful analysis reveals that there are at least three areas where this is evident. First, the characters themselves view the art of criticism as a game. Secondly, characters treat each other as objects, means to an end. And thirdly, the narrator plays with the reader through the words he uses in telling his story.

Throughout the text, the narrator obsessively searches for the single "true meaning" of Vereker's novel. In this sense it seems that the text of the novel is an obstacle course and the figure is the single truth that supposedly stands out at the finish line. But the narrator never reaches the finish line, stumbling upon traps and bits of ill-fortune along the way. It is interesting that the narrator chooses to repeat the words "fate" and "chance" throughout the text. This emphasizes for the reader an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. Other words reinforce this, an example being when the narrator "stole" down to sneak a look at Vereker's text (290). A second example is the instance when Corvick and Gwendolen are described as chessplayers puzzling over their "moves" (295).

Indeed, the names the narrator uses to describe these events color the reader's attitude toward them, and are an important consideration. Yet philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, a critic of language usage, cautions that, "Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to say anything at all about them" (Farb 192). Still, I don't think Sartre contradicts my interpretation. Rather, he supports it in telling us to look beyond the names of an event to the event itself. In this case, the event is criticism, and the game-language merely reflects James's unique view of the reality of criticism.

Yet it is not only the description of criticism, but also the characters' treatment of each other that reflects a game. The narrator himself manipulates what the reader knows about others through the dominating language he uses. On occasion he chooses condescending words to describe the other characters, perhaps so that the reader will favor him

over the others. He introduces Corvick as a critic who had promised a review of his book, but "had not even had time to read it" (280). From this statement, the reader would get the unfavorable impression that Corvick is lazy.

Within the area of characters manipulating each other lies the operation of the relationships themselves. Relationships seem to be tricks of fate and luck intertwined with life and death, and the narrator gives the impression that he has little control over them. We are told that fate sends Corvick to India. Again, by fate, Gwendolen's mother dies, allowing Gwendolen to marry Corvick. Gwendolen's mother had forbidden her to marry Corvick as long as she was alive. By chance, the narrator is in Germany visiting his sick brother and can't visit Corvick to learn the secret of the novel. Then Corvick dies suddenly in a cart accident. The narrator gains some consolation in knowing that Vereker is still alive to solve the mystery of the text, until Vereker, too, suddenly dies.

Within this amusing soap opera, the only hope remaining for the narrator and the reader to learn the secret is Gwendolen, who supposedly has learned it from Corvick. But she plays a game in withholding the information about the text. According to Goffman, withholding information is a deliberate communication strategy termed "collusion" (134). It often involves private speech between two individuals which excludes a third person. Whether or not Gwendolen actually possesses the information cannot be determined, but she gives the impression that she does. Berne would describe Gwendolen's type of game with the narrator as "Cops and Robbers" (132). In this game, one player hides information from another, with her pleasure increasing as his suspense increases. It is an adult game, and the hiding player does not want to be caught. She "is an untouchable" (Berne 133). In fact, she has both the narrator and the reader nearly salivating for her "secret" and seems to enjoy the power of this. Yet, as misfortune would have it, she dies in childbirth without enlightening even Drayton Deane, her new husband. The narrator explains his failure to find the "figure" as ill-fortune. He shows the reader he is a player with little control over his game. As Berne states, a game "does not necessarily imply fun and enjoyment" (49).

Before proceeding into the third area of the games analysis, I will summarize the implications of the ideas discussed up to this point. If one considers that the narrator views criticism as a mystery, and that he seems to have little control over his relationships, it is not surprising that his personality is manipulative. According to psychologist William Schultz, "control" is one of the three major needs central to human existence, the other two being inclusion and affection (Alder-Rodman 9). We see "inclusion" through the narrator's need to be a part of the secret, and "affection"

through his wanting to be liked by the reader. The need for control occurs when the narrator feels helpless. If he cannot control what characters and events say and do to him, at least he can control what he says to them and tells the reader about them.

Thus, the narrator, in his storytelling, plays word games to influence the reader. He does this not only through his blatant judgments of other characters, but with his elevated language designed to puzzle the reader. A first reading of the text proved virtually meaningless to me. Like a detective, I gathered seemingly disjointed data in hopes of making some sense of the work. A second reading revealed information not evident at first glance. It was only through further readings that I more closely understood the mystery.

Throughout my readings, I increasingly focused on the critic's truth, the "thing," the "it" in James's text. Yet the terms for "it" still remain abstract and elusive. Equivocal metaphors or phrases for the "thing" include "the buried treasure" (289), "the little point" (286), "the letter 'P'" (289), the "trick" (287), the "bait on a hook" (288), the "loveliest thing in the world" (289), or "the very mouth of the cave" (311). My task as a reader is to determine what all of these terms have in common, to decide what they, in fact, mean. This task is virtually impossible since the phrases range from the seemingly precise "letter P" to the breathtakingly amorphous "loveliest thing in the world." Drayton Deane himself speaks the reader's sentiments when he ultimately exclaims the point of the story to the narrator, "I don't know what you're talking about" (312).

In all, the reader has been forced to play the critic's game of solving a text. The game is made less pleasurable as the reader suspects through the language used that the single thing the narrator so excruciatingly searches for may exist only in the narrator's mind, and not in reality. According to Farb, "Language is thought by some to obscure the vision of reality" (192). It obscures reality because one person can interpret language differently from another. The narrator's reality may not be the reader's.

Yet the reader is forced into reading the narrator's words, no matter how accurately or inaccurately they reflect the actual event. These words represent the only form of communication, the only access to the story. The reader cannot ask for clarification; she must accept the text as it is. As a reader, do I lose my game in not discovering the narrator's buried treasure? Repeated readings from the games perspective assure me that I do not. I discover, through the narrator's use of word play, the pleasure of understanding why I cannot uncover the secret. I cannot uncover the secret because the language prevents me from doing so.

Yet, at the same time, the obscure words allow me to bring my own

interpretation into the text, to discover my own buried treasure, as critics "will tend to make different reports of the same event and no report will include every detail of the event" (Johnson 77). The critic's game could be likened to the game of chess. As readers, we start with the given text, and the arrangement of words is fixed, like the pieces on the chessboard. In our first readings, we react to the words as part of a cultural code, based on the language conventions, the rules of our speech community (Saville-Troike 2), as we would with the rules of a chess game. As a community of readers, we share certain basic assumptions that make us competent communicators, and allow us to make basic agreements about what the text is saying. Yet, as in the game of chess, how each of us chooses to move further through the text is up to us as individual readers or players. The early moves, hunches, are critical, since they lead to more refined later interpretations. As critics, the intriguing factor about our game is that with each move we make in interpreting our text, we limit our possibilities for future choices. As we get more involved in our game, we select maneuvers consistent with our overall game plan. The more elusive the words in the text, as in "The Figure in the Carpet," the more diverse the interpretations will be. The end result is a wealth of criticism, like the essays generated in this collection. One treasure grows into many.

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