

More on James's Style

These notes recapitulate and extend our in-class discussion of James's style on March 5. The kind of analysis we were practicing is an example of what people mean when they talk about "close reading" in literary studies. That term also refers to many other kinds of interpretation, however; a more specific term for this occasion is "stylistic analysis," for which I give the basic principles below. Formal grammatical analysis as practiced by linguists is not a skill most English scholars—even those interested in style—learn. You are certainly not expected to know how to make tree diagrams of complex sentences; I struggled with it myself, spending a lot of time looking things up in my grammar, and I may have gotten parts wrong!¹ What literary scholars do, and what you should work on doing, is to recognize and describe stylistic details informally, including syntax, word choice, and rhetorical effects. To do this effectively, be as precise as you can, whether you use specialized terminology or not. Just to be comprehensive, I have given my attempted tree diagrams below, but the stylistic analysis uses only a few features of these diagrams heuristically.

STYLISTICS: PRINCIPLES

- 1.8 For literary studies, the *style* of a text is a crucial dimension of its meaning; style is not separable from "content." The *way* a text uses the linguistic medium—the way words are arranged and convey meaning—bears both on its generic status and on its specific significance.
 - 1.8.1 The sources of style are many and layered: style may be analyzed as characteristic of a single speaker within a text, of a single text as a whole, of an author (who may have a signature style), of a genre (the formal characteristics of a genre may include a certain kind of style, in which case we speak of *linguistic register*), of a literary movement, of a social group, or of a historical era.
 - 1.8.2 An analysis of style requires careful attention, at a minimum, to *syntax* and to *diction*, sentence by sentence: literary studies considers grammar and lexicon as resources used by texts.
 - 1.8.3 Style also encompasses patterns in the *pragmatic* effects by which a text conveys meanings not explicitly stated at sentence level. Some of these effects are described as rhetorical figures (metaphor, irony, understatement, hyperbole); others have no widely used names but may be analyzed in context as a relationship between *sentence meaning* and *discourse meaning*.

1. I refer to Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). This modern descriptive grammar differs in many ways from the traditional grammar which you might have learned in elementary through high school; there have been major changes in the way linguists have come to understand syntax in the last sixty years, but English teachers, including most university English professors, have not caught up.

A JAMESIAN SENTENCE

We focused on a single sentence from chap. 6, right after Beale has picked up Miss Overmore and Maisie, and the governess says Maisie keeps them “perfectly proper”:

The child took in the office it was so endearingly presented to her that she performed a comfort that helped her to a sense of security even in the event of her mother’s giving her up. (41)

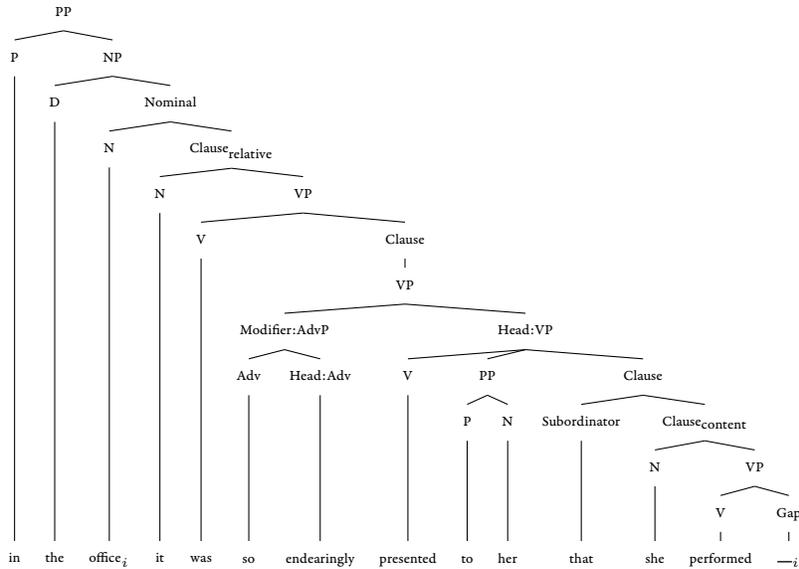
To discuss the style of this sentence, we should consider its diction, its syntax, and its pragmatic or rhetorical effects. Here I will take these in turn, though normally it is not necessary—and sometimes it is not even possible—to try to discuss these separately.

DICTION

In class I remarked on the word choices in this sentence. Consider the content words in the sentence: *child, office, endearingly, presented, performed, comfort, helped, sense, security, event, mother’s, giving up*. What these words have in common is that they are *underspecific*. The names of characters are replaced by kinship terms (not “Maisie” and “Ida” but *the child, her mother*). Indeed, by another syntactic trick—the passive construction *it was presented to her*—Miss Overmore is not overtly referred to in the sentence at all. The other words also tend to be both more formal and more abstract than we usually expect in a discussion of family: children don’t normally *perform offices* and for that matter governesses don’t normally *present* matters to their little pupils. Though we might talk about how “secure” children feel with their parents, *a sense of security* is stranger and less satisfactory. Not only content words are important to diction: this example, together with *a comfort*, shows how James generates indefiniteness through function words too—in this case, the indefinite article *a*. Again, lexical vagueness is thematically significant, because the uncertainty of Maisie’s situation is what makes it so difficult (and so poignant). She doesn’t feel secure; she is helped to a *a sense of security*. And it is less comforting to take *a* comfort than to just take comfort. At the same time, these word choices indicate that Maisie isn’t entirely miserable or helpless; she is making what she can out of the situation. Finding *a sense of security* is indeed the best possibility available to her at this precarious moment.

SYNTAX

A tree diagram of the syntax of the whole sentence would need to be microscopic to fit on the page. In any case, a complex sentence should be divided into constituent parts for analysis. Elaborate as it is, the basic shape of the sentence is simply a subject followed by a predicate:



Delay is one of James's most characteristic stylistic procedures. In this sentence, two devices make this phrase as long as it is. James uses not just a single adverb but a stack of two: *so endearingly*.³ And he uses a whole clause to modify one of his nouns: *office* is modified by *it was so endearingly presented to her that she performed*. (This relationship is indicated by the presence of a "Gap" as the object of *performed*, which refers back to *office*; hence both are marked with the "index" subscript *i*.) In fact, James doesn't stop with just one embedded clause; within the relative clause is a content clause which serves as the complement of *was presented*. James regularly exploits syntactic nesting or "recursion." Of course these choices are not simply arbitrary ways to add more words to the sentence, but devices that *nuance* the kinds of perceptions and beliefs the sentence refers to.

To refine these nuances, James often takes advantage of the syntactic possibilities for "information packaging"—that is, for rearranging the order of the elements of a clause while keeping the basic meaning. The clause modifying *office* exemplifies two kinds of rearrangement. *was presented* is a passive: the person doing the presenting is omitted, but the basic meaning is "Miss Overmore presented to her [Maisie] that she performed [the office]." As you know from high-school English, the passive shifts the emphasis to the receiver of an action—appropriately enough, in this case, since Maisie has no choice at all about the role (*the office*) she is told she plays.⁴ *it was presented...that* is also an example of the kind of rearrangement called "extraposition."

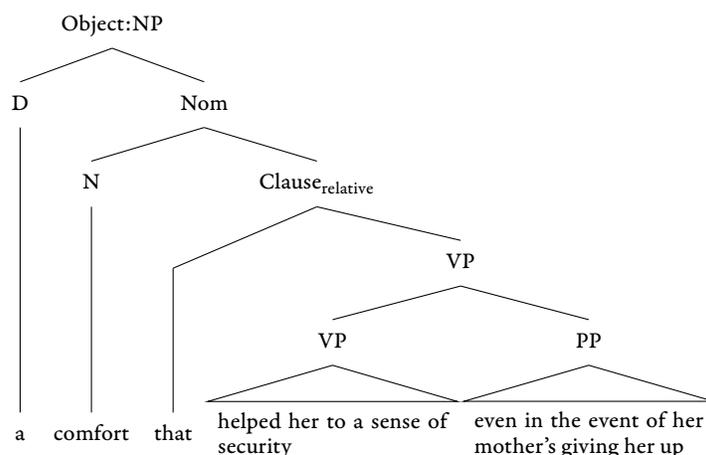
3. By "stack" I mean that, as the diagram shows, whereas *endearingly* modifies *was presented*, *so* modifies *endearingly*.

4. The *Cambridge Grammar* diverges from traditional grammar by not considering *was presented* as a unit. Instead it suggests that the passive should be represented as headed by the auxiliary verb *was* with a non-finite clausal complement *presented to her that...*

The answer to the question “what was presented?” which would normally be in subject position in the clause, is instead pushed to the end: *that she performed [the office]*. *it* is a “dummy” subject here.⁵ These elaborate syntactic rearrangements re-enact the cognitive challenge which the elaborate *social* arrangements pose for Maisie. If we go down a garden path in the sentence, that is because Miss Overmore (quite deliberately) is leading Maisie down one too.

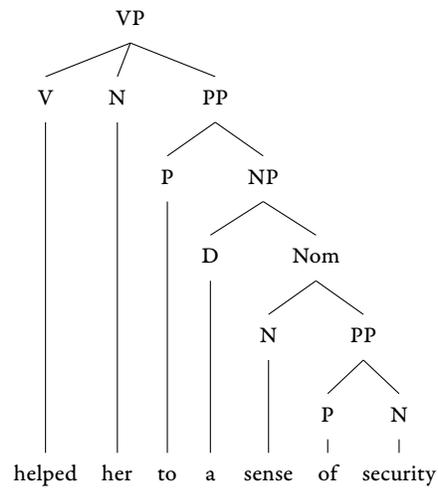
I will say less about the rest of the sentence. It would be a useful exercise to see what you can figure out about how style works here; I’ll give some tree diagrams and a couple of remarks to get you started.

The whole of the sentence after *a comfort* modifies this noun (answering the question: “what kind of comfort did she take in the office?”). I will have to subdivide the diagram. The overall structure of this noun phrase is:

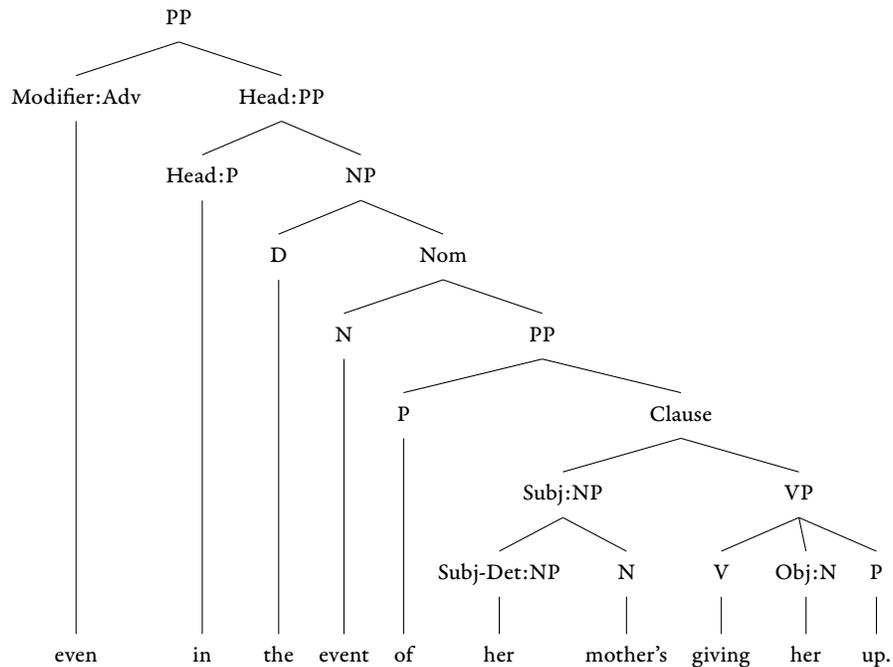


The predicate of the relative clause modifying *comfort* is:

⁵ In fact the use of extraposition is required in this case because of the surrounding relative clause. It would be grammatical to say, in a main clause, *That she performed the office was presented to her*. (The whole content clause *That she performed the office* is the subject.) But it is ungrammatical to say *the office that she performed was presented to her helped her to a sense of security*.



This predicate is modified by a prepositional phrase describing the conditions in which the comfort of her "office" helps Maisie to a sense of security:



Notice one further form of syntactic complexity worth paying attention to here: the use of the gerund-participle (that is to say, an "-ing" word) in *the event of her mother's*

giving her up.⁶ Here *event* is modified so as to contain a little narrative process, with an actor (*her mother*), an action (*giving up*), and a recipient of that action (*her*). The whole prepositional phrase (*in the event...*) modifies the *manner* of *took a comfort*: it answers the question “how did she take comfort?” The answer is not that Maisie simply and definitively took comfort in her “office,” but that she took comfort with an awareness of the precariousness of her situation (*even in the event...*). Thus the little narrative incident (Miss Overmore’s remark, Maisie’s reaction), also looks forward and back in time, and anticipates possibilities which could or could not come to pass. The sentence expands to contain Maisie’s complex relationship to time, a relationship produced by her equally complex personal relationships.

PRAGMATICS

Though I have isolated this sentence for analysis, some of its most important stylistic features have to do with the way it is related to its immediate discursive context. James’s writing is characterized by a very subtle and suggestive use of devices that refer back (and forward) in discourse. *the office* refers to what Miss Overmore says Maisie is doing in the previous sentence (“making us so perfectly proper”). Miss Overmore calls Maisie “darling”; *endearingly* points back to this endearment. But James makes these forms of discourse-reference purposefully vague: it takes work to figure out what Maisie’s *office* is supposed to be or why Miss Overmore’s speech should be called *endearing*. When we do this interpretive work, in this case we are dealing not just with vagueness or fancy syntax but with irony: there is not actually anything endearing about Miss Overmore’s exploitative attitude; as one of you pointed in class, she may even be being mocking or sarcastic towards Maisie. And James’s external narrator is definitely being ironic in describing Maisie’s role as an office (or in indicating to us that she takes comfort in it). James’s back-references are not always ironic, of course, but they often shade the meaning of what has been said before. Here, the vagueness of reference suggests the way Maisie herself can’t fully understand Miss Overmore’s meanings and has to make the best of what she can figure out; at the same time, the irony helps the reader along to a critical interpretation of the situation.

6. The *Cambridge Grammar* considers these “-ing” words to be special kinds of verbs. Traditional grammar speaks of gerunds as nouns.