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“Framed and Wired”: Teaching “In the Cage” at the Intersection of Literature and Media

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Long familiar to Jamesians, “In the Cage” seems poised to become increasingly well-known to our students as well. Within the past two years, both Penguin and Modern Library have published new paperbacks that include this 1898 story of a young female telegraph clerk and her obsession with the adulterous relationship between two customers (see ST, TC), and the editors of the Norton Critical Edition of James’s tales, Tales of Henry James, have added it to the new version of their collection as well.1 Although it’s often difficult to account for the amount of interest a particular literary work attracts from publishers or pedagogues, a flurry of recent scholarship on “In the Cage” suggests several reasons why the tale might also be appearing on more syllabi. For one thing, it amply attests to the existence and the interest of the figure John Carlos Rowe calls “the other Henry James,” an author as concerned with social marginality and the conflicts of modern life as with fictional aesthetics or the international theme. Indeed, this Henry James often treats the art of fiction as inextricably bound up with such social concerns, issues that with “In the Cage” revolve most notably around class, sexuality, and the ways in which their interaction may shape identity, psychology, and desire.2

But what gives “In the Cage” special interest (even a certain uncanny timeliness) for many contemporary scholars and readers alike is its treatment of the inquisitive Jamesian protagonist as a service worker in the turn-of-the-century information economy that helped lay the foundation for our own (see Clayton; Hayles, “Escape”; Menke; Otis [162–79]; Rowe [155–80]; Thurschwell; Wicke). The conjunction of its Jamesian themes and its notably modern subject matter (data networks, women workers, fantasies about the power of wired and wireless communication) makes “In the Cage” well suited to a variety of classes: seminars on James’s writing, surveys of nineteenth-century fiction, and courses on litera-

ture and culture at the turn of the century. In particular, the intriguing fit between
the tale’s subject and the form and ideology of Jamesian fiction can make it a
fascinating case study for the relationship of the histories of media technology and
literature. As treated by writers such as Friedrich Kittler and N. Katherine Hayles
(Posthuman), the nexus of literature, media, and theory has become one of the
most exciting topics of contemporary literary scholarship. Teaching “In the
Cage” at the intersection of literature and the history of media brings such
concerns into the classroom and allows them to be explored in an acutely practical
way, through formal analyses of language, style, and narrative that readily unfold
into questions of representation and theme.

This essay outlines strategies for teaching “In the Cage” in relation to the
history of media—not only a subject of increasing scholarly interest but also one
that resonates with our students’ own experiences of new communication tech-
nologies. Such an approach can both broaden students’ impressions of James
(emphasizing, for example, the tale’s gritty milieu, urban working-class heroine,
and technological subtext) and suggest ways of approaching the intricacies of
James’s late style (for instance, via James’s own media transition from longhand
to dictation), a style that students new to it often find hard to tackle. Moreover,
it can allow for intellectual movement between history and imagination, between
local interpretations and broad questions, as discussions of cultural history and
close textual analysis grow into wider considerations of the relationships of
technological change to psychology, social life, and art.

A preliminary class that combines attention to the technological and social
history of the telegraph with a reading of Anthony Trollope’s 1877 story “The
Telegraph Girl” can prove especially effective in suggesting both the cultural
background and literary innovations of James’s tale. The communication scholar
James Carey has aptly summarized the fundamental significance of the electric
telegraph in the nineteenth century: it decisively separated data transmission from
transportation, freeing the circulation of information from the constraints of
physical movement (203). While a few earlier forms of transmission had offered
a very limited version of such accelerated communication (signal fires and smoke
signals; the optical telegraph stations of the late eighteenth century, in which flags
or paddles were mounted on hilltop towers), the electrical telegraph both
overcame the limitations of such visual transmission and presented the new
triumph of harnessing the mysterious power of electricity (Coe 23). By the late
1830s, both the American Samuel Morse and the English team of William
Fothergill Cooke and Charles Wheatstone had successfully tested rival prototypes
of electric telegraphs, yet so unfamiliar was the concept of electrical transmission
that they received little commercial or governmental encouragement until well
into the next decade. But by the midpoint of the century the telegraph had begun
to establish itself and its network to grow rapidly, soon including a cross-channel
cable connecting England to France (1851), a transcontinental line connecting the
East Coast of the United States to California (1861), a line connecting Europe to
India (1864), and—after several well-publicized but unsuccessful earlier at-
ttempts—a permanent cable connecting North America and Europe (1865). And
with each ballyhooed expansion of its network, journalists, politicians, and
entrepreneurs celebrated the power of the telegraph to connect people, to increase mutual sympathy, to transmit human thought seamlessly.

Most students are surprised to learn how old the electric telegraph is, how well established it was by James’s time, and how its history and rapid growth resemble that of the Internet in our own age. Indeed, our students should have little trouble imagining the impact of a new communication system that interconnected the world with a network of wires, a web that permitted virtually instantaneous communication via digital code through much of the globe, especially the industrialized nations. Tom Standage’s popular (if glib) *The Victorian Internet* (1998) delineates many parallels between the Internet and the telegraph network: not only did both create new modes of commerce and inspire overheated claims for the revolutionary power of technological progress and rapid intercommunication, but both also brought with them new forms of fraud, mistaken identity, day-trading, and various kinds of hacking (which in the nineteenth century could involve a kind of literal hacking—disrupting or diverting telegraphic transmissions by physically interrupting the wires). But the comparison between the Internet and the telegraph can easily be exaggerated. For one thing, although journalists and promoters tended to hail the telegraph as a new source of seamless interconnection between nations and persons, users of the telegraph had to depend on its operators to code and transmit their messages—as Standage acknowledges (145). A private letter could be sealed in an envelope, but a telegram had to have its words transcoded, transmitted, and transcribed by human beings. And so the trustworthiness and honesty of telegraph workers became a frequent concern to customers of the telegraph—especially when the telegraph workers were women, as Christopher Keep has suggested. In light of such concerns, many confidential messages were sent in code—like the telegrams exchanged between Captain Everard and the married Lady Bradeen in “In the Cage.”

Although telegraphic communication quickly became an essential tool for government and business, telegrams were initially so expensive that most private customers could only use them rarely. But by the end of the century, telegrams had become far cheaper and more mundane. In his preface to the New York Edition of “In the Cage,” James calls the visit to a post and telegraph office “one of the commonest and most taken for granted of London impressions” (*NT* xviii); in fact, the telegraph counter of “In the Cage” occupies “the duskiest corner” of a smelly grocery shop (*TC* 117). The telegraph was by then the oldest of a range of nineteenth-century “new media” that had come to include the telephone, phonograph, motion picture, and (newest of all) wireless radio. Power and excitement had once characterized the telegraph itself, but by the end of the century they seemed to reside somewhere else. Oppressed by her tedious and sometimes humiliating work at the telegraph counter of Cocker’s grocery store, James’s telegraphist comes to find such glamour in two of her customers.

One helpful way I’ve found to approach both the contexts and the complexities of James’s tale is via a comparison with Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl,” an earlier story that might well have provided an unacknowledged source for “In the Cage.” In 1869, Britain nationalized the country’s telegraph network and made
it part of the Post Office (a contrast to matters in the United States, where the Western Union company came to dominate the American telegraph business but successfully fended off calls for nationalization). A retired postal administrator, Trollope seems to have been especially intrigued by one of the results of the Post Office’s push to consolidate operations and to lower costs: the hiring of female workers in large telegraph-processing centers. In effect, this practice provided a foretaste of a turn-of-the-century world in which inventions such as the first commercially successful typewriter (1873) and the telephone (1876) would help give rise to a new class of female information-workers: secretaries, stenographers, and switchboard operators. After visiting a large telegraph center in London, Trollope wrote both an article (“The Young Women at the London Telegraph Office”) and a short story (“The Telegraph Girl”) to examine some of the questions the experience had suggested to him: who were these highly trained young women who worked outside the domestic sphere of the governess or teacher (the traditional occupations for educated young women who needed to work)? Were they respectable? And whom—if anyone—might they marry?

Like “In the Cage,” “The Telegraph Girl” investigates the psychology as well as the linked professional and romantic fortunes of a young, female telegraph worker in London. But Trollope’s practical interests (in salaries, for instance—the first words of his story are “[t]hree shillings a day to cover all expenses of life . . .”), straightforward plot, simpler sentence structure, and less ambivalent narrative stance provide an effective foil for James’s approach. Students may be prompted to compare the stories’ treatments of gender, work, marriage, and class, as well as their tones, writing styles, and methods of story-telling. I’ve even come to believe that, perhaps paradoxically, having Trollope as an immediate touchstone can help students unfamiliar with James’s late style begin to get past some of their possible frustration with it. If James seems more difficult than Trollope—and to many students, he certainly will—comparing the two can allow students to talk about some of the specific sources of that difficulty and even to speculate about its origins and its ethics. I also like to ask students about realism in the tales—not just “Which story is more realistic?” (clearly it depends upon what we mean by “realism,” as they are quick to point out), but how is each tale realistic? And what is the nature of reality for each tale? On a cultural level, students should recognize a generation of social change between the stories; carefully protected from public visibility—and from men—when they are at work, Trollope’s telegraph girls present a marked contrast to James’s telegraphist, who not only serves male customers and faces routine sexual harassment from her male fellow clerks but has met her fiancé, the ambitious grocer Mr. Mudge, on the job.

As they read Trollope’s story, students will easily recognize the narrator’s admiration for intelligent, upright, kind Lucy Graham, the “telegraph girl” of the title, an attitude that will present a suggestive comparison to the far more equivocal treatment of the unnamed heroine of “In the Cage.” For the narrator of “The Telegraph Girl,” Lucy’s main flaw is her too rigid adherence to mid-Victorian notions of feminine propriety. Trollope’s tale explores a nineteenth-century dilemma that intrigues many students: how to reconcile the competing cultural imperatives of marriage-making and sexual decorum between unmarried
men and women (or, as one of my students recently put it, the fact that there was no such thing as “Victorian dating,” at least for respectable women). Lucy’s lack of familial protection—and of an older relative who could superintend a relationship with a marriageable man—makes the situation even more difficult. And the telegraph center where she works adheres to an even stricter standard of gender segregation than does Lucy herself.

Just as James’s telegraphist has her best friend (and bitter undeclared rival) Mrs. Jordan, Lucy has a female friend whose situation presents a carefully drawn parallel to her own. Flighty, flirty, sickly Sophy Wilson readily accepts Lucy’s financial generosity but not her counsel about how to maintain a scrupulous feminine reserve. Trollope clearly means for us to find it appropriate, given Sophy’s frivolousness and superficiality, that the ultimate object of Sophy’s affections should be a hairdresser. Students will have no problem delineating the ways in which the story contrasts the two characters. Moreover, a focus on the relationship between media and literature in “The Telegraph Girl” will take the comparison in a more complex direction highly relevant for “In the Cage.” For Lucy and Sophy also represent not merely different marital attitudes but different media aptitudes. The text consistently aligns solid, sensible Lucy with the medium of writing, with words on paper: having worked in her late brother’s bookstore, she is highly literate and is even compared to a book with “a good strong binding” (356). Her success as a telegraph worker grows out of this association; so proficient is she at reading the “little dots and pricks” punched into her telegraph’s recording tape that “[n]o one could read and use her telegraphic literature more correctly than Lucy Graham” (365). Yet a media transition will soon make Lucy’s skills obsolete, for the Post Office has begun the switch to a new “system of communicating messages by ear instead of by eye,” that is, the more familiar sounding telegraph, which produces audible dots and dashes to be heard rather than a recording tape to be read (365). Bookish Lucy cannot make the change, but silly, over-imaginative, romantic Sophy easily masters “the musical box” and receives a promotion (367).

At the climax of the story, Lucy manages to overcome decorum and the rules of her workplace long enough to receive and accept a marriage proposal from Abraham Hall, the kindly printing engineer who will take her away from telegraph work while continuing her association with written words. But the alignment between the story’s characters and media remains intact and worthy of analysis in the classroom. Lucy dwells in a milieu of careful reading, strenuous morality, and “telegraphic literature,” while Sophy seems to inhabit a rising world of moral ambiguity and intuition, a world signaled by the Post Office’s technological replacement of “literature” with something else, something that one does not read but simply “catch[es],” and whose “little tinkling sounds” the tale describes as a sort of music, not a text at all (365–66). Perhaps the narratorial affiliation with Lucy suggests that fictional literature too may face new challenges in the coming age of sound transmission, the era not merely of the sounding telegraph but of Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone (1876) and Thomas Edison’s phonograph (1877). As Friedrich Kittler has noted, in this new epoch the written word would lose its comparative monopoly on the transmission and storage of
data. Lucy Graham’s departure from the telegraph office thus makes an especially appropriate introduction to the turn-of-the-century world of “In the Cage.”

Twenty years after Trollope published “The Telegraph Girl,” James was well situated to investigate issues of sound and imaginative writing. For one thing, he had recently returned to writing fiction from his notoriously unsuccessful foray as a playwright. Although James seems to have felt mortified by the experience, critics have often speculated about the ways in which playwriting may have helped set the stage for James’s more openly experimental novels and novellas of the late 1890s: *What Maisie Knew* (1897) views a suite of remarriages and affairs from the perspective of the child who might seem lost among them; “The Turn of the Screw” (1898) presents celebrated intractable hermeneutic puzzles; *The Awkward Age* (1899) represents an attempt to write a psychological novel that nevertheless—like a play—largely dispenses with reporting its characters’ thoughts, confining itself more or less to dialogue and external description.

Like “In the Cage,” all of these works center on the mind and experiences of a girl or young woman, a pattern that strongly suggests that the era of the “New Woman” kept questions of female knowledge, exposure, and innocence pressing for James, who had enjoyed such early popularity when he explored them with a transatlantic twist in “Daisy Miller” (1878). But in subtler ways, these fictions of the late 1890s probably also reflect a momentous change in James’s practice as a novelist: in the middle of the composition of *What Maisie Knew*, suffering from a chronic case of writer’s cramp, James of course began “writing” novels by dictating them to a private typist. James’s new work habits took him from manual composition to a regime that Walter J. Ong might recognize as a sort of “secondary orality,” that is, the renewed ascendancy of speaking and listening encouraged by new technologies in a literate age (136). Students may be challenged to discuss some of the ways in which the new experience of dictation to a skilled secretarial worker at a modern discourse-machine may have shaped various elements of “In the Cage,” from its framework and themes to its emphasis on sound and sounding and even its exhibition of some of the characteristics of James’s late style.

For one thing, it seems likely that James’s dictation helped open his writing to speech in a new way, encouraging for instance those many moments in which his prose takes up a spoken idiom used by a character or within the narrative and then pauses to comment on it, modify it, or examine it from different angles, as if half surprised that such an oral expression is about to appear on the page. Students may even note the ways in which, for all of the glorious dilation of the Jamesian sentence, “In the Cage” at times seems to pick up something of the tense linguistic compression of a telegram message, especially when characters are speaking to one another. “No two styles could be more opposite than the modernist long sentence with its implications of connotative complexity and the short and economical style of the telegram,” observes Rowe, “[y]et they are the two styles that typify modernity” (159). Moreover, both of these may be the styles of words that have moved between technological media and passed through clerical mediation: James’s dictation to a typist and the telegram’s conversion from written words to Morse code and back again. And just because a telegram is terse doesn’t mean that it can’t be acutely ambiguous—as James’s telegraphist,
along with many users of the telegraph (including Ralph Touchett in the first scene of *The Portrait of a Lady*), has reason to note.

Among our students, what may resonate even more than such stylistic effects of new media are their psychological and social implications, real or imagined. Students should recognize the ways in which fantasies and fears about information technology underlie the situation imagined by “In the Cage”: beliefs that technological change will bring new access to knowledge and new kinds of connection between people, anxieties that interconnection might lead to neurosis or information overload, and concerns about a loss of privacy (see Moody). Indeed, “In the Cage” suggests an intrinsic entanglement between the supposed powers and the potential pitfalls of communication and knowledge exchange—one person’s exhilarating new access to information may deprive someone else of privacy. And the commodification of information in the telegraph office, where the telegraphist must each day “count words as numberless as the sands of the sea,” seems to inform her rich appreciation of the possibilities of blackmail, that less savory way to turn information into money: “She quite thrilled herself with thinking what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do” (*TC* 117, 149–50).

But of course the telegraphist rejects the possibilities of blackmail in favor of what she considers a less tangible power. Trapped within the “cage” of a dingy telegraph counter, James’s telegraphist comes to believe that her “framed and wired confinement” nevertheless grants her a kind of mental liberation, “a certain expansion of her consciousness” that gives her a special link to her trysting customers (117, 121). In fact, her desire for wordless intercommunication, especially with the handsome Captain Everard, strongly suggests a longing for the kind of seamless linking of consciousness often misleadingly attributed to the telegraph. At Cocker’s, her prosaic exchanges with Everard nevertheless fuel “her fancy that no form of intercourse so transcendent and distilled had ever been established on earth” (147). Later, meeting him at night outside his chambers, and amply aware of the sexual possibilities of such an extramural encounter between an upper-class man and a young working woman, she longs for a virtuous understanding deeper than speech, feeling “an intense desire he should know the type she really was without her doing anything so low as tell him” (161). These fantasies of unspoken interconnection may be suggested by the technological triumph of the telegraph, but they end up underwriting forms of communication breakdown in the tale: Lady Bradeen’s wordless exit when she learns that the telegraphist has been reading her coded messages; Captain Everard’s troubling tendency to leave “redundant money” for his telegraphic transactions, perhaps as preemptive blackmail payments (184).

The tale hints sharply that the participants in this shifting situation understand it in conflicting ways. Exploring “In the Cage” with students can highlight the tale’s deft construction of psychological complexity out of these divergent understandings, most of which are suggested rather than explicitly described. How might we delineate the telegraphist’s connection to the love affair from the perspectives of different figures in the story: the narrator, the telegraphist herself, Captain Everard, Lady Bradeen—even the surprisingly tolerant Mr. Mudge? And how do different aspects and visions of telegraphy help sustain them: ideas about
its powers to provide access to information and to people, to make interpersonal connections, to conceal or reveal secrets, or to turn the circulation of discourse into the circulation of money (which is more or less Mr. Mudge’s pet “theory” about the magic of telegraphy, though “[h]e couldn’t have formulated” it in so many words [145])? Exploring these concerns, students may also be prompted to analyze the tale’s incorporation of telegraphic language (“dash, ” “sounder,” “circuit,” “impulses”). As they are likely to note, and as a communal close reading of the tale’s opening lines can help suggest, “In the Cage” often uses such terms in order to identify the telegraphist with the device that gives her a “position,” a “function,” an “identity” and even a designation within the tale (117); for instance, she is “wired” in place at Cocker’s or makes a “most ridiculous circuit” in order to pass Everard’s lodgings as she walks home at night (117, 158). At work at the counter, she even responds to her customers like a quasi-telegraphic device for receiving alternating emotional “impulses”:

There were those she would have liked to betray, to trip up, to bring down with words altered and fatal; and all through a personal hostility provoked by the lightest signs, by their accidents of tone and manner, by the particular kind of relation she always happened instantly to feel.

There were impulses of various kinds, alternately soft and severe, to which she was constitutionally accessible and which were determined by the smallest accidents. (130)

Telegraphic insight may enhance not only the telegraphist’s perceptual grasp but even her corporeal reach. When she offers an unsolicited and unexpected correction to Lady Bradeen’s cryptic telegram, it is “as if she had bodily leaped—cleared the top of the cage and alighted on her interlocutress” (155). Marshall McLuhan’s classic Understanding Media claims that media technologies function to “extend” the human body and sensorium. Many decades before McLuhan, James’s telegraphist would seem to manifest an analogous extension via medium. Or rather, she might attest to the attraction of such claims for the power of media, for “In the Cage” offers a critical counter to the technophilia and technological determinism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alike. Building on the moderate but pervasive irony with which the narrative has treated the telegraphist, the end of the tale will bring her disillusionment about her telegraphic perceptions. Amid new-millennium claims for the empowering potential of information technologies, students may recognize the timeliness of James’s examination of the ways in which such technologies can fuel fantasies of power and connection but leave intact the divides of class and gender, as well as the psychological distance between even those of us who are the most thoroughly “wired.” In fact, the final “social gulf” that yawns for the telegraphist precisely reiterates “the social . . . gulf” that she upheld when it came to Cocker’s grocery clerks (204, 117); for all her fantasies of cross-class connections, such divisions seem as firm in the tale’s final scene as they were in its second paragraph.

In “In the Cage,” invocations of the language and logic of telegraphy form a fascinating array central to understanding the tale in relation to media ques-
tions. But what strikes me as at least as intriguing are the ways in which this string of words and images becomes part of the story’s elaborate network of conceptual strands that interweave in multiple ways: clusters of ideas and images related to captivity and release; smell and flowers; breeze and the air; birds and other animals; eating and biting; weaving, including “clues” (since the word originally referred to the ball of thread that let Theseus find his way out of the labyrinth); money, gold, and the myth of Danae, whose imprisonment Zeus infiltrates in the form of a shower of gold; exchange and circulation; sound and sounding (not only the telegraphic sounder but also testing, measuring depths); pages and margins; rising and falling; floating, floods, and currents; visions, vistas, and panoramas.

Hoping to encourage both intellectual engagement and faithful completion of reading assignments (obviously the two are mutually reinforcing), I often give students short, informal weekly writing assignments. One such assignment for “In the Cage” asks them to track and briefly to analyze a source or string of such repeated, related images. It’s a challenging exercise in close reading, but one that can readily become preliminary work towards a longer—and by no means purely formalist—argumentative essay.

After considering the cultural context of the telegraph and its place in the tale, students should be well prepared to think about the relationships between the treatment of telegraphy in “In the Cage” and the developing formal and thematic concerns of James’s work: for instance, questions of point of view (the tale’s narrative “cages” us within the central consciousness of the telegraphist but “frames” her in the third person through a screen of irony), realism (an issue that, as I’ve indicated, can emerge especially in relation to Trollope), the possibility or impossibility of authentic communication, and the representation of consciousness. They are also more likely to note and to appreciate all the codes that are never broken in “In the Cage,” the plot points that are never quite resolved—for instance, the full story of the recovered telegram (the very telegram, Ralf Norrman tells us, into which the telegraphist had introduced an error by means of her unwanted “correction”), or of exactly how the newly widowed Lady Bradeen has “nailed” a reluctant Everard into marrying her (207).

Placing “In the Cage” at the media/literature interface allows us to explore it as a tale about the fears and fantasies that attend technologies of intercommunication, a subject about which our web-surfing, cell phone-using, MP3-trading students—as well as their less technologically privileged or savvy classmates—are likely to have much to say. But, as helpful as the unexpected topicality of the tale usually proves for jump-starting discussion of this somewhat verbally daunting story, a focus on questions of media in the tale can go beyond merely tapping into students’ own experiences with third-millennium communication technologies. Indeed, I try to draw upon our discussions of the tale to introduce a topic that should concern liberal arts students and literature professors alike: how do existing media change when new media technologies appear and make their presence felt? And what may be the implications of newer media—the telegraph in the nineteenth century, motion pictures and television in the twentieth, the Internet and its offshoots in the twenty-first—for existing literary and cultural forms based on writing?
and media offers us the chance to investigate a complex and compelling tale in its cultural context. But it also lets us make connections between James’s work in its world of typewriters or electric messages and our situation in a culture trying to sound out the implications of electronic textuality and to understand the effects—on our teaching, our literature, our society—of our own new media.

NOTES
1Two slippery narratives about nameless, highly imaginative young women at work, “The Turn of the Screw” and “In the Cage” work well as a pair, the Gothic trappings of the first setting off the urban milieu and technological underpinnings of the other. The Modern Library volume’s juxtaposition of the tales and its reasonable price make it an attractive text for teaching, despite its lack of scholarly apparatus.
2On class see Bauer and Lakritz, Galvan; on sexuality, Nixon, Savoy, Stevens.
3In many ways, the telegraph resembled a “Victorian Internet” less than it did text-only Victorian electronic mail, since it simply transmitted messages and lacked, for example, the World Wide Web’s capacity to store data, to permit content-based links, to allow searching, to generate content dynamically, to include sounds and images, and so on. For a detailed and well-documented account of the history of the telegraph less focused on the Internet comparison, see Beauchamp.

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

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