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Value and Truth in Literature: The Critic versus the Reader from Henry James' Perspective as Applied to Reader Response Theory

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VALUE AND TRUTH IN LITERATURE:
THE CRITIC VERSUS THE READER
FROM HENRY JAMES' PERSPECTIVE AS APPLIED
TO READER RESPONSE THEORY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
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English

By
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Abstract:

This argument is based on Reader Response Theory because without an audience and interpretation, a piece of literature does not have value and does not elicit a truth. It has to communicate. Henry James in his work is not only saying that interpretation by a reader is of vital importance in creating value and truth, he implies that there are different types of readers. He specifically, in the works cited, seems to differentiate between the role of a literary critic and a casual reader. He creates narrators at varied levels of education and knowledge on purpose to elicit from the reader different points-of-view, but he does not tell the reader what to believe about his narrator. He purposefully leaves a sense of ambiguity about the reliability of the narrator to be interpreted by the reader. This creates layers of possible interpretations based on the approach to the reading. This is in line with Reader Response Theory in that it considers interpretation of text by the reader as something dynamic and oscillating. James is concerned as Stanley Fish is with the reliability of the reader, thus the Fish proposal of communities of readers would have appealed to James. Literary analysis alone cannot determine the value and truth in a piece, and human truths cannot be labelled or categorized. Henry James knew this. He calls this truth “it” and equates “it” to heart and the artistic muse. To get to the heart, the “it,” it takes the emotionally invested reader and it changes and mutates with each reading. Value has been determined by the system of literary interpretation; however, due to the fluctuating ambiguity of interpretation no definitive “truth” can be determined. Truth is a dynamic process of interaction of opposing elements in constant flux as both Henry James and Reader Response Theory concludes.

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Introduction:

Henry James as an author and as a critic offers a unique perspective of who determines value and truth in text. Not only was he a prolific writer who throughout his lifetime specifically addressed this question in his fiction, but he was also a noted literary critic. He was situated in a time period and place that was going through vast change where his thinking regarding the role of a critic, reader, and author was important.

Through James' work in both roles and by placing this in the context of Reader Response Theory, it is possible to test the hypothesis that the roles of the literary critic and the reader are both significant, but one lends himself more to the literary artistic value of the work and the other determines meaning or truth. The literary critic who has a modicum of expertise in evaluating a literary work is evaluating the artistic and structural value of the work. The reader who reads for pleasure enjoys a work based on what touches him as being true and reflective of his world. Both types of reader are aware of what the written word is doing at both levels, but there is a difference of focus. It takes both types of reader together to determine the value and truth in a piece of literature. James' evaluation of the art of writing and how it is interpreted by the reader may be used as a touchstone of value and truth. The work that touches many types of readers both artistically and at a more emotional level will retain interest over long periods of time.

A writer creates a work through whatever muse is his to tap into, but there comes a time when the created characters take on a life of their own and their story goes out into the world. At this point it is the reader, whether critic or casual peruser who will determine the value and truth of the work based on how well the author has plied his

trade. Henry James was very concerned with this aspect of literature and its influence is found in much of his writing. Henry James had a fascination with the class system which was more pronounced in England; also he looked at urban life as opposed to rural life. These two factors were instrumental in how he brought his characters to life. There was a rising middle class and the large estates of the aristocracy were deteriorating even as life moved more and more into the urban setting. Relationships between the classes were becoming less distinctly different and there was much more interplay. James' works often drew their realism from this interplay between the classes and by revealing the character's psychological state of being. He used the role of his narrator's to express a character's consciousness. This gave his characters a freedom to exist beyond the author and relate directly to the reader.

Reader-Response Theory states "the reader is responsible for what is made of the literary text." According to Janice A. Radway in her book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*: "Literary meaning is the result of a complex, temporally evolving interaction between a fixed verbal structure and a socially situated reader. The reader bases this on previously learned aesthetics and cultural codes. He does not need a trained critic to interpret what he has read" (Radway). Louise M. Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* took this further. She felt text and reader must work together to find meaning. James would agree with this to the extent that he as an author has led the reader to read in a particular way. He talks about what the author should leave to the reader: "In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters" (James,

The Art of The Novel 416527). James differs from Reader Response Theory in that he feels it is the author who instigates a specific response from the reader. According to Rosenblatt, finding meaning is a transactional experience with the text as the catalyst for experience by the reader (Rosenblatt). The reading of any given text brings the words to life each time in a new way. The reader makes the text his own as he interprets and creates context based on personal and learned experience and information. This relationship oscillates between text and reader. My argument is in line with Reader Response Theory in that the reader brings the text to life, and meaning is revealed as he interprets the work. To do this, worth is gleaned through a cultural, gender, and age determined lens. An assessment of a work cannot be free of bias and a cultural slant, so value and truth must be determined by readers approaching the work from different perspectives. This is a dynamic, ongoing process that is never completed. Both James as critic and author and proponents of Reader Response Theory strengthen this assertion.

Henry James as Critic:

Using Henry James' view point as a critic as well as an author of fiction, it becomes evident he was concerned with the issues of the literary critic and the reader uncovering value and truth in works of fiction. An in-depth evaluation of his critical work, *The Art of the Novel*, and four fictional pieces that span each stage of his writing: "The Figure in the Carpet," *The Aspern Papers*, "In The Cage", and *The Sacred Fount*, will exemplify how his work can be seen through the lens of Reader Response Theory to verify that the literary critic and the casual reader are two separate but equally important determiners of value and truth in a piece of writing that holds its value over time. When

the literary critic evaluates a work, he begins by breaking it into different qualities such as style, technique, and characterization. He will often start categorizing the genres where the piece belongs. The work is interpreted based on a preset bank of skills that have been acquired over time from studying literary theory.

According to James when he is writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1866 about “The Novels of George Eliot, “The critic’s first duty in the presence of an author’s collective works is to seek out some key to his method, some utterance of his literary convictions, some indication of his ruling theory” (James, *The Art of The Novel* 416233). Which paradigm the writer is creating from is important to understand his values and ultimate intent. James talks about the question of accuracy – He feels he can, as a critic, determine “they bear strong internal evidence of truthfulness.” The “completeness and rich density of detail” are further evidence of author experience and knowing (James, *The Art of The Novel* 416293). He also looks at the conclusion as to how the author leaves the characters – will the story continue – did the story end, and what was the final state of mind (James, *The Art of The Novel* 416527). He talks about what he thinks the author should leave to the reader, “In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters” (James, *The Art of The Novel* 416527). For James, his work is not well written unless he addresses the way his reader will read the piece. According to him, “A good author gets the reader to do his part” (James, *The Art of The Novel* 416536). Henry James not only lent his expertise as a critic to other people’s texts, he also would go back to his own work and critique it after many years.

In his major critical work, *The Art of the Novel*, James talks about character analysis and what aspects are explored and why. He suggests that characters get away from their author. James felt relations with the characters and the work never stop and over time the circle just gets bigger. He acknowledges that, “[a work’s] fortune rests primarily, beyond doubt, on someone’s having, under suggestion, a sense for it – even the reader will do, on occasion, when the writer, as so often happens, completely falls out” (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410767). There comes a time when it is no longer the writer’s piece of work to continue working on. It is now the reader and critic’s turn. James feels there is a symbiotic relationship between author, text, and reader. He is aware and concerned with the position he places his reader in. For example, when he is critiquing his early novel *Roderick Hudson*, he explains that he expects his characters to create a particular response from the reader. What he realizes looking back at the work is what he intended at the time is not necessarily what came across. For example, “Roderick, though he is unwitting, at the time, of that secret – the conception of this last irony, I must add, has remained happier than my execution of it; which should logically have involved the reader’s being put into a position to take more closely home the impression made by Mary Garland” (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410890). He finds major errors in *Roderick Hudson*: “It stared me in the face that the time scheme of the story is quite inadequate.... Everything occurs, none the less, too punctually and moves too fast” (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410815). He is reading and determining this years after having written it. This could reflect his maturation over time as either a writer or as a critic. The critic in him is making a critical observation that is based on his more

educated and experienced opinion. If it is as the critic, the acknowledgement of this fault in *Roderick Hudson* contributes to the work and a reader's interpretation and enjoyment perhaps, but it does not mean the original manuscript needs changing or that it dims its worth (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410815). Henry James the critic claims he has distorted the hero for the reader because of this. He makes the assumption he knows what the reader will think. He states, "that [Roderick] is special, that his great gift makes and keeps him highly exceptional; but that is not for a moment supposed to preclude his appearing typical (of the general type) as well; for the fictive hero successfully appeals to us only as an eminent instance, as eminent as we like, of our own conscious kind." By using words such as "us," "we," and "our," he places himself as knowing the reader's reactions to his character. All of a sudden he is author, critic, and reader. Here lies the difference between the literary critic and the casual reader. As a critic, James is analyzing the characters in such depth and creating his own conclusions, different conclusions as a critic than he would have had as a casual reader. (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410825). James created the character based on the assumption that the reader would view his hero the way he saw him. He assumes he is leading the reader to think and see a certain way which even in his own words he admits is a contradiction because he feels truth and interpretation are created by both author and reader. There comes a time when the author's intent is no longer the point.

Reader Response Theory:

Research indicates that being a more reliable reader can create a path to truth and value in a text when the reader has a greater cultural base to relate from. The article

“Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Reader Response” by Norman H. Holland, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr. and Mark Bracher propose a fascinating theory of literature as edifying or building the reader. Barbara Herrnstein Smith is an American literary critic and theorist associated with Reader Response Theory. In her well known work, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, she asserts,

...that literary evaluation is not merely an aspect of formal academic criticism, but a complex set of social and cultural activities central to the very nature of literature [which] has been obscured, and an entire domain that is properly the object of theoretical, historical, and empirical exploration [which] has been lost to serious inquiry (Smith 6).

She further admonishes that the critic has attempted to take out a fundamental character of literary interpretation, “mutability and diversity.” She thus proposes a rethinking of the concept of value. Her proposal is a combination of “multiple forms and functions” of literary evaluation from the critic as well as the casual reader.

A culturally based consensus that not only critics but readers would use to evaluate and interpret makes more sense. She determines then that, “institutions of evaluative authority will be called upon repeatedly to devise arguments and procedures that validate the community’s established tastes and preferences.... In Hume’s words, ‘It is natural to seek a Standard of Taste’” (Smith 18). If creating these standards creates an argument, all the better, as being the object of argument makes it valuable. Herrnstein agrees, stating, “the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by

the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation.... endurance of a classical canonical author such as Homer, owes...to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture” (Smith 30). If no one reads it any longer, a work has lost its value in this cultural setting.

One reason I am certain that Henry James means for the general reader to play an active part in interpretation of truth is that he often uses a technique of interior dialogue with his main character. The four pieces I am focusing on are written in a narrative form that invites interpretation from the reader while still controlling the perceptions. His narrator’s aren’t truly unreliable – they have points of consciousness that are very believable and they work within their scope of being. They are not crazy, or misled. They are creating conjecture from their point-of-view which is in line with their status as a character in the work. This is the same thing the reader does. The girl in *In the Cage* is narrow in her point-of-view because of her age and circumstances, but her consciousness (narration) is true to the setting and is reflective of who we know she is. James is inviting the reader into the problem of determining truth by making the narrator believable even if the point-of-view is narrowed by certain aspects of the character (James, *In The Cage* 4410869). James puts his character out there – just experiencing – not leading and the reader must determine for himself the worth of the character’s actions. This is the genius and gift of Henry James as an author. Truth is determined in his pieces by how his characters relate to the reader. Does he share a truth with all readers from all times, all genders, and all walks of life? Not always the same truth, but each reader owns it as representative of truth for himself. The character resonates either by a likeness to the

reader or to some person in the reader's world, so it feels real, feels true (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410965).

Another aspect of how he shares his characters with the reader is his belief that once he thinks of them and commits them to paper, they take on a life of their own and there is an acknowledged magic of the character writing himself, presenting his own story. Henry James talks about characters rising "before me, on a perfect day of the divine Paris spring, in the great gilded Salon Carre of the Louvre" (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410992). Once the character takes on "life" it is merely a matter of following them as they reveal their story. According to James regarding Christopher Newman, the antagonist in *The American*, "I have, I confess, no memory of a disturbing doubt, once the man himself was imagined by me (and that germination is a process almost always untraceable) he must have walked into the situation as by taking a pass-key from his pocket" (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410992). The direction a tale takes is "all without intention, presumption, hesitation, contrition" (James, *The Art of The Novel* 411010). The character then "becomes" through the reader.

Stanley Fish's question of, "if the reader determines meaning, what makes a good reader and '[w]hat [m]akes an [i]nterpretation [a]cceptable?'" becomes pertinent to a discussion of ascertaining truth in fiction (Fish, "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?"). As seen in James' work, not all readers are equal and an unreliable reader does not make for a valued interpretation. The act of reading is the act of interpretation, but the interpretation may not be insightful. Is literature an artificial universe then that no real meaning can be expostulated from by author intent and reader interpretation? I

believe literature that stands the test of time does so because it holds a psychological touchstone of truth that the reader intuitively feels. If that truth is based on the reader's cultural biases, and it still holds for a culture in a much later time, then it reflects an ongoing truth about humankind. Henry James in particular allows me to further explore this idea because he separates the role of critic and reader distinctly. Critics believe they are the only readers qualified to interpret a text. They discount both the author and other readers because they believe they are taking the text at face value and interpreting meaning and value from a non-judgmental, unbiased point of view. They assume that when they apply a specific set of criteria from a structured theory it will be possible to look at the text without inserting their personal biases into the process, but even theories are created from at least a cultural bias. There have been examples of how slanted the canon of Great Books of the Western World is in what works are included, how small the sampling is, and how unrepresentative it is of all that was written at the time. The critic's worth is in applying a particular set of criteria to the work in order to determine value. I do not feel this aids in determining whether the piece is representative of a truth. That results from interpretation. James' characters often change from critic to enthusiastic reader as they realize the difference between analysis for value and literary truth revealed through the work itself. The critic is evaluating the writer's methods, tools, forms, etc., tangible things that are considered important to determining value. Questions such as who was reading at the time, what were the values of society, who was represented, who was excluded, are elements that create a strong bias of the times which will not always hold up in later years. Whether the critic or reader of a work completely understands the

initial impetus of the author does not necessarily matter.

According to Stanley Fish, there is a limit to interpretation and not all readers are created equal. If we don't believe that the scholarly critic is as unbiased as he says, yet we feel the reader must be qualified in some way to give a valuable interpretation, it is necessary to determine who the "good" reader is. Fish is concerned with "correct interpretation" and feels this results from neither fixed and stable texts nor free and independent readers, but from "interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?"). It is important to which community the reader belongs. It will affect interpretation which includes attitudes and beliefs. James addresses this concept from the artist's point of view but it pertains to readership as well: "Where for the complete expression of one's subject, does a particular relation stop – giving way to some other not concerned in that expression?" He reaches into the community, cultural aspect by describing a "metaphor of embroiderer – plain moral - canvas of life – boundless number of perforations for the needle. A need to 'cover and consume' as many of those holes as possible" (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410711). The "very nature" of those holes made available to the reader are created "so to invite, to solicit, to persuade, to practice positively a thousand lures and deceits. But, one must discriminate and pick and choose correctly" (James, *The Art of The Novel* 410720). Although James does not define who the good reader is, he is agreeing here that interpretive communities exist and must "pick and choose correctly." There must be some consensus as to worth and interpretation within specific communities of readers before a text is considered worthy.

Thus a reader as part of a community is creating meaning. Henry James would then agree with this idea of community. He allows his characters to be influenced by their “setting” and by those around them and he expects the reader to gain meaning from this cultural setting. He is very explicit in his critiques of his own and other’s work. This is conducive to the idea that only a trained critic has the criteria and is unbiased enough to interpret the value of the text. But, he is very in tune with his reader and herein lays the path to interpretation of truth.

The Four Henry James Pieces:

It is necessary now to take an in depth look at four of his works to determine how Henry James was specifically addressing these questions of who determines value and who determines truth in his work. He is definitely wrestling with the question as he writes specifically about the critic in two early pieces, “The Aspern Papers” and “The Figure in the Carpet,” and he is focusing on the worth of the reader during his middle years in *In the Cage*. In a later work, *The Sacred Fount*, he seems to be criticizing the critic which leaves the reader with an ambiguous non-conclusion.

The Aspern Papers

Henry James’ novella, *The Aspern Papers*, was originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1888. This novella is a good example of James addressing the role of the critic and what the value is of an artist’s work. It also evaluates the deification of an artist over time making everything they wrote or touched valuable to the critic. It begs the question: Do we go too far when we evaluate an artist’s work and does it make the work itself less important if we make the artist the focus? Here James addresses the

community of critical readers and he questions their focus. In the novella he creates an accomplice to the narrator, Mrs. Prest, who has more background and knowledge than the narrator. In this way the reader is inclined to feel they are getting to the truth even if the narrator is biased. “She herself had been established in Venice for fifteen years...In the early years of her residence she had made an attempt to see them” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253815-253821). She has background information, knowledge of the time and place that the narrator lacks. She has an ironic attitude towards the papers he is seeking. She downplays how important the narrator seems to think they are. He deems Aspern a “genius,” and places him on such a high pedestal that, “one doesn’t defend one’s god; one’s god is in himself a defense...he hangs high in the heaven of our literature...” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253837). The reader is inclined to feel this is overblown because Mrs. Prest “was amused by my infatuation, the way my interest had become a fixed idea” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253837). When James creates a character who disdains the literary giant and the person who has spent his lifetime pursuing every small piece of this person’s writing, I am inclined to interpret that as his own disdain for the literary critic when the pursuit becomes obsession and assumes a narrowed point of view and results in missing the bigger picture. For me, the main idea in this novella is that anything written by this author, Aspern, is invaluable – but, key is the critic’s infatuation with the value of the papers. Are they really important to anyone but Juliana Bordereau, the object of Aspern’s poetry? A value is being placed on a personal piece of writing outside of the author’s purposeful writing. (Ironically, everything written by Henry James has been treated the same way, including his private papers). Even Juliana has

become more because of the “legend” of her relationship with the author and time passing. The narrator places her in lofty company when he states, “it was as if I had been told Mrs. Siddon was, or Queen Caroline, or the famous Lady Hamilton, for it seemed to me that she belonged to a generation as extinct” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253837-253844). Legends are often built on conjecture rather than on facts, and the further out they go in time, they either dissipate and become nil or they become larger than life. This is due to the hype that has been presented, but the lasting power has to do with the kernel of truth that remains. This has meaning for the interpreters.

The other aspect the narrator (critic) tries to ignore is his lack of personal knowledge of the author. He feels he knows the author almost as a personal friend although he has never met the man. Our narrator acknowledges that he has not been unbiased as he and Cumnor have delved into the finer points of Aspern’s life. “The multitude, today, flocked to his temple... [but] we had done more for his memory than anyone else, and we had done it by opening lights into his life” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253852). He is admitting he has created the persona. The narrator claims, “He had nothing to fear from us because he had nothing to fear from the truth, which alone at such a distance of time we could be interested in establishing” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253852). Yet, from this “distance of time” the type of truth he is trying to reveal can only be partial. The man cannot be known completely and those following him will only pick up those pieces that they deem important. This cannot be truth. Truth is locked in the words of the poems. Truth is what resonates from those words out into the world of those who read them and are touched by them. The narrator here is doing biographical

work. The poems would be the determiner of truth. Even Juliana at this great distance of time could not tell the truth of Jeffrey Aspern; she only knows certain aspects of the man's life. I'm not saying that these details do not enhance the work of the author by knowing more of who he was and when he wrote and what he wrote about, but it is the work itself that reaches out. Perhaps truth in literature is hidden in plain sight and the critic is looking so hard for particulars based on assumptions, that they cannot perceive the truth that is often simple and universal (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253866-253874). The narrator acknowledges, "we were glad to think at least that in all our publishings (some people consider I believe that we have overdone them), we had only touched in passing..." (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253881).

The hypocrisy and duplicity are in the statement that he is doing this for Aspern. He is doing this for his own glory. Many assumptions are being made based on research – to what end? Juliana represents the focus of the poet's work. A critic or reader feels an intimate relationship with her because of what has been written about her – especially if what has been written is deeply revealing – because the reader can empathize and relate. The narrator stated, "her presence seemed somehow to contain his, I felt nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever have been before or ever have been since" (James, *The Aspern Papers* 253938). For the narrator that flesh and blood person means more than the words on paper, but just as characters, even first person narrators, are not the author, Juliana is not the woman written about in the poem. That person was not only a younger, romanticized version of the old woman now sitting there she was Aspern's version of Juliana. It is exciting to be in the same room with her because of what the

narrator has built her up to be in his mind. He never gets to know the real Juliana at all. James often causes his narrator to assume his assessments of others are correct while allowing the reader to be aware that they aren't necessarily correct. The reader then starts to make his own assumptions, but there is never proof one way or the other whether either party is completely correct.

The tactics the narrator takes to reach his goal are often questioned by Mrs. Prest. Again, James uses her to pull back from the narration to view the narrator's way of functioning. According to him, "you must have an opportunity: you may push on through a breach but you can't batter down a dead wall. She answered that the breach I had already made was big enough to admit an army and accused me of wasting precious hours..." (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254432). In question is the approach to analysis. Too close a reading, too many nuances, and the prize may never be achieved. She is telling him he is procrastinating. He has lost focus by being too close and too enamored of the process.

In this novella we are reminded on several occasions that this story is being told after the fact. The narrator often says he "realized later." This reveals what he has learned from the experience. For example, "...The real reading of the matter, I afterward perceived, was simply the poor old woman's desire to emphasize the fact that I was in the enjoyment of a favor as rigidly limited as it had been liberally bestowed" (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254479). She is determining what is revealed and what is not. The papers, the key to his desires, will not be revealed. He knows she will not ever give him the Aspern papers. The narrator is changing however. His love is for literature, for the

research, for the romance of it. He is not the hardcore critic that Cumnor, back in the States, is. The trip was becoming, “essentially delightful to me. I foresaw that I should have a summer after my own literary heart” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254479). The spirit of the past that he loved was there, “I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me...his bright ghost had returned to earth to tell me that he regarded the affair as his own no less than mine and that we should see it fraternally, cheerfully to a conclusion” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254479). James is here reminding us of the author/reader relationship. The reader determines that this is what the author intended. At this point we are not certain who invoked whom, but it may not be important.

He becomes happier as a “reader,” as someone just experiencing the world Aspern was inspired by rather than digging and researching and trying to get the papers. They are becoming less and less important as he sees the truth of this long past world that Aspern and Juliana occupied. He reasoned, “There was no end to the questions it was possible to ask about them and no end to the answers it was not possible to frame” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254523). James realizes that a theorist or critic will create the answers they want by the way they slant their work. Any theory can be “proven” if the right information is manipulated in the right way. This may have an impact on the value of the work, but it doesn’t necessarily address the truth in the work. “He “sat spinning theories about her...” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254544). The reality could never have satisfied him as much. A reader’s link to the character is better, more intimate, and closer to a truth for them. James has basically said this through the changes in his narrator. The narrator is realizing that to understand her better “there was

something touching to me in all that, and my imagination frequently went back to that period” (James, *The Aspern Papers* 254544). The Juliana of the poem is created from the imagination and what he finds touching is based on his knowledge of the time period, how women were treated then, in what regard her behavior would have been unacceptable, which made the insinuation even more romantic. Suffice to say that in this novella, James is putting forth the idea that characters in writing are just that, made up characters of the author’s imagination. Digging into the actual person is interesting, but not always revelatory of what the author was attempting to say. Without the reader, the text is dead as well as the author because there is no interpretation or meaning occurring. Being very knowledgeable about the author, the history, etc. is helpful in evaluating the value of a piece, but it does not necessarily reveal the truth that is felt by the reader.

“The Figure in the Carpet”

An ulterior motive of the literary critic that was touched on in *The Aspern Papers* is what reviewing or writing about a well-known piece does for the reputation of the critic. Again, within the community of the literary critic James is questioning motive. This is important to the continuing question of value and truth because motive determines the specifics of what a critic is trying to reveal. In “The Figure in the Carpet” this ulterior motive is one of the first things addressed by our narrator. “What explanation could be more to the point than my obvious fitness for the task? ... This was his new novel, an advance copy, and whatever much or little it should do for his reputation I was clear on the spot as to what it should do for mine.” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267451) When a critic sets out to make a name for himself it is going to be based on the depth and

breadth of his research and the value of the work. He is less concerned about the cultural truth that readers have found in the writing than the intricacies of the writing itself. In this short story, we see the faults of the narrator which he will not overcome because he cannot see them. James uses a second character again to reveal the shortcomings of the narrator. Here Corvick, the “better” critic says to him,

“For God’s sake try to get *at* him, you know, if you can as you should have spoken of him.”

“I wondered an instant. You mean as far and away the biggest of the lot – that sort of thing?”

Corvick almost groaned. “Oh, you know, I don’t put them back to back that way; it’s the infancy of art! But he gives me a pleasure so rare; the sense of” – he mused a little – “something or other.”

I wondered again. “The sense, pray, of what?”

“My dear man, that’s just what I want you to say!” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267497)

The narrator is portrayed as thick-headed. Is there really an art to how a piece can be read and appreciated, how you must talk to the author, understand at a deeper level, or is it all pretention? The narrator is obviously not certain as he says, “I reflected indeed that the heat of the admirer was sometimes grosser even than the appetite of the scribe...I hadn’t at all said what Vereker gave him the sense of” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267497).

The review that the narrator wrote impressed neither Corvick nor Vereker. When

he met the man there was no mention of the article at all and he wasn't sure Vereker had even read it. The narrator states, this writer "wasn't of course popular, but I judged one of the sources of his good humour to be precisely that his success was independent of that...the critics at least had put on a spurt and caught up with him" (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267517). When Lady Jane presses the article on Vereker, she declares, "the man has actually got *at* you, at what I always feel, you know" (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267525-535). However, Vereker's assessment of the article is that, "the author doesn't see...anything." He concludes that "Nobody does" (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267568). Of course the writer of the article feels that the author is conceited, and it is his vanity that dismisses the narrator's talent. It would never occur to him that he should inquire as to what the author meant by "nobody does." After all, author intent is not the point. Yet, it is the author who is venerated. When Vereker apologizes, the narrator realizes "the sense of his solicitude suddenly made all the difference to me. My cheap review fluttered off into space, and the best things I had said in it became flat enough beside the brilliancy of his being there" (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267596). As was seen in *The Aspern Papers*, Henry James seems to feel the critic has a tendency to become "star struck" and lose sight of the work itself. A critique or interpretation should be focused on the words that have been written.

The author explains to the journalist that, "You miss it, my dear fellow, with inimitable assurance; the fact of your being awfully clever and your article's being awfully nice doesn't make a hair's breadth of difference" (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267615). He explains that it makes him feel like a failure probably because the

point, the truism is not getting across to the reader. He said to the narrator, “Have I got to *tell* you, after all these years and labours?” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267623).

The author hints at truth, and the narrator, although not clearly, realizes he has missed something, “There was something in the friendly reproach of this – jocosely exaggerated – that made me, as an ardent young seeker for truth, blush to the roots of my hair. I’m as much in the dark as ever, though I’ve grown used in a sense to my obtuseness” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267623). Vereker then explains, “the particular thing I’ve written my books most *for*. Isn’t there for every writer a particular thing...that most makes him apply himself...without...which he wouldn’t write at all, the very passion of his passion?” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267637). Vereker says, “there’s an idea in my work ...I ought to leave that to somebody else to say; but that nobody does say it is precisely what we’re talking about” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267648). He tells the narrator that he, the author, should “assist the critic,” meaning he should help eke out this “little trick.” This is what James is talking about when he says the author determines how the reader should read his work, but he is also saying that the critic, by delving too deeply into structure and value, misses this truth. The narrator implies that the author should make it more obvious to the critic, but Vereker retorts, “What else in heaven’s name is criticism supposed to be?” It is hidden in plain sight, but the problem for the person reading too closely “is that your little demons of subtlety” cause you to miss the obvious (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267675). When the narrator asks for a clue, Vereker is disappointed. He tells him it is “as concrete” in all of his writing “as a bird in

a cage,” but he knows that with the state of mind of the narrator he will not be able to see it. He is looking too hard. The closest Vereker comes to revealing “it” is when he says, “Well, you’ve got a heart in your body” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267702).

The problem with literary criticism versus reading from the heart is that everything has to be labeled. Perhaps the truth that I’m searching for in Henry James’ writing is like the “it” in Vereker’s work. It is not to be labeled, it is to be experienced. The retort that comes from the narrator is valid, “why should you despise us chaps for not doing what you can’t do yourself?” But, Vereker states, “Haven’t I done it in twenty volumes? I do it in my way,” he continued. “You don’t do it in yours” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267717). The author has done his part. This is why the purity of reading the work and being touched by it is a more important truth for the reader. The critic seems to have a different job.

Sadly, the search for “it” causes the narrator to no longer enjoy the author’s work. He “found [him]self missing the subordinate intentions [he] had formerly found. His books didn’t even remain the charming things they had been for me” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267767). There are different ways to read, and what is a pleasurable pursuit to the critic is very different than the reading of a work from a casual stance. Perhaps there is a wrong way to read. The narrator became frustrated and felt he had been made a fool. He told Corvick about the exchange and Corvick was surprisingly stirred by the anecdote. It made him feel there was more to Vereker than he had realized. As in his other work, James uses a more knowledgeable character to reveal the shortcomings of the narrator. Corvick knew “there was evidently in the writer’s inmost art something to *be*

understood” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267785). Unfortunately, his approach is also one of digging in instead of stepping back. The narrator is certain that Corvick will discover “it,” because of his “cleverness, his admiration, the intensity of his interest in my anecdote; and without making too much of the divergence of our respective estimates mentioned that ...he saw much further into a certain affair than most people” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267831). The only hope that Vereker saw for Corvick finding the answer would be in his getting married and being in that state for some time. The narrator doesn’t pick up on this greatest of clues. He thinks Vereker thinks him not intelligent enough, but he doesn’t realize that understanding “it” has nothing to do with intellect.

James is really talking about the difference between the “artistic temperament” and the intellectual. Or is it deeper than that? Is the narrator closer to the truth of “it” than Corvick after all if only because instead of enjoying the thrill of the game he is irritated? He realizes “they would take him page by page, as they would take one of the classics, inhale him in slow draughts and let him sink deep in” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267881). It was all about the search, not about the answer. Corvick had over the years, “caught whiffs and hints of he didn’t know what, faint wandering notes of a hidden music” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267888).

The narrator has lost his taste for the work and the author. However, “it wasn’t a bit true that I had ceased to care for knowledge; little by little my curiosity had not only begun to ache again, but had become the familiar torment of my consciousness....literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage

meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267954). The narrator is beginning to mature into an artistic mindset. When Gwendolen tells him that George has figured out the “general intention,” both are elated. She relates how Corvick came to his understanding, that “let severely alone for six months that has simply sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle. They all worked in him together, and someday somewhere, when he wasn’t thinking, they fell, in all their superb intricacy, into the one right combination. The figure in the carpet came out” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 267975-267990). Corvick will not divulge what “it” is although he says Vereker has agreed he has figured it out. He does however intimate that “it was simple – it was simple, but it was immense, and the final knowledge of it was an experience quite apart” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 268069). It is interesting also that Vereker told the narrator that only being married for some time would allow one to truly understand – that is possibly why Corvick requires being married to Gwendolen before he will tell her. When Corvick dies it is Gwendolen who keeps the secret, and the narrator surmises that the figure in the carpet can only be traceable for husbands and wives. When the narrator approaches her for the answer, he is met with a cold “never” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 268185). Finally, the narrator states, “I detested Hugh Vereker – simply couldn’t read him” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 268254). He cannot live with his own inability to see “it.” He understands, “I was shut up in my obsession for ever” (James, *The Figure in the Carpet* 268254). In this story James has created a depiction of the gap between value and truth that for many cannot be spanned. The most intellectual, well-read, critic may not possess the insight to see truth even when

he is capable of taking a valuable work down to its most basic parts. I surmise James feels one must have the heart of an artist to read a work from the artistic point of view. He leaves his narrator moving in that direction if he will only adjust his thinking. The door is left open if he stops being discouraged and sees what is right in front of his face. But, that will take experience and depth of character.

In the Cage

During what is considered the middle years of his writing, Henry James took leave of the critic and wrote a wonderful novella that deals with the role of the reader. The novella, *In the Cage*, written in 1898, fits nicely into Stanley Fish's question about who is a reliable reader. *In the Cage* addresses the problem of interpretation including age, gender and social status of the reader. James is also emphasizing the importance of a standard or consensus of how to read. This narrator alone has too narrow a scope. The advent of the novel and advancements in printing created an emphasis on reader interpretation because books were available to everyone now. There was wider distribution and readership. In Henry James' *In the Cage*, gender, social status and age affect the interpretation of the messages being sent over the telegraph. The telegraph was the original electronic communication which broke sentences into bits and pieces. We communicate this way all of the time now through electronic media which often leads to misinterpretation. As a society we receive our news in brief moments of time and are required to create meaning on our own from this input most of the time. But in the late 19th Century, there was a different perspective. We never know the name of the operator in the novella, but her attitudes are expressed through her age, gender and how she

romanticizes the messages. “She was perfectly aware that her imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time...” (James, *In the Cage* 4). This character functions as both creator and interpreter, making the mundane something more. She makes things better, more beautiful than they really are. It is typical of a young female belonging to a social status that is somewhat protected and naïve, to romanticize a situation. She creates a fantasy to enhance her world. Her life is determined already and she is locked into her particular social strata. To be engaged to marry means losing what little freedom she has ever had to explore things beyond her ken. Her approach to what she reads “enhances” reality. We as readers never know how much of the tale is true and how much is made up. But, it doesn’t necessarily matter. The revelation here is of the reader herself, and how her interpretations impact lives. The implication here is reminiscent of Fish’s need to establish who is a reliable reader.

The girl’s gaze is also an important factor in this novella. The implications of being in a cage and seeing only glimpses of her clients and small parts of conversations are representative of the narrow bias she brings to interpreting what she is reading. She is aware of this as “[it] had occurred to her early that in her position – that of a young person spending, in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie— she should know a great many persons without their recognizing the acquaintance” (James, *In the Cage* 1). It allows for misinterpretation, and without having Stanley Fish’s community to concur with her interpretation, she is locked into a very narrow viewpoint.

The bits and pieces the narrator receives are a reflection of society in the early 1900's when this book was written. The advent of the telegraph, the camera, and other inventions made life simpler while breaking down communication into something brief and somewhat unintelligible. This fragmentation was damaging to meaning because it became a brief moment in time with no continuity. Also, for the character in this novella, she was only privy to one side of the conversation, so she had to completely conjecture the other side. Where speed became a factor, clarity seems to have taken a back seat. She was not particularly interested in the truth, in reality. She is not a good interpreter of what she reads. She prefers her own description of both Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard. Her version makes her life bearable and she rearranges the story as more "facts" come to light to suit herself rather than caring about the reality. For example, "This morning everything changed, but rather to dreariness; she had to swallow the rebuff to her theory about fatal desires, which she did without confusion and indeed with absolute levity..." (James, *In the Cage* 7). James is emphasizing the need for a "reliable" reader to interpret truth. This narrator does not represent her entire culture or time period. She is not reading from a "community's" set of values or ideals. Cultural bias had everything to do with the author's intent, and even read today, the text reflects the problems we all face with only receiving bits and pieces of information where communication can take a backseat. The girl doesn't really want to deal with the realities of society. When Mrs. Jordan tries to entice her into going into their homes with her, the girl is not brave or sophisticated enough to function in that world, so she backs away from it. She is jealous though, so she manufactures a meeting with Captain Everard that she can view as an

what she has conjectured is false comes to light, she is finally ready to close the story and move on to her intended life in the country. Reality has taken the excitement out of the story for her, and she can no longer place herself in the role of the heroine. Roland Barthes maintains “the reader plays with text. He is not a passive recipient. Boredom results if a reader cannot ‘produce the text, open it out, set it going’” (Barthes). It takes the reader to bring life to the words on the page. However, when the reader is isolated from understanding the world around them, they do not have enough information to glean the truth from the text.

We create as we interpret. Interpretation is a result of who the reader is and the bank of knowledge they bring to the reading. This moves us into the “social reading aspect of interpretation.” The impact the community has on bringing meaning to a text is probably more important than the individual reading because it better reflects society at any given time. If the reader is the final determiner of meaning, what makes a good reader as approached in Stanley Fish’s “What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?” becomes most important (Fish, What Makes...). The words themselves “cannot be proof of point because words are interpreted” according to Fish. But, eventually through interpretation the facts will be discovered (Fish, What Makes...). Steven Mailloux agrees and feels, “interpretation is a two-step methodology: 1. A text gives a reader a task or something to do. 2. Then, the reader’s response or answer helps give meaning...the reader’s interpretation is important to meaning, and there is not just one right interpretation of a text” (Mailloux).

According to Stanley Fish, there is a limit to interpretation and not all readers are created equal. If we don't believe that the scholarly critic is as unbiased as he says, yet we feel the reader must be qualified in some way to give a valuable interpretation even if more than one interpretation is possible, it is necessary to determine who the "good" reader is. Fish is concerned with "correct interpretation" and feels this results from neither fixed and stable texts nor free and independent readers, but from "interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (Fish, "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?"). Which community the reader belongs to then is important. It will affect interpretation, which will include attitudes and beliefs. There must be some consensus as to worth and interpretation within specific communities of readers before a text is considered worthy. Thus, community is creating meaning. This is in line with Henry James' portrayal in "In The Cage" of a reader who is not able to determine complete truth because her age, gender, and station in life leave her uneducated and naïve about the world she is trying to decipher through reading the telegraphs. As he often does, he ends the story without answering the question of who the reliable reader is, and we never know the truth about the characters the narrator has revealed, but he leaves it open to the reader of the short story to perhaps have the community and knowledge to glean some truth from the girl's tale.

The Sacred Fount

In 1901, Henry James wrote the novel *The Sacred Fount*. It was not as well received as many of his other works and some critics even called it, "morbid analysis of thought and

phrase and look and gesture, and then analysis of the analysis” (Zajdman). I find this humorous because the critic should be looking in the mirror as he makes this statement. It seems obvious that this overt criticism of over-analysis is something James is doing on purpose in the novel. This novel exploits the often arbitrary nature of literary criticism and theory. It exemplifies the danger of not having a community with consensus. This interpretation is in danger of having no meaning at all. According to Josh Zajdman, in his article, “The Forgotten Twentieth Century: *The Sacred Fount*,”

The Sacred Fount [is] easily James’s most divisive and controversial work. Quite famously, Rebecca West referred to the novel as something that ‘worries one like a rat nibbling at a wainscot’ and describes its plot as that where a week-end visitor spends more intellectual force than Kant can have used on *The Critique of Pure Reason*, in an unsuccessful attempt to discover whether there exists between certain of his fellow guests a relationship not more interesting among these vacuous people than it is among sparrows...the snark is terrific (James, *The Sacred Fount* 130427-130445).

It must make literary critics cringe inside as they would have to recognize at least some of what they attempt to do when digging into a writer’s work.

The narrator in *The Sacred Fount* is read as stream of consciousness, but there are

other characters and we do get their reaction to the narrator's spate of ideas. Zadzman says it well:

“Yes, it's a challenging, elliptical and even baffling novel.... However, the wonder of it lies in the sure handedness that James carries it off with. The mind will bend to the point of breaking, but then the narrator simply ushers the reader toward another avenue of thought” (Zajdman).

It is as if you are privy to the narrator's every thought. Not an orderly, controlled dialogue, but the thought process he goes through while observing his fellow persons. It forces the reader to stop conjecturing and instead try to follow the path of this thought process. It keeps the reader on task. No interpretation, no analysis, just follow the train of thought. The narrator is doing all of the interpreting and analysis at such a pace there is no room for the reader's thoughts. As Zadzman says, “Yes, the outpouring of analysis is staggering, but as a text, it's really a feat of economy” (Zadzman). The character is forcing the reader in different directions which is an idea James was working with back when he wrote *The Aspern Papers* and “The Figure in the Carpet.” I am intrigued with Zadzman's assessment that,

While writing the novel, James was already viewed as a colossal literary talent, but a mystifying one. What if the book serves as a bit of a tease for all those people who tried to figure him out, or decades later, pigeonhole him...It just doesn't seem all that impossible that brutally intelligent James, always appreciative of attention, would delight in writing something that everyone would find impenetrable (Zadzman).

Although the novel has been called unimportant by some, the pretensions of *The Sacred Fount* are exactly the point. “Henry James ...is notorious for writing things like, ‘You after all then now don’t?’” in this novel and some critics deem it unreadable (Zajdman). But, James is creating a challenge for the reader. The way we interpret things, what we think we know, and what makes us read things in a certain way are all addressed in this fascinating novel.

The narrator is attempting to prove his theory that “a person may become younger or cleverer by tapping the ‘sacred fount’ of another person” (Bersani). It is never explicitly stated, but it is assumed the “sacred fount” is the fountain of youth, and there is “too much for a single share, but it’s not enough to go round” (James, *The Sacred Fount* 126287). Like the over-zealous literary critic, the narrator is obsessive about digging into other people’s personal lives. The book makes us uncomfortable as readers because, “Rarely can a book be found that gives a greater feeling of voyeurism. The eyes of the astoundingly perceptive narrator all but physically strip people. However, one increasingly wonders whether this is what he actually sees or what he thinks he is seeing, or can even convince himself of” (Zadjman). The narrator’s first observation, before he even gets to the party is that perceptions about people are very changeable – as changeable as the place and time of day. James immediately sets up the ambiguity involved in determining what others are like, or what they are thinking and why. Thus when he evaluates the first person, Gilbert Long, as “stupid in fact...His good looks, which were striking, perhaps paid his way...He was a fine piece of furniture,” this is based on the narrator’s previous knowledge of the man and before he even speaks to him

(James, *The Sacred Fount* 125966). Here is a metaphor for the preconceived evaluation the critic brings to a work. The narrator's assessment is based on how Long has treated him previously so it is obviously biased. He recognizes that Long has matured some, but that is all.

Already we're not certain this narrator's opinions are reliable, but when he doesn't even recognize Grace Brissenden because she has changed so much, we, the reader, become as curious about what could have changed her as our narrator becomes. The reader immediately determines to rely on the observations and opinions of someone who is being set up as a questionable narrator and yet the assumption that he has known her before gives credence to his observation. Why do we so easily get sucked into this game? When we think someone has more knowledge than we do (such as the literary critic) the tendency is to believe them unquestionably. The other confusing aspect of this novel is that much of the conversation doesn't really make much sense, but it sounds profound. For example, "'Didn't you really know?' ... 'Why in the world SHOULD I KNOW?' ... 'Oh, it's only that I thought you always did.' And both speakers had looked at me a little oddly, as if appealing from each other. 'What in the world does she mean?'" (James, *The Sacred Fount* 125997-126003). As the reader, we never know what any of them are talking about. This occurs often in the novel. It "sounds" important and profound, but the conversations are often circular and appear meaningless in the end. The narrator's manipulations are reminiscent of Stanley Fish's concept that literary theorists will always arrive at the answers they are seeking by simple manipulation of

The narrator roams the room gathering information as he observes everyone's actions. When he asks a question or makes an observation, he keeps the other person off perception and opinion. No matter how knowledgeable or how much research they do, the value seems to drop out with the next great theory.

balance by pushing points beyond what is necessary. For example, he will make a comment such as, "something—that there is nothing in anything" (James, *The Sacred Fount* 126287), or When he's asked, "Does it matter?" He says, "depends on . . . , what you mean by matter" (James, *The Sacred Fount* 12687). Even when we feel the narrator is being validated in his opinions because Obert has had similar observations about Mrs. Server and the other characters, we have no concrete evidence that any of what he has conjectured is true. He is taken with the idea that each person initiates change in those he or she encounters. He goes through a litany of who has impacted whom in his description of Lady John – her wit, her intellect, the idea of "point," and how all of the people change. Lady John was more pointed – she created change in Long. Grace Brissenden hadn't aged; the assumption is that she must have a lover. Long has become more personable so it may be his love that is fueling Grace. Guy Brissenden seems older, so he must love and adore someone also, because the twist is the nature of the changes; it is vampiric. A woman who is adored and loved is sucking dry the person who loves her. He is aging and she is not. The one change the narrator negates is that, "the stupid never grow clever, even if all other change is possible" (James, *The Sacred Fount* 126287).

When the narrator states, "I felt from the first that if I was on the scent of something ultimate I had better waste neither my wonder nor my wisdom. . . I should still

have been at a loss to put my enigma itself into words. I was just conscious vaguely of being on the track of a law, a law that would fit, that would take me as governing the delicate phenomena....” I can’t help but think of the narrator in “The Figure in the Carpet,” so obsessed with an idea he could not put his finger on, but he was certain existed (James, *The Sacred Fount* 126294). So typical of the critic to get more involved in the pouring over minute details than in the truth of what might have set him on the hunt in the first place. This narrator is also dismissive of everyone else’s ideas and possible interpretations as the critic also typically feels only their way of interpreting is correct and only they truly understand his or her findings. The possibility here may be that we end up studying the critics’ opinion rather than the work itself.

Just like the other four James’ works, the narrator reads much into every little nuance to the point where the reader starts to doubt the truth of it. It is too much conjecture. The character Obert realizes just as he thinks he “has it,” “it” isn’t all that he needs to know. Research leads to more research. The narrator, however, is never humble enough to come to this conclusion. In response to critics who were panning the novel and inserting their own interpretation of James’ queerness, Zajdman argues that this novel is “the writing of a man who adhered to his views on literature with more piety than a wagon full of fundamentalists. Of course, James came from one of the most complex, dynamic and accomplished families seen by the standards of the nineteenth or any century, really” (Zajdman). In the end, James is again leaving it to the reader. He has left the reader having to determine not only whether the narrator is being true to his

nature, but whether he is purposefully creating a fantastical hypothesis purely for his own entertainment. At the very end of the novel this egotistic narrator relinquishes his power over his theory by stating,

Then there we are again at our mystery! I don't think you know...it was my person, really, that gave its charm to my theory; I think it was much more my theory that gave its charm to my person. My person, I flatter myself, has remained through these few hours – hours of tension, but of a tension, you see, purely intellectual – as good as ever; so that if we're not, even in our anomalous situation, in danger from any such source, it's simply that my theory is dead and that the blight of the rest is involved”

(James, *The Sacred Fount* 130427-130445).

Stanley Fish would very much agree with the narrator's evaluation of his own work. The theory will be proven if manipulated correctly or if it takes the wrong direction it is dead. The reader must make that decision.

Still, the theory itself, that people are “fed” and “bled” by their relationships to others has the mark of a greater truth. When I read Henry James I am left feeling that it is unimportant whether the character who tells the story is right or wrong, narrow in scope or reliable. He or she is still able to impart to me the thread of truth that touches me in the work. It is left to me to interpret and determine its worth. James knows what he is requiring of the reader and the literary critic.

The Sacred Fount was a culmination of what Henry James had been toying with for a long time. Being both a literary critic and a now famous author left him working

back and forth from the two different aspects of value and truth as early as *The Aspern Papers* and “The Figure in the Carpet.” *The Sacred Fount* speaks directly to those who try to intelligently, with a certain amount of base knowledge and research, determine author intent, value of text, and how a work should be interpreted. In the novel, “the narrator spends the novel searching for signs of depletion among guests giving from their sacred fount for the betterment of others...the narrator’s mental state wavering frequently and sometimes cruelly from clarity to muddiness. Eventually, he even doubts himself...” (Zadjman). Either there is brilliant insight into the work or it is all fanciful conjecture that cannot be verified one way or the other.

Conclusion

According to H.J. McCloskey in his essay “On Being an Atheist,” “Value free language does not exist.” When the writer writes he has his own interpretation that he thinks the reader is going to understand. But, this is not what happens in the communication process. Intent may be perceived by the reader, but there are barriers to communication that involve many social and educational mores. Henry James’ family was very well educated and he came from a diverse background where his father and brother’s theological and philosophical approaches must certainly have influenced his own approach to determining value and truth in literature. His criticism and writing, while being labeled realism among other things by critics, spanned many successful years. It seems to me he should not and did not want to be pigeon-holed. It is evident he understood the different roles of the critic and the knowledgeable reader. The critic is well versed in the methods of determining the worth of a piece of writing as they apply

technique and theories to literature, but it takes the co-construction of knowledge and interpretation to find truth. James attempted to create that moral reality for the reader and he always left the final analysis up to that reader. According to the New Rhetoricians, truth is impossible without language because language embodies truth. Communication in relation to others creates a means to structured interpretation which leads to meaning (Berlin). In “Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries” by William A. Covino and David A. Jolliffe they state, “the rhetoric of a text is also the intellectual, cognitive, affective, and social considerations that guide the writer or speaker to use the language as he or she does, and the rhetoric of a text is the effect it actually has on people who listen to it or read it” (Covino, Jolliffe). Truth is a dynamic process of interaction of opposing elements in constant flux. Truth is a creation always changing. It is, in literature, the communication that occurs between author, text, and reader which is organic “language [which] is an instrument for controlling our becoming” (Berlin). Although social influence impacts the person’s ideas, truth develops outside of history or politics in the sense that it is created as the individual or group interprets the work based on a particular paradigm. For me, those that reflect mainstream thinking are best qualified at that moment to determine value. The “upstart” artists and readers will more likely question that authority and push to change the reflective truth in a work which can stand the test of time. Time and endurance, is the telling element. Lee Morrisey in “Debating the Canon” would say, “the longer the better, presumably, but...a century is ‘the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit’” (Covino, Joliffe 4). If it actually takes this long to

determine value and truth in a text, we are all being very presumptive when applying theory and value and even truth. It could well change tomorrow.

Lastly, if Stanley Fish is correct and it takes a community of readers, that group creates “presuppositions and beliefs about the subject of the text as well as the patterns of demonstration or proof that the audience will accept. In other words, the constraints are ideas and attitudes that exist between [those] who ideally will act upon this exigence” (Covino and Joliffe 11). James understands this role of the reader and purposely places the reader in a position where he has to apply his own “presuppositions and beliefs.” He shows a faith in the interpretation that the reader brings because truth is James’ “it,” and “it” is found in the heart not the head.

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