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The Comic in Henry James' Fiction

Komický element v díle Henryho Jamese

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Dedication

I would here like to express my gratitude to the enquirers who have preceded me in their intellectual analyses of James's oeuvre, those already ahead in the field, who have posed their own questions according to their respective interests and who have stimulated my own – including, first and foremost, my thesis advisor Erik Sherman Roraback, DPhil. To all of them belongs my respect. To Dr. Erik Sherman Roraback I further owe my gratitude for his kind patience, abundant advice and copious support, both academic and personal. I would further like to express my thanks to all the teachers who have sustained me and encouraged me in my studies and writing throughout the years. You truly are *the best* teachers one could wish for.

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work, for which I used only the sources and literature cited, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

In Prague

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the study and interpretation of the interlacement of the world of comedy in several works of Henry James and the reflection in these fictions of certain specified problems and challenges of modern society which assist to bring forth the social ambience therein.

In the author's opinion, the comedy in the said works of James, on the fundamental level, criticises and pokes fun at the evils of modern society and the characters who pay homage to them. The thesis argues that the comedy in the analysed works of Henry James satirizes several challenging, problematic socio-cultural and economic developments of contemporary modern times through the ridicule and stigmatization of the mostly despicable characters who, under the sway of these developments, perpetrate their negative influence on the lives of other characters in the selected works. To substantiate this argument the thesis looks at the following works of James: *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, "The Turn of the Screw" and "The Beast in the Jungle."

At the outset, the thesis outlines briefly several critical approaches to the comedy in James's works, comments on their validity, reveals the author's views, and points in the direction of the critical opinions and approaches which the author embraces toward the comedy in the selected works. Furthermore, the thesis establishes the currency of James's social consciousness, discusses the international social differences in James's works, outlines the portrayal of the American and European social scenes in James's works, and delineates the socio-cultural and economic developments with the negative effect on modern society, including the following: consumerism, materialism, moral abasement, objectification, commodification, commercialization, predatory financial acquisitiveness, rampant egotism, the interpenetration between the public and private spheres, and performativeness.

With respect to the four long works of Henry James (*The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*), the thesis demonstrates the full scope of the thesis statement. With respect to the two shorter works ("The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Turn of the Screw"), where comedy is not a pronounced feature of their compositions in a traditional sense, the thesis proposes along which interpretative lines the comic perspective into the works is attainable. The link between the comedy and the social scene in these fictions being fuzzy, the thesis proposes that the

value of including these textual specimen of James's canon is in their assisting us in identifying the extreme limit beyond which there is little possibility of the insight into the social scene. The description of the means by which the tales defy the interpretative associations combining readings of the texts for the reflections of modern social problems and comic readings of the texts is effectively delivered as part of the investigations into the comedy in the respective works.

Abstrakt

Tématem této bakalářské práce je studium a výklad protkávání světa komedie v několika dílech Henryho Jamese s odrazem jmenovitých obtíží a hlubších problémů moderní společnosti, které spoluutvářejí společenský rámeček v daných dílech.

Autor práce je toho názoru, že komedie v uvedených dílech Henryho Jamese v zásadě kritizuje a satiricky napadá společenská zla moderní doby a postavy, které jim skládají hold. Bakalářská práce obhajuje stanovisko, které tvrdí, že komedie v rozebíraných dílech satirizuje řadu společensko-kulturních a ekonomických potíží a problémů tehdejší moderní doby, a to prostřednictvím zesměšnění a potupné diskreditace povětšinou zavrženíhodných postav, které, pod vlivem těchto proměn, negativně působí na životy dalších postav ve vybraných dílech. Ve snaze doložit toto tvrzení se práce obrací k následujícím textům Henryho Jamese: *Holubičí křídla*, *Zlatá mísa*, *Portrét dámy*, *Vyslanci*, *Přitažení šroubu* a *Šelma v džungli*.

Práce nejdříve nabízí krátký přehled několika kritických přístupů ke komedii v díle Henryho Jamese, vyjadřuje se k jejich platnosti, vysvětluje stanovisko autora práce a ukazuje, ve směru jakých názorových proudů se bude práce ubírat během rozboru komedie ve vybraných dílech. Práce dále dokládá platnost tvrzení, že James byl autor, kterému nechybělo sociální uvědomění. Předmětem zájmu jsou také mezinárodní společenské rozdíly v dílech Jamese, nastíní jeho portrétů americké a evropské společenské scény, jakožto i společensko-kulturní a ekonomické vlivy s negativním dopadem na moderní společnost, včetně: konzumerismu, materialismu, morálního úpadku, objektivizace, komodifikace, komercializace, kořistnické ziskuchtivosti, rozbujelého sobectví, vzájemného průniku veřejného života a soukromí, a performativnosti.

Během rozboru čtyř dlouhých děl Henryho Jamese (*Holubičí křídla*, *Zlatá mísa*, *Portrét dámy* a *Vyslanci*) řešitel objasňuje a dokládá na příkladech z textu základní stanovisko práce v celé jeho šíři. Během rozboru dvou kratších děl (*Přitažení šroubu* a *Šelma v džungli*), ve kterých komedie v tradičním slova smyslu není jejich výrazným rysem, práce navrhuje způsob, jak díla interpretovat tak, aby na ně bylo možné nahlížet ve světle komedie. Protože propojení mezi komedií a společenskou scénou v těchto dílech je značně neurčité, práce shledává skutečný přínos začlenění těchto dvou ukázek tvorby Henryho Jamese v tom, že nám umožňují určit mez v dílech autora, za kterou již není skutečně možné dojít

k pochopení toho, jaký obraz společnosti se nám naskýtá. Popis prostředků, kterými oba příběhy kladou odpor snahám o interpretaci na základě usouvztažnění výkladů o komedii a společenských problémech moderní doby, je v těchto případech fakticky součástí samotné studie komedie v jednotlivých dílech.

KEY WORDS

The Wings of the Dove, The Golden Bowl, The Portrait of a Lady, The Ambassadors, “The Turn of the Screw,” “The Beast in the Jungle,” comedy, consumerism, materialism, moral abasement, objectification, commodification, commercialization, predatory financial acquisitiveness, rampant egotism, the interpenetration between the public and private spheres, performativeness.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Holubičí křídla, Zlatá mísa, Portrét dámy, Vyslanci, Přitažení šroubu, Šelma v džungli, komedie, konzumerismus, materialismus, morální úpadek, objektifikace, komodifikace, komercializace, kořistnická ziskuchtivost, rozbujelé sobectví, vzájemný průnik veřejného života a soukromí, performativnost.

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Introduction

The subject of this thesis is the study and interpretation of the interlacement of the world of comedy in several works of Henry James and the reflection in these fictions of certain specified problems and challenges of modern society which assist to bring forth the social ambience therein. To my mind, the comedy in the said works of James, on the fundamental level, criticises and pokes fun at these social evils of modern society and the characters who pay homage to them.

The thesis argues that the comedy in the analysed works of Henry James satirizes several challenging, problematic socio-cultural and economic developments of contemporary modern times through the ridicule and stigmatization of the mostly despicable characters who, under the sway of these developments, perpetrate their negative influence on the lives of other characters in the selected works. To substantiate this argument, the thesis looks at the following works: *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, “The Turn of the Screw” and “The Beast in the Jungle.”

The objective of the thesis is, consequently, – when the basic premise of the attainability of the interlock between the comedy and the reflection of society with respect to the chosen works can be fulfilled – the investigation of the comedy as the vehicle of judgement on the problems and challenges of modern society reflected in the works. The thesis, therefore, explores the manner in which the comedy depicts the problems of modern society therein, i.e. the thesis explains what form the comedy takes by describing the mechanism of the nascency of the comic sense. Furthermore, the thesis looks into what meanings are produced by the image conveyed through the comedy of the reflection of the modern social problems, i.e. the thesis examines the functions of the comedy in relation to the reflection.

When the knowledge about the relationship between the reflection of the modern social problems and the comedy is felt not to be safely attainable (namely, in “The Beast in the Jungle” and “The Turn of the Screw”), the goal of the present thesis – the comedy in Henry James being considered the backbone of the focus in that case – is to propose along which interpretative lines the comic perspective into the works is attainable. The value of including these textual specimen of James’s canon is in their assisting us in identifying the extreme limit beyond which there is little possibility of the

insight into the social scene. The thesis then attempts to comment on why it is impossible to establish a clear link between the reflections of the social reality of James's age therein and the comedy found in the works. The study of the Gothic conventions and the Gothic effects in "The Turn of the Screw," and the examination of Marcher's imagination in "The Beast in the Jungle" equal expositions of the means by which the tales hinder interpretations from the viewpoint of the reflection of the social scene.

Allow me to explain how the different chapters of this thesis contribute towards the study and interpretation of the interlacement between the comedy and the reflection of the social problems in the selected works of Henry James.

Chapter I establishes the currency of one of the basic premises behind this thesis: the idea that there is any comic material available that can be analysed in the works of James. The chapter further specifies my basic assumptions of the comedy in the selected works for the purpose of the thesis. The chapter gives a short overview of approaches to various aspects of the comedy in James's works in general and in particular works by James by making references to opinions drawn from books and papers by a number of critics. Such a presentation allows me to introduce points of view on the comedy in James to which I will adhere later on or which I will parallel in my own discussion of the comedy in the selected works. The presentation of the competing critical views, on the other hand, allows me to evaluate the merit of the standpoints I will be defending by comparing them to their contraries. The chapter thus provides my commentary on a number of takes on the comedy in James and my reasoned evaluations of the validity of the claims according to my opinion, which informs the arguments I will be making concerning the selected works by James.

Chapter II attests the premise of the connection between James's works and the social scene, and throws light on the influence of the international social differences in the US and Europe as a source of inspiration on the canon of Henry James and, ultimately, on the selected works. The chapter explains and defines the challenges and issues of modernity for the purposes of this thesis.

Chapter III offers the analysis of the comedy in the six selected works of Henry James mentioned above.

In my thesis, I – by no means – claim to come close to explaining the complexity of James's comedy in the original works or to approaching the depth of the analyses provided by the professional

critics I cite. This thesis walks in their footsteps in hope of getting some small insight into the matter and of framing my own version of the picture that James paints with the comedy in relation to the reflection of social problems of modernity. I hope to make my contribution, partly, by synthesizing the information available to me and, partly, by drawing my own conclusions throughout the thesis. Most conspicuously, in chapter III, I link the findings of the authors mentioned therein with my own analysis to comment on the relationship of the comedy and the problems of modernity in order to illustrate the central argument that the comedy satirizes the social evils of modernity. The foregoing chapters provide the treatment of the components necessary to achieve this.

I. Critical Approaches to the Comedy

Before I progress to the analysis of the interlacement of the comedy and the reflection of society in the selected works of Henry James, it is required by my design that I characterize my basic position on the comedy in those works. In this chapter I will attempt to do just that by proceeding from general notes and the historical perspective on the comic sense of Henry James to the perspectives on the selected works to the defence of the premises to which I implicitly subscribe at the outset of my investigation.

As a way of introduction to my treatment of Jamesian comedy, allow me – by making reference to various authors, their rough scopes of interest and the general shape of their critical opinions – to give a short survey of several tendencies in literary criticism with respect to the comedy in the works of Henry James, by means of which survey I will be offered the opportunity to introduce ideas which I will incorporate in my own thesis, and to show which of them my interpretations will parallel. I will attempt to briefly settle the question of the validity of these tendencies, to explain why I consider some of them to be more felicitously applicable and to indicate to which views I incline, by virtue of which choice this Introduction is a preview of some of the lines of argument which I will follow in the thesis. This Introduction uses Hartsock's and Brun's essays as partial frames of reference.

Approaches towards the comic sense of Henry James vary critic from critic and the degree of variance and disagreement between some authors across the literature of literary criticism is oftentimes striking. Early criticism on James seems mostly to reflect the lukewarm interest in the subject or assigns it minor or no significance. This is apparent from Richard Poirier's statements in the Preface to the study *The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels* (1960) – a milestone work in that it gave weight to the comic in any considerable way for the first time. He summarizes the field of criticism on the comedy in James up till that point: "The extraordinary amount of published criticism on the works of Henry James does not encourage the idea that the element of comedy in his novels is either strong or pervasive, and even those few who allude to it do not claim that the examples they have noticed, except possibly in *The American*, make any very significant sense" (7).

Poirier's own idea of James's comedy is that it is

usually on the very surface of the action and the language. That is perhaps why it has been ignored. Readers of his books sometimes act as if they are obliged to get beyond everything that

is obvious, including ‘merely’ personal reactions to it, so as to reach the supposedly deeper realms of meaning. As a consequence, the word ‘meaning’ has become associated not with what we experience as we read but merely with what we figure out after we are through.

My point throughout is that the meaning of these novels is apprehended only by our whole sensibility, including the simplest forms of excitement and amusement. (9–10)

Leon Edel, who too belongs among the writers who were capable of recognizing such a thing as comedy in James, feels Poirier fails to provide “a working definition of the comic sense [in James]” (qtd. in Bruns 1). Bruns himself, though defending Poirier against Edel by citing part of Poirier’s above quote, also finds fault with the superficiality of Poirier’s notion of the comedy, but for a different reason (1). Bruns (1–2) maintains that Poirier’s attempt to incorporate the comic in the comprehensive meaning of James’s works is dependent upon the hackneyed association of comedy with “the simplest forms of excitement and amusement” (Poirier 10) and calls attention to Poirier’s assumption that James’s comedy surfaces only at the moments when “the reader is most amused, excited, or pleased” (Bruns 1–2).

Bruns and Edel speculate that such definitions of Poirier are inconsiderably depthless and reductive – with Edel having trouble recognizing anything that would even approximate Poirier’s theory of the comedy in James (Bruns 1). In my view, Poirier is only partially right in seeing the notion of the comedy as an effect which is to be found close to the surface of a work and which is easily missed if one shelters only in “the supposedly deeper realms of meaning” (Poirier 10). On that account I side with Bruns when he says “the central problem . . . is not that one has to be carefully selective when pursuing the comic in James, that one must necessarily exclude the difficult, later writings. Rather, the problem lies with the inadequacy of our definition of comedy” (2). Among the proponents of this idea are also Lionel Trilling or Ronald Wallace, who writes: “[t]he lack of any extended critical discussion of James’s comic manner and affinities with a comic tradition arises from a misunderstanding of the comic seriousness” (qtd. in Bruns 3). To me, Poirier’s definition is not wholly inappropriate, but the complexity and sophistication of James’s compositions is, in my view, also capable of organically sustaining even more involved meanings and interpretations.

Some expositors find James undeniably and openly entertaining. Hartsock writes along these lines: “To put it concisely, James *is* funny. One can scarcely read any randomly selected fifty pages without smiles, chuckles, hearty laughter, or, at the least, a wry appreciation of wit in the eighteenth-century sense” (114). In my view, Hartsock exhibits her perception of the humour of Henry James as a

type whose definitional qualities emphasize the outward production of audible and visual, facial reactions, but also a type that provokes the inner sensations of bitter and/or ironic amusement. On account of their leaning towards analogous conclusions, in her essay Hartsock heartily endorsed Richard Poirier's analysis.

Writing in 1975, Hartsock commented on the debt of most contemporary critics with respect to their failure to engage in a discussion about the comic in late novels of James; nonetheless, she mentions Richard Chase and Ellen Leyburn as examples of critics who give their consideration to the subject (114). Concerning *The Ambassadors*, Richard Chase speaks of "urbane comedy," "elaborate levity" and "mock-serious playing with language" (qtd. in Hartsock 114). Similarly, Ellen Leyburn discusses the relation between the comic and the tragic in the serious novels (Hartsock 114), recognizing thus the value of the insight into the comic in James. Hartsock, feeling that even these critics mostly avoided discussion of the means by which the comic is achieved, sets this as the task of her paper about *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* (114–115).

While Hartsock has it that "[m]ost critics have recognized some social satire in certain of the novels," she states that some critics rejected the presence of comedy in James and cites the example of James Alexander Holder-Barrell, who said: "Plain humour is not an outstanding quality of James's novels. The nature of the subject he deals with does not allow an extensive development of the comic side" (qtd. in Hartsock 114).

A sense of the impossibility or improbability of the comedy in James have sometimes propelled critics to embrace extreme views and conceptualize some Jamesian narratives as pure tragedies or narratives with traits of tragedies simply because their plots give prominence to adversities, calamities and misfortunes from which protagonists suffer. For example, concerning the critics who have attempted to interpret *The Spoils of Poynton* "as the tragedy of a suffering Fleda Vetch," Hartsock views their "ponderous, unsmiling attempts" as a suggestion of "the imperviousness to laughter of the critics who make them" (among these are, for example, the following authors: Edwin T. Bowden, Joseph Warren Beach, Walter Wright, J. A. Ward, Alan H. Roper and Patrick Quinn); to Hartsock, *The Spoils of Poynton* is a "rollicking social comedy" (114).

In my opinion, not all Henry James's narratives offer such lucent examples of the dazzling comedy of the conspicuous kind as described by Hartsock. Indeed, there are texts, like "The Turn of the Screw" or "The Beast in the Jungle," whose inherent tone is not conducive to open levity or laughter, and which can understandably be interpreted as tragedies on the basis of their tone, plot and denouement. Nevertheless, even as I think that the specificities of the compositions and dramatic plans in these works do not allow for conventional definitions of comedy, in this thesis I attempt to propose ways of interpreting the effects of these texts which partake of James's comic sense.

On the other hand, in many stories which capture the life of society and the social life of individuals – like *The Ambassadors* or *The Portrait of a Lady* – this kind of blazing comedy oftentimes sparkles both in dialogues and when the narrator speaks. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, actual, physical laughter rings out, there is straightforward humour, little jests and taunts, witty repartee – short and longer exchanges that are characterized by a keen perception and the cleverly apt expression of connections that awaken amusement and pleasure. There are expressions with a double meaning, talk that equals to verbal jousting and effervescent conversation, little charming expressions, and whole humorous episodes.

If only on account of those observations, I strongly disagree with those critics who either maintain the non-existence of the comedic sense in James or adduce its insignificance. While I do not wish to nullify the ideas held for example by Bruns about the comedy in James as more than a superficial effect, I side with the stance taken by Hartsock and Poirier saying that in Henry James one can find clearly manifest, transparent and easily comprehensible comedy. Yet, it is also discernible that the comedy in James is very often shown to be connected with the tragedy of life – as can be observed when it helps to communicate the sinister overtones that money is associated with in all four long novels I will be examining in this thesis – for which reason I agree with Ellen Douglas Leyburn's findings about the tragedy interweaving with the comedy. I shall be using her book *Strange Alloy: The Relation of Comedy to Tragedy in the Fiction of Henry James* to bolster the legitimacy of my own interpretation of the comedy with her observations, even if my primary focus in this thesis is not the tragedy in James. In order to link my examination of the comedy with the reflection of the social problems of the contemporary modern society in the novels I am going to analyse, I will be using *The Image of Money*

in *the American Novel of the Gilded Age* by Jan W. Dietrichson to reinforce my conclusions about the subject.

Crucially to my concerns in this thesis, I see Leyburn as a critic who by virtue of her analysis of the comic effectively points to the fact that the comic in James allows better insight into the psychology of the characters in James's writings and so into the moral issues arising out of modern life.

Analogously, my premise in this thesis is that the comedy in James can enhance the insight into the psychology of characters – their behaviour, thoughts and feelings. They, as members of society, come into contact with social topics/issues/evils, take positions to the problems and face the moral issues arising out of modern life. Thus, in their character psychology, in their stances and the particulars of their ensuing conduct is reflected the image of society with the problems of the social environment. In other words, I see the comic in James opening wider the window onto the social scene revealed through the agency of the characters in all manner of direct and indirect responses. In my mind, the picture that the works of James thus present suggests that James applauded and defended decency, gentleness and worthiness, and ridiculed the contemptible and the foolish. Accordingly, my thesis makes use of the psychological insight, which the comedy in the selected works opens, to obtain a better image of the iniquitous effects of materialism, consumerism and the attendant developments, and of the ridicule and castigation of the mostly despicable characters who, under the sway of these developments, perpetrate their negative influence on the lives of other characters.

Evidence of James's distinctly coming down on one side of the moral fence lies in Leyburn's treatment of James's comic, where we find examples of James protecting worthy characters using the comedy as a wall against the evil and even as a wall in the sense of a defence against the suffering of some characters along the lines of Kafka's laughter, which invokes the resistance to the faithful interpretation of the reality (e.g. the reality of the wasting effects of Ralph's condition in *The Portrait of a Lady*). Poirier makes similar conclusions; in his analyses we witness James's comic used in order to – by more or less direct implication – criticise the ugly and to build up a wall which protects characters against the “vague moral epithets” of the reader (James, Rev. of *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, qtd. in Poirier 184).

Nonetheless, there are critics whose claims of the lack of strong moral centre in James's writing would, in effect, invalidate my premise about what amounts to the comedy in James communicating moral judgement. Unlike, for example, David Daiches – who claims that the moral sense in the late novels of James cannot be separated “from their totality of meaning, . . . from the ‘felt life’ the author presents through the novel” (qtd. in Reilla) – I rather think that what becomes apparent from the insight of critics like Leyburn or Poirier is that James had a strong moral compass even in the late novels. I incline toward the latter critics, who, to my mind, clearly demonstrate the existence of forceful and consistent morality in James's writings, which is one of the premises of the approach to the comedy in James which allow me to explore my thesis statement: i.e. to look at the way the comedy in the selected works of James satirizes the evils of modern society and those characters who pay homage to them.

II. The Image of Society and its Problems

II.i. James's Social Consciousness and his Art

In order to substantiate the relevance of the discussion of James's art from the perspective of its relation to comedy and the commercialisation and materialism of then-contemporary modern world and other related problems, one of the questions which have to be settled is whether James the author grants the reader insight into the modern social milieu or not through creating reflections of it in his works, in which latter case our pursuit of the topic would be beside the point.

In my assessment, James incontrovertibly reflects the challenges and issues of the modern social life, namely the tendencies issuing from the commercialization and materialism in the late nineteenth century – especially, but not exclusively, the impulse to acquire and own which has augmented under the auspices of the conspicuous materialistic, capitalistic and consumer social culture tendencies.

Though the fact of James's social insight has been contested, and even if his "world view can be criticised as one-sided and incomplete," (Dietrichson 53) in my view and that of a number of critics, James has managed to transform a likeness of the modern social world with its challenges and problems into an attenuated, but – in substance – realistic, vision in his fictional world. The essence of this view is shared by critics like Clinton Oliver, Newton Arvin and Lionel Trilling, and "Critics of the latter type may even have exaggerated James's social insight and perspicacity as well as his interest in radical political movements" (Dietrichson 53). Be it as it may, let me quote Dietrichson to settle the question of whether James has interest in the social situation of his time: "Edward Wagenknecht is right when he says that even if socialistically-minded critics have made too much of the novelist's social consciousness, one cannot deny that he was aware of something in the great world covertly tigerish, and that he observed wide-spreading corruption encrusting civilization itself" (53).

Simultaneously, it should be argued that James's artistic focal point resides elsewhere – with his characters as thinking and feeling beings going through the motions of life, interacting with their social environment. In other words, James was a fastidious detailer of social and interior life of his major characters – with all their admirable traits, weaknesses and follies. And so "All his life he was primarily the *artist*, the sensitive observer of people and events to whom political or social developments might

be interesting per se, but would seem more important and relevant if they could be made use of for literature, for an artistic interpretation of life” (Dietrichson 53). Even if James’s literature lacks that Balzacian quality of comprehensiveness of existence, his body of work carries unmistakable marks of certain social attitudes; “We see them with the greatest clarity in such books as *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and *The American Scene*, but they exist, also, below the surface in *The Tragic Muse*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Ivory Tower*, and others, and in a great many of the short stories as well” (Dietrichson 54).

Exception being made for such works as *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Europeans*, and a few others, one must conclude that James’s art expresses society obliquely rather than directly. The social background seems rather thinly developed in the majority of his works. He often gives a fairly detailed account of the cultural and domestic aspects of the world in which the characters move, of art and architecture, but treats only scantily or not at all such important areas of human activity as politics or business. To give a balanced picture, it should be added that James was highly responsive to the tone and temper of society. In his mature works—for instance *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*—he succeeded in conveying to his readers “the feel” of the society or social group on which he focused his attention. This applies particularly to the groups he knew best, the Victorian urban middle and upper classes on both sides of the Atlantic. (Dietrichson 64–65)

It was, above all, the portrayal of the lives of the members of these social groups that allowed James to express his pejorative criticism and taunt of the deleterious effects of the social developments charismatically driving the materialistic agenda of modernity.

II.ii. The International Social Differences

Now that we have produced arguments in defence of the existence of James's social insight, let us turn attention to the differences between the international social environments in James's writing, which are frequently encased in the configurations of meaning involving both comedy and the reflection of social life, and which are, therefore, of interest in view of the subject of this thesis. This and the following subchapters attempt to characterize the essential attributes of James's portrayal of the international social differences in general and to establish which national characteristics James regularly imputed to the Americans and Europeans respectively. The general treatment of them will represent an introduction into the subject, while the specific treatment of the international social differences in the selected works will be presented in Chapter III.

As Leyburn informs us, James's preoccupation with his dramatic subjects is animated by the principle of contrast, whose source he regularly finds – as he declares in the Preface to the “Lady Barbarina” volume of international tales – in “the mixture of manners” (*The Art of the Novel* 202), and the one he most frequently depicts is international in nature (Leyburn 50). Consequently, it can be claimed that in James's works

the drama . . . arises from the mixture of manners, the encounter of characters who come together bringing from different social groups or classes different sets of preconceived attitudes and habits of behavior in addition to and complicating individual differences of temperament. The juxtaposing of contrasting, often conflicting, limitations of background, whether the contrast is international or not, is one of James's favorite ways of revealing both the tragedy and the comedy of life, and usually both at once. (Leyburn 51)

Additionally, we should distinguish between the disparities in the backgrounds of the characters which have a more profound relation toward the theme and plot, and between when the differences are inconsequential to the larger meaning of the work. James makes a distinction between works which make use of the international differences to create the ambience and those in which the international differences are the subject proper (Leyburn 64). “[T]he subject of ‘The Wings of the Dove,’ or that of ‘The Golden Bowl,’ has not been the exhibited behaviour of certain Americans as Americans, of certain English persons as English, of certain Romans as Romans” (James, *The Art of the Novel* 198–199). Even then, we should note that James recognizes the value of the contrast as “contributive” (Leyburn 64).

II.iii. The Image of the US

The picture of the US in the works of James is not, as might be reasonably expected, uniform. James liked his nuances and subtleties. Roughly speaking, however, there is a discernible tendency in his treatment of the cultural differences. On account of the fact that James's ideals of freedom and imagination are predominantly represented by American characters, and on account of those American characters who frequently attempt to shake the shackles of conformity and incept the James's ideals, it is wholly appropriate to say that James's picture of America is affectionately idealized and optimistic. Although Dietrichson rightly reminds us to be careful about generalizing about James's social attitudes since his American characters do not always express his perspective (54), James does make statements throughout his canon that, as Dietrichson says regarding Mr. Cockerel in "The Point of View," (1882) "have such a ring of sincerity and conviction that the reader is inclined to see behind them a personal engagement" (54). That James attributed America a premium position among nations is inescapable when we consider the following quote: "Once one feels, over here, that the great questions of the future are social questions, that a mighty tide is sweeping the world to democracy, and that this country is the biggest stage on which the drama can be enacted, the fashionable European topics seem petty and parochial" (James, "The Point of View").

Despite being capable of rendering in his works "several widely conflicting views on the American social scene" – as Dietrichson notes about "The Point of View" (54), for example – James's allegiance to America and its ethos of freedom and growth is clear. His acceptance of its "social conditions is to be seen in a work as late as 'Pandora'" (1884) (Dietrichson 54). Let us use the following observations about "Pandora," *The Bostonians* and *The American Scene* to establish James's attitude towards America in writing, which we can reasonably expect to encounter in one form or another in the analysed works of James later.

"Pandora" is written in a light, comic tone, and it images "a young, friendly, and fairly innocent society with strong egalitarian tendencies. . . . Class distinctions exist, but no such rigid barriers between classes as on the continent of Europe. There is, on the contrary, a unique social mobility" (Dietrichson 55). James's America furnishes the individual with the resources of the ideas of advancement and freedom, and his characters venture to explore and attempt to redefine the shifting social realities of

class and sex as new social, personal and national identities are crystallizing out of the ways of the past and the emerging present. We can see the dramatization of the egalitarian ideals and the ideas of social mobility in the character of Pandora Day, a self-made girl who rises in society despite of her class.

That James was not seeing the reality only through rose-tinted glasses is palpable in *The Bostonians* (1886). Dietrichson echoes Irving Howe, saying that the novel's trenchant satirical tone is coordinated with "a deep-going and radical criticism of American life" (Dietrichson 55) – the satire is aimed at the New England reforming tradition, and feminism specifically, but also at the Southern conservatism and its chauvinistic tendencies. The novel betrays James's scepticism of the reform but attests to his keen awareness of great social, political and moral changes – with former traditions and ways of the past disappearing – as he stood "on the margin of American society, estranged from its dominant powers, helpless before the drift toward a world of industry and finance, money and impersonality" (Howe xiv, qtd. in Dietrichson 55). The novel reflects – according to Dietrichson, who absorbs Howe's determinations – "a disarrangement of political and sexual life, both public and private, in America. This is to be seen in a breakdown of the traditional role of women" (Dietrichson 55). In *The Bostonians* James offers his most definite vision of American society in the novelistic form. The novel decries US policies when it shares the impression of the situation of the South after the Civil War and the class cleavage in the North (Dietrichson 56). It portrays class and gender status of women, and criticises the class distinctions and the rampant materialism of America.

James's *The American Scene* (1907) is an assessment of the author of his native country in 1904. In it James makes appraisal of the dominant characteristics of contemporary America and, to his disfavour, notices the excessive influence of commercialism and business in American life, the flagrant capitalism, the rapid growth of trusts and monopolies, the booming consumer-oriented society and the shabbiness of the democratic institutions as well as the spirit of American democracy.

II.iv. The Portrait of Europe

The cultures of Europe entered James's heart when he travelled on the continent with his relatives as a boy. The fascination remained with him for the rest of his life as he kept returning to the place of his youth to rediscover it. Europe fascinated James but he was determined not to sentimentalise it when he explored its traditions and how they matched with American ones. He found it the source of the humanistic ideals, centuries of culture, education, art and architecture. He also found it a place of temptations, inequality and inequity, a place where people lived much inferior lives. In England, the "stratified class culture, the respect for traditional institutions, for codes and rules, but also the grinding poverty of the masses of the people, were all matters that impressed themselves on his sensitive mind. . . . They gave him a standard by which he could enlarge the process, begun a long time ago, of comparing peoples and their manners" (Dietrichson 59). James portrayed many characters from the British upper society as bigoted, straight-laced, arrogant and insolent snobs. It was not, strictly speaking, the objectively greater corrosiveness of the British social institutions, or the greater actual fixity of the social order, culture and conventions that James found offensive about the British life. Rather, its blanket traditionalism appeared obsolete and stifling to the American freethinker. After all, it has been noted that James was capable of an equally uncomfortable and stern critique of his homeland. James had no preferences, even if it sometimes feels like he may have glamorized America. His developing the Europe-America contrast in the fiction, it seems to me, can be rightfully explained only in terms of the dramatic potential that such an international configuration of characters and circumstances bestowed on James.

We have engaged in this and the previous subchapter in a more systematic and coherent description of the socio-economic and cultural scene of James's times as a means of introducing the subject and evaluating the objectivity of the two representations of the US and Europe in James's canon, and because the later analyses of the selected works will focus restrictively on the link between the comedy and the reflection of the social scene, and will be, as a result, cursory with respect to the more comprehensive views of the social scene de facto presented in the individual works.

II.v. The Problems and Challenges of Modern Society:

Consumerism and Materialism of Late Nineteenth-Century Life in Representations by James

Having established the currency of the existence of James's social insight and having identified the contrast between the social scenes in America and Europe – with its respective typical roles in James – as a frequent source of James's inspiration for his novels and, indeed, the novels selected for the analysis – for which reason the contrast is relevant for the discussion of the comedy and society in this thesis –, I now proceed to single out several contemporary socio-economic issues that, when reflected in James's work, get cast in the light of conspicuously vexing, challenging problems. Once established in this subchapter, the reflections in James's six selected works of thus defined problems and challenges of modernity will be related to the comedy in the fictions in the next chapter. The problems dealt with here include the negative effects of: consumerism, materialism, moral abasement, objectification, commodification, commercialization, predatory financial acquisitiveness, rampant egotism, the interpenetration between the public and private spheres, and performativeness.

The following discussion of consumerism, materialism and its relevance for the identity and the value system draws inspiration from Anna Despotopoulou's essay "Penetrating the Vitrine: Henry James and the Challenge of Publicity." As Despotopoulou marks, the conversation between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* about the importance of the image one projects in society situates the novel within the sociohistorical circumstances of the coming into existence of consumer culture (39). To quote a pregnant utterance of the character of Madame Merle,

What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive. (*PL* 188)

This and other similar textual instances in the novel enact the dissolution of the social identity that occurred in the late nineteenth century and its rephrasing into a new model based on the principles of the marketplace – the culture of unbridled, pandemic consumption and materialism. **Materialism** gives importance to material objects and products that promote the state of comfort, ease and satisfaction at the expense of the interest in spiritual, intellectual and cultural values. **Consumerism** is the behaviour of an ever-increasing or excessive consumption/hoarding of such products and objects. The self,

however, did not merely procure and incorporate the new imperatives and standards of worth from without in the late nineteenth century – it fused with those valuations to the extent of losing its own former integrity. In this process the identity became infiltrated and governed by articles of commerce and the rules of their exchange, which gave rise to the personal value system whose sole centrepiece is the dehumanizing value of the product – attended by **moral abasement**. Of this new value system, Erik Roraback notes, “[c]apital formulae supplant other ironclad social facts for one’s cynical, pragmatic, mono-logical and calculated Machiavellian, if not Hobbesian value-goals and value-ideals” (145). In *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate Croy opines, significantly, as follows: “One knew people in general by something they had to show, something that, either for them or against, could be touched or named or proved” (*WD* 189–190). Thus externalized identity allowed for the **objectification** of human beings (people being treated as objects owned by other people) and their **commodification** (people treated as commodities that can be bought and sold). The social values, and the social relations and interactions came under the influence of **commercialization** (characterised by focusing on making profit) – and **predatory financial acquisitiveness** at all cost and **rampant egotism** thus joined the rest of the problems. Correspondingly, Lord Mark announces to Milly: “Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing” (*WD* 171). **The interpenetration between the public and private spheres**, and, consequently, between the public and private identities – the surrender of the self –, shows very plainly in James’s later writings; his subjects, style and vocabulary manifest that James has osmosed and took possession of the sociocultural transformation (Despotopoulou 40).

The culture of consumption, as any system, deploys accomplished methods on its behalf by which it sustains and propagates itself, one of them is the disposition to theatricality, or, to use Ian F. A. Bell’s preferred term, **performativeness** (1, qtd. in Despotopoulou 40). This means that communication among the members of society acquires an element of public performance – it is synthetic and practised. In James’s novels the stage extends far into the privacy of the home and household, and on it appear people who are on display for sale in the same way as objects would be behind a shopping window (Despotopoulou 40). Once the arguments of the disjunction between the focus of James style and representation of historicity are repudiated, “we may assert that James creates a discourse that is primarily social”; in it James presents “an identity perceived as a commodity with specified market

value” – a “revised view of consciousness . . . apparent in James’s treatment of his characters but also in his own appraisal of publicity” – James disliked being interviewed (Despotopoulou 40–41).

As much as critics pointed out James’s aversion to ubiquitous publicity of American life as he witnessed it in 1904, the fact remains that the European settings in James’s novels like *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Awkward Age*, *What Maisie Knew* and *The Wings of the Dove* also trace the outlines of spaces which abide by subtle, concealed version of publicity (Despotopoulou 41). In them, however, the public and the private become blended and united. They are “neither private nor public” anymore (Despotopoulou 41). The characters who attempt to extricate and differentiate between the public and the private spheres –“trying to raise boundaries” (Despotopoulou 41) – fall short of their goals because they fail to respect the rules of the game of the newly laid out social space. Conversely, the characters who acknowledge and assent to the commutability may “gain some victory” (Despotopoulou 41).

These disparate approaches to identity are illustrated especially on the characters of Isabel Archer and Kate Croy, whose analyses will be provided in the following chapter, in which I will also demonstrate using examples the other problems defined in this subchapter as part of the analyses of the relationship of the comedy and the reflection of the problems of the social environment in the selected works of Henry James.

III. Analysis of Six Works of Henry James

At the present moment, the thesis has addressed itself to the most important elements implicitly or explicitly involved in my take on the subject of the thesis – the interrelation between the comedy and the reflection of the problems of modern social environment in the selected works of James – and can now proceed to the analysis of the selected works itself. Accordingly, the following subchapters consist of the study and interpretation of the interlacement of the comedy in the chosen works of Henry James and the reflection in these fictions of the problems and challenges of modern society identified in the previous chapter. Specifically, the thesis attempts to identify the troublesome aspects of modernity that James targets by the comedy and to describe the mechanism of the comedy in the texts, i.e. how exactly James ridicules and stigmatizes the problems of modernity.

III.i. *The Wings of the Dove*

In the novel James uses the plain, light-hearted comedy to feed into the mechanism of the comedy that implicitly stigmatizes the repercussions of the socio-economic developments of modernity on the characters. This is exemplified in the case of the broad comedy that blankets the portrayal of Susan Stringham.

The character of Susan positively draws sympathetic laughter and a measure of pity since James presents her with affectionate comedy which allows the reader to regard with indulgence her eccentricities and foibles. She is rendered comically by reason of her curious infatuation with romantic literature and the excessively romantic view of life in general, which is why Milly's company means to her being "in presence of the real thing, the romantic life itself" (*WD* 118).

However, in the final analysis the comically endearing image of Susan is compromised by her egotistical social exploitation of Milly. She hopes that some of the social prestige of Milly will rub off on her and that, through association with Milly, she will be able to best Mrs. Maud Lowder on the public, social stage. In this way, Susan can be said to objectify Milly to achieve her own purpose of augmenting her public image, which fact underpins the idea that the society in the novel – including Susan herself – espouses the value of performativeness. "Whatever Mrs. Lowder might have to show—and one hoped one did the presumptions all justice—she would have nothing like Milly Theale, who constituted the trophy producible by poor Susan" (*WD* 153). The pathetic comedy in Susan's rendering thus emphasizes, with respect to Milly, the tragedy of Milly's exploitation by the social environment as a result of the society embracing the values of the marketplace, including performativeness. In this way the plain comedy is converted into the comedy that stigmatizes the effects of the material, consumerist spirit of modernity.

Even if Susan's passionate devotion and her attending Milly in her illness later to an extent redeems her moral standing, it feels that Susan remains a more problematic character than the tone of her comic rendering would at first suggest. Through the venality of this pitiable and laughably amusing character James achieves to convey certain tragic inevitability of Milly's fateful end: Milly is not meant to escape the traps of her corrupted social environment when even Susan, who genuinely adores Milly and sheds tears for her, is set to exploit her. In Leyburn's parlance, the comedy of Susan's portrayal here

intensifies the tragic trajectory of Milly's life. The inconsistency between the innocuous comedy and the latent tragedy has such a marked effect of emphasizing the skewed social values exactly because James unceasingly represents Susan under the banner of comedy. It is James's deploying consistently the mixture of humour and affection – which underlines his persistent presentation of Susan's identity as enhanced by her relationship with Milly – that forecasts Milly's downfall at the hands of all those who 'treasure' her for more or less materialistic reasons and that conveys the criticism of the social environment's covetous streak.

James also makes use of the comedic portrayal of Susan's character to reveal the prehensile natures of Kate and Mrs. Lowder. Both belong to the class of characters in James's canon who intend by their actions to suppress the unadulterated latitude of being of the main protagonists. "Kate's finding Mrs. Stringham a bore and Mrs. Lowder's patronizing her as Milly's 'funny friend' . . . show up their own natures; and their condescension toward her forms a comic counterpart to their separate designs on Milly" (Leyburn 93), while Susan's "single-minded sincerity of her devotion [to Milly] . . . mocks the mixed motives in the emulation of it by Mrs. Lowder and Kate" (Leyburn 92).

In the novel, Mrs. Lowder is surrounded by egotistical and materialistic London polite society types, who – together with this "Britannia of the Market Place" (*WD* 39) – represent the values of the market place. For this reason and because of an assortment of other negative personal characteristics Mrs. Lowder is kept by James under the constant microscope of uncompromisingly derisive satire. It reflects her role in bringing about Milly's demise and otherwise shrewdly manipulating Milly, Densher and Kate on account of her belief in the paramount utility of money and its supreme indispensability in life. She is depicted as a "wholly unsympathetic" (Leyburn 81) character, who sits "in the midst of her money, founded on it and surrounded by it" (*WD* 209) "in the ostentatiously vulgar magnificence of the house at Lancaster Gate, as the symbol of the evil to be combated by the free spirits of the novel" (Leyburn 81).

In conceiving and orchestrating the plot with Densher against Milly, the character of Kate in the novel represents self-serving narcissism, rapacity and cut-throat perfidiousness aroused by the spirit of unadulterated materialism and moral degradation preached by the marketplace morals. Kate says about Milly: "Everything suits her so—especially her pearls. They go so with her old lace. I'll trouble you

really to look at them. . . . She's a dove . . . and one somehow doesn't think of doves as bejewelled. Yet they suit her down to the ground" (*WD* 560). The comedy of the train of thought in the statement issues from the fact that the pairing of "doves" and "jewels" is, indeed, unusual in cognition. Yet, the fact that Kate deftly identifies Milly in the context of the sight of the emblem of her wealth as a symbol of peaceful innocence insinuates Kate's persuasion that Milly is a bird – harmless enough to be – worthy of plucking.

Apart from satirizing the commercialization of society through the stigmatization of acquisitiveness in Kate's character, James carefully constructs his satire to criticise Kate's capacity to cross the boundaries of the private and public spaces, and in so doing condemns the notion as such. Kate Croy's picture is that of a character whose consciousness and language manifest spontaneous responsiveness to both the private and public spheres – the assimilation of the theatricality of the market place. Kate engages with her environment in an unrepressed manner when she examines both the "vulgar little street" and the "vulgar little room" (*WD* 8). "To feel the street, to feel the room, to feel the tablecloth and the centre-piece and the lamp, gave her a small, salutary sense, at least, of neither shirking nor lying" (*WD* 9). Because the novel outlines spaces which abide by concealed version of publicity – where the private and the public intertwine – Milly and Densher, who attempt to extricate and differentiate between the public and the private spheres, fall short of their goals, while Kate is allowed to be victorious in her intrigue to profit financially from Milly. However, this is not to say that James turns a blind eye to the essential unrighteousness of her motives or conduct. James harbours devoted fondness for his free spirits and brings the comedy to bear on the fools who capitalize on the relationship with James's heroes, thus delivering symbolic revenge and a measure of comeuppance to the villains.

Conforming to this logic of retribution, James ridicules Kate's interblending of the private and public spheres in the novel, and in this way satirizes the commercialization of the social life that the novel thus depicts. In a hilarious moment of intended levity, James lets Kate heave a sigh of relief at her father having decided not to welcome her while in bed, and so spare her the revealing sight of the more 'private parts' of his apartment and, by extension, his naked body. "She was glad to be spared the sight of such *penetralia*" (*WD* 12). In this inoffensive, yet hilariously nearly risqué, pun James shows that even Kate – who assents to the commutability of the two domains – honours and thankfully welcomes

the raising of the boundary between them when it comes to certain things personal. James's innuendo suggests in this fashion that abolishing the difference between the private and the public domains to achieve such an exposure as Kate otherwise practices perversely – pun intended – contravenes one's essential humanity.

James also uses the comic depiction involving Kate to stigmatize her inclination towards a degree of theatricality in her privacy and to satirize in this way the performativeness of the marketplace itself – an aspect of the consumerist, materialistic society the novel reflects. Under the circumstances, Kate's moments alone or with Densher often have “an element of exaggeration or emphatic naturalness,” and her decisions to meet with him are moderated by the demands of social propriety – “their meetings are never truly private . . . they are publicly private” (Despotopoulou 43). Over the artificiality of the emphasis and exaggeration in their meetings hovers comedy that issues from forced joviality and inescapable awkwardness. Even when they meet alone “in one of the smaller apartments of state, a room arranged as a boudoir, but visibly unused—it defied familiarity—and furnished in the ugliest of blues,” (WD 337–338) the privacy they experience is not intimate, it is “permitted” (WD 338). The aspect of theatricality in their private relationship also alludes to the phoniness of Kate's deportment towards Densher, which he apperceives as evasiveness. She is not truly open with him but hides behind a mask. The comic sense intensifies the impression of Kate's artifice in the moments when she works to mould and bend Densher under her will to do her bidding with Milly. The comedy makes the theatricality conveyed in such scenes accentuate the patent absurdity in the pretence. It brings ignominy to Kate, who embodies the performativeness of the marketplace, and, in consequence, the consumerist, materialistic streak of the society, which James satirizes.

Even in her mourning over the loss of her mother James shows how Kate “mingles private cause with public function: her distress becomes a conveniently appropriate social behaviour,” “the girl uses it to publicly support her seclusion” (Despotopoulou 43). The juxtaposition of the death, her near liking that she has an excuse to avoid her aunt, her feeling she has a right to be sad, the surreal description of her aunt's “looming ‘personality’,” and the image of waiting to be devoured like “a trembling kid” by this “lioness,” (WD 38) casts Kate's whole situation in the light of freakishly grotesque comedy bordering on a nightmare. The proximity of these circumstances and images to an instance of when

Kate's mingling of the private and the public becomes apparent overlays with lunatic preposterousness Kate's tendencies to perpetually impersonate a role – thus articulating their irrationality and incongruity with the reality that James seems to be defending in his berating of the consumerist, materialistic values. The configuration of the text can be said to reflect brilliantly the hopeless confusion and desperation that strains her mind; however, there is an undeniable tendency to revel in conceiving of this moment as an eccentrically dramatic performance of which she is the central, spontaneously voluntary protagonist. Though she is alone, she almost imagines standing on a stage and play acting a dramatic piece. However, the comic undercurrent turns her performance – also, but not exclusively, through the animal imagery – into a farcical fable rather than a singular tragedy. It is hard to feel compassion for her without an inkling that her selfhood consists of feigned responses, not the genuine articles of truth.

In summary, in *The Wings of the Dove*, James uses the plain comedy as a component in the mechanism of the comedy that implicitly mocks and stigmatizes the mostly despicable characters who, under the sway of a number of socio-cultural and economic developments portrayed obliquely in the novel, perpetrate their negative influence on the lives of other characters. In so doing, James satirizes the whole array of the problems of modernity. The broad comic rendering of Susan Stringham underlines Milly's exploitation by the social environment as a result of its embracing of the commercialized values. Susan objectifies Milly and uses her to augment her social image, which exploitation points to the society's embracing the performativeness of the marketplace. James's consistently using comedy in the portrayal of Susan emphasizes the skewed social values of the materialistic, consumerist society, and forecasts the inevitability of Milly's death. The comedy in the novel derides and stigmatizes the self-serving financial rapacity of Kate and the materialistic outlook of the polite society of London, headed by the figure of Maud Lowder. The comedy also scoffs at and stigmatizes Kate's capacity to cross the boundaries of the private and public spaces, and her embracing the value of performativeness. Sarah Stringham, Maud Lowder, Kate Croy and Merton Densher are on the receiving end of the most incisive satire because they cleave to the values of the materialistic, consumerist society. In these characters James ridicules and stigmatizes the selfish acquisitiveness, materialistic outlook, objectification, performativeness, moral abasement, and the interpenetration of the private and public spheres.

III.ii. *The Golden Bowl*

The comedy in the novel intermingles with the pecuniary morality of the consumerist, materialistic modern civilisation, which the particular rendering of the international contrasts in the novel conceives as being American, personified by the figure of Adam Verver. Yet, to some degree, “By his manner of presenting him James . . . [avoids] undercut[ting] his basic assumption that Americans, even the very affluent ones, are, on the whole, good and morally innocent people” (Dietrichson 88).

James is capable of accomplishing this also because of the power of the comedy to partly allay the inconveniently vexing, sinister particulars of the materialistic, acquisitive morality of the culture in the novel. By contributing to making the consumerist, materialistic tendencies of the society in the novel aesthetically and intellectually bearable, the comedy is trying to help with the sanctioning of the attendant notions as the acceptable moral standard of the fictional world. In the end, the palpable implications of the consumerist, materialistic morality, however, never really go completely away and constantly float to the surface, and, together with the direct ridicule and stigmatization of the effects of the consumerist, materialistic values on society, they override the neutralizing effect of the comedy.

James satirizes in *The Golden Bowl* the objectification and commodification of people resulting from the consumerist, materialistic social outlook on life, and thus he satirizes these socio-economic developments of the consumerist, materialistic society in themselves. In accordance with the visualization of the society in the novel as the market – brought about by the pecuniary morality of the characters – the people in the novel offer themselves to be sold to others, if their assets are insufficient as in the case of the Prince or Charlotte, or, if they are financially independent, they may shop for other people, like Mr. Verver and his daughter do. The commodification and objectification of the Prince and Charlotte are gestures of power through which the Ververs assume the dominant positions over their spouses. The processes automatically involve the dehumanization of the two objects of the transactions and a degree of the buyers’ severance from the essential humanity of the Prince and Charlotte – the suppression of their absolute independence is engendering their vulnerability by effectuating dependence and corroborating in the eyes of the buyers their susceptibility to be further manipulated or controlled. This potentiality of money for evil hidden in plain sight in the imagery and carefree conversations adumbrates Charlotte’s fate at the end when Adam Verver enforces the power of money

over her and effortlessly accomplishes her removal from England to American City for the sake of his daughter's marriage.

The Prince's market price is established by the worth of his bloodline, and he and Maggie openly joke about the fact that he was bought by the Ververs and belongs now among the prized pieces of Maggie's father's collection. He re-articulates her "a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price" with unabashed frankness as "I cost a lot of money" (*GB* 49). The compound effect of the unapologetic lightness of tone under the banner of the consumerist, materialistic values throughout the novel when the dehumanizing effects of the marketplace values are concerned – here manifested in the Prince's reaction to own objectification and commodification – is depressingly disconcerting. The comedy, which originates in the incongruity of the tone and substance, in such instances ridicules and denounces the effects of materialism and consumerism on society – here the fact of commodification and objectification of human beings – as a travesty of the conventional morality value system.

However, neither Charlotte nor Amerigo seem to be bothered by the acquisitive interest of the Ververs in them. In that light, James's dramatization seems to be stigmatizing the whole material outlook and the acquisitive sense of Americans, on one hand, and the European readiness to be acquired in exchange for financial and existential independence, which fact again suggests partiality to materialism and its attendant values. James seems to underline the moral abasement of the whole concept of the human trade in the ridiculously vulgar scene when those ideas are discussed openly with the mixture of dispassionate objectivism, pragmatism and goofiness on part of the characters. From both Maggie and Amerigo the idea of buying someone or being bought draws only smiles and a polite conversation about Amerigo's value. Later, the images spawned by describing a human being acquired as "spoils" (*GB* 54) carry irreverently ludicrous and disproportionately frivolous meanings and connotations, considering the substance of the things being discussed. The perceived disproportion and inappropriateness imply the aberration of such language and situations in the novel from desired normalcy, and expose the fact that the social banter has disconcerting and tragic overtones.

James discredits and mocks the American impulse towards buying and ownership – together with the sordid materialistic ambitions of James's contemporary America which inspired it, and along with the consequences of the rapid development of American capitalism and industrialism in the second

half of the nineteenth century on the social values – by way of James’s mentioning the murky origins of Adam Verver’s money. “He had wrought by devious ways, but he had reached the place, and what would ever have been straighter in any man’s life than his way henceforth of occupying it?” (*GB* 142). Here James is questioning conscienceless craftiness and the impact of it on rendering acceptable standards of conduct in the world of business and society motivated by such self-seeking, underhanded application to amassing capital uninhibited by scruples. James satirizes the lack of moral and ethical consideration behind the acquiring of American wealth by ironically downplaying Adam’s own past lack of scruples and culpability with the alibi-seeking, exculpatory and yet colloquially nonchalant formula “what would ever have . . .” (*GB* 142). However, the basic paradoxical incongruity between how Adam Verver came about his pecuniary security – which James makes certain the reader realizes – and the nobility of his ostensibly purely charitable cause to graft European high culture and its superior artistic tradition onto American culture, and, what is more, to benefit the people by, essentially, endeavouring to stimulate their sensibilities – all by removing treasure from Europe – makes Mr. Verver’s aspiration appear in the light of obscene comedy. The images associated with his acquiring of things and people in the novel, like “rifl[ing of] the Golden Isles,” (*GB* 140) “conquer[ing]” (*GB* 139) and “the spoils of Darius,” (*GB* 54) render Adam Verver’s proclaimed efforts, in the context of his past life and the present parasitic subsistence on the life of European culture and on his daughter, in the vein of a vaudeville pirate / blood-sucking vampire performance. Consequently, James manages to cast the influence of the materialism and consumerism of the nineteenth century life in the light of discerning satire.

In summary, the comedy in *The Golden Bowl* satirizes the materialistic, consumerist American society of the nineteenth century through the discrediting mockery of the materialistic, acquisitive morality of the Ververs and the American business culture – its capitalists and industrialists – personified specifically by Adam Verver. The comedy questions the means of derivation of the American wealth by means of the satire of the unscrupulous ways through which Adam Verver acquired his wealth. James ridicules and denounces the objectification and commodification of the Prince and Charlotte by the Ververs, and in so doing denounces the morality of objectification and commodification itself.

III.iii. *The Portrait of a Lady*

In the novel, James diverts the pronounced comic means for the purposes of the oblique satire of the consumerism and materialism of society in real life through the ridicule of the materialism and consumerism of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, who are guilty of vulgar acquisitiveness and the moral self-abasement accompanying the trapping of Isabel into marriage for the sake of financial profit.

James brings the signification of the novel, and especially of the financial means therein, into the frame of the materialism and consumerism of the nineteenth century especially by virtue of Madame Merle's character. James provides a revealing insight into her value system and, in consequence, into the socio-economic reality which the novel reflects. Madame Merle's creed is based on the modern socio-economic identity derived from the assumptions about the primacy of material possessions, from the conviction of the essentiality of the consumption of products, and from the conviction that one's social identity needs to be carefully cultivated by the keeping of vibrant social presence and the maintaining of appropriate social image – in other words, Madame Merle recognizes, appreciates and lives by the truth of the centrality of performativeness in life.

When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive. (PL 188)

Nonetheless, Osmond, too, has great appreciation for material possessions – “old plates and . . . sixteenth-century drawings,” (PL 245–246) “cabinets,” (PL 244) “[h]is pictures, his medallions and tapestries,” (PL 245) which seem to “overhang him” “thickly” (PL 245). James illustrates Osmond's rapacious disposition when Madame Merle, whom he did not marry on account of her lacking financial security, manages to stimulate the interest of this indolent dilettante in Isabel by drawing attention to Isabel's advantageous financial situation.

‘I don't object to showing my things – when people are not idiots.’
‘You do it delightfully. As cicerone of your museum you appear to particular advantage.’
Mr. Osmond, in return for this compliment, simply looked at once colder and more attentive.
‘Did you say she was rich?’ (PL 227)

By contextualizing the novel in this way in the materialism and consumerism of the society and the social identity of the nineteenth century, James makes the exploitative acquisitiveness of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, which stands behind their plotting for Isabel's hand, appear also in the light of the materialistic, consumerist social values and morality of the non-fictional world. The novel illustrates on the characters of Madame Merle and Osmond how people who are tempted in the presence of money just enough to allow themselves to be morally corrupted by it may stand in the path of wide-eyed idealists.

When Ralph tries to warn Isabel about Madame Merle, the comedy of their conversation is appropriately portentous. Isabel accuses Ralph of trying to slander Madame Merle by implication, which impels Ralph to give a series of statements which ridicule Madame Merle and stigmatize the intimated artfulness and ulterior motives of which Ralph suspects her on account of the peculiar faultlessness of her public image.

'You put your finger on it,' Ralph interrupted. 'Her modesty's exaggerated. She has no business with small claims – she has a perfect right to make large ones.'

'Her merits are large then. You contradict yourself.'

'Her merits are immense,' said Ralph. 'She's indescribably blameless; a pathless desert of virtue; the only woman I know who never gives one a chance.'

'A chance for what?'

'Well, say to call her a fool! She's the only woman I know who has but that one little fault.'

...

... She's too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She's too complete, in a word. I confess to you that she acts on my nerves and that I feel about her a good deal as that intensely human Athenian felt about Aristides the Just.' . . .

'You're very odious, sir!' Isabel exclaimed. And then she asked him if he knew anything that was not to the honour of her brilliant friend.

'Nothing whatever. Don't you see that's just what I mean? On the character of everyone else you may find some little black speck; if I were to take half an hour to it, some day, I've no doubt I should be able to find one on yours. For my own, of course, I'm spotted like a leopard. But on Madame Merle's nothing, nothing, nothing!'

'That's just what I think!' said Isabel with a toss of her head. 'That is why I like her so much.'

'She's a capital person for you to know. Since you wish to see the world you couldn't have a better guide.'

'I suppose you mean by that that she's worldly?'

'Worldly? No,' said Ralph, 'she's the great round world itself!' (*PL* 235–236)

The tone of the conversation is coloured by an inseparable part of the makeup of Ralph's character: his propensity to inject irony into his commentary – and into the timbre of the novel. Consequently, the irony that routinely finds the object of its ridicule in himself, being a defence mechanism of his choice to hush away what would otherwise be a sad preoccupation with his medical condition, here helps to

convey the sinister overtones of Ralph's obscure insight into the character of Madame Merle. Isabel's later discovery of the conspiracy between Madame Merle and Osmond retrospectively infuses the ironic satire here with a sense of forewarning against a measure of moral void in Madame Merle and with a measure of mockery denouncing what is yet to be revealed as acquisitiveness driven by a sense of financial advantage.

Even earlier in the novel, the comedy points in a straightforward manner in the direction of Madame Merle's plans for Isabel, and suggests Madame Merle's predatory motivation even as it mocks her reaction.

‘A fortune!’ Madame Merle softly repeated.

‘Isabel steps into something like seventy thousand pounds.’

Madame Merle's hands were clasped in her lap; at this she raised them, still clasped, and held them a moment against her bosom while her eyes, a little dilated, fixed themselves on those of her friend. (*PL* 194–195)

The height of the almost religious transport of Madame Merle expressed in the scene, and the sheer epiphany of the moment in which she revels when Isabel's coming into fortune is revealed to her, could not be any plainer as to Madame Merle's true colours. She is a pragmatic materialist, and this moment in the book marks the beginning of her interest in Isabel to financially exploit her. In consequence, the comedy blending with the malefic undertones of the moment both adumbrates the exploitation and criticises Madame Merle's acquisitiveness. In this way, the novel intimates that financial independence has at least one downside – money makes a person liable to become the target of exploitation and abuse by predatory calculating parasites, especially if one is romantic, idealistic, well-meaning but unsophisticated and credulous as Isabel.

Even before she learns about Isabel's fortune and before she proposes to Osmond to introduce him to Isabel, whom Madame Merle on that occasion “invite[s] . . . to profit by . . . [her] knowledge” (*PL* 224) about Isabel, who has – in Madame Merle's appreciative words – “a handsome fortune,” (*PL* 225) the novel furnishes indications about the dark side of Madame Merle.

On which, ‘I'm obliged to you,’ Madame Merle replied, ‘but I'm afraid your aunt imagines, or at least alludes to, no aberrations that the clock-face doesn't register.’

‘So that you mean you've a wild side that's unknown to her?’

‘Ah no, I fear my darkest sides are my tamest.’ (*PL* 181)

The novel systematically but reticently builds up the image of Madame Merle's egregiously amoral character until the scene with the cracked coffee cup when James makes her verbalize her moral depravity: "have I been so vile all for nothing?" (*PL* 496).

The comedy enveloping Osmond himself is similarly suffused with meanings that suggest contrived appearances, which taken en masse with his espousal of materialism and financial interest in Isabel, so point out Osmond's own scheming selfishness behind an unartfully donned mask of a sophisticated gentleman, through which, ironically, Isabel cannot see. For example, the erratic jabbering of the Countess Gemini, whose "demonstrations suggested the violent waving of some flag of general truce – white silk with fluttering streamers," (*PL* 239) ensconces the character of Osmond in the embrace of the comedy issuing from the ravings of the befuddled mind of his sister. However, the deluge of trivialities seems to contain a few ominous words of wisdom that – by suggesting that Osmond's 'things,' which he is so fond of, are not as solid as they seem – hint at the artifice of Osmond's present comportment disguising under the created simulacrum of a man of sensibility the vulgar emptiness of a base, crude and trivial mind.

I like to see new people, and I'm sure you're very new. But don't sit there; that chair's not what it looks. There are some very good seats here, but there are also some horrors.'

These remarks were delivered with a series of little jerks and pecks, of roulades of shrillness, and in an accent that was as some fond recall of good English, or rather of good American, in adversity.

'I don't like to have you, my dear?' said her brother. 'I'm sure you're invaluable.'

'I don't see any horrors anywhere,' Isabel returned, looking about her. 'Everything seems to me beautiful and precious.'

'I've a few good things,' Mr. Osmond allowed; 'indeed I've nothing very bad. But I've not what I should have liked.'

He stood there a little awkwardly, smiling and glancing about; his manner was an odd mixture of the detached and the involved. He seemed to hint that nothing but the right 'values' was of any consequence. Isabel made a rapid induction: perfect simplicity was not the badge of his family. . . . even Mr. Osmond's diminutive daughter had a kind of finish that was not entirely artless.

'You'd have liked a few things from the Uffizi and the Pitti – that's what you'd have liked,' said Madame Merle.

'Poor Osmond, with his old curtains and crucifixes!' the Countess Gemini exclaimed: she appeared to call her brother only by his family name. Her ejaculation had no particular object; she smiled at Isabel as she made it and looked at her from head to foot. (*PL* 239–240)

James thus ridicules and stigmatizes both Osmond and his concern with obsessive materiality – his obsessive love of his 'things' – by showing a man entirely influenced by materialism and consumerism in his thinking, whose identity is derived from the esteem for objects – from owning and acquiring more of 'things' – who is, however, ironically and actually, worthy of pity because he cannot afford enough

of them. The portrayal of Osmond's character is seemingly replete with paradoxes on the grounds that "his ideal was a conception of high prosperity and propriety, of the aristocratic life, . . . [which] was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude. He was fond of the old, the consecrated, the transmitted" (PL 406–407). Yet, if we consider that the materialistic, consumerist spirit of the times did not really replace the past allegiances but rather merged with them, the complexity of the shallow and egotistical being that Osmond is can be readily explained. At the same time, the scene does not bode well for Isabel. What respectable motives can a man whose needs are essentially material and who is defined by acquisitiveness possess with respect to Isabel, in whom he displayed true interest only after learning about her wealth? Knowing her brother well enough, the Countess Gemini is capable of discerning that Osmond is manoeuvring to complete his collection of objects by getting Isabel. That Osmond's objectification of Isabel in the novel is actual and not only dependent on the imagery of the language here is justified by what Isabel realizes during her night vigil about Osmond's egotism: "He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them. He had told her that already, before their marriage; but then she had not noticed it. . . . He had really meant it – he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" (PL 404). The scene, accordingly, demonstrates how James satirizes the materialism and consumerism of the nineteenth century through the ridicule and stigmatization of Osmond's acquisitiveness and his egotistical, materialistic outlook, which allows him to easily objectify Isabel.

In summary, James contextualizes *The Portrait of a Lady* within the consumerist, materialistic society of the nineteenth century, and uses the devices of the plain comedy in the novel to mock and criticise in a circuitous manner the consumerist, materialistic social values via the ridicule of Madame Merle's and Gilbert Osmond's egotism, moral abasement, acquisitiveness, materialism and objectification, consumerist outlook, and performativeness, which last fact also attests to the social environment's acceptance of the interpenetration of the public and private spheres. Above all, in these characters James portrays the temptation to financially exploit others of the people who espouse materialistic morality.

III.iv. *The Ambassadors*

By bringing into dramatic proximity various manifestations of the value systems of America and Europe, the novel achieves a criticism of the consumerist, materialistic outlook of the times, associated in the novel specifically with New England. The comedy in the novel assists in this critique of the negative influence of the late nineteenth century American consumerism and materialism – represented by the family of the Newsomes, and especially by Mrs. Newsome, and the town of Woollett. Among the embodiments of the preoccupation with materialistic considerations is wealthy Mrs. Newsome, who owns a business back in Woollett. Strether describes it as

a big brave bouncing business. A roaring trade. . . .

“Yes—a workshop; a great production, a great industry. The concern’s a manufacture—and a manufacture that, if it’s only properly looked after, may well be on the way to become a monopoly. . . .

. . . [The place is] quite a number of buildings; almost a little industrial colony. But above all it’s a thing. The article produced. (A 85).

Thus James symbolically connects Woollett and Mrs. Newsome with the buying and selling of goods, the large-scale production of cheap goods, as well as monopoly dominance. Mrs. Newsome herself in the novel is also a symbol of materialism and the preoccupation with the accumulation of material wealth. The success of the business selling this “small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use” (A 86) implies also the symbolic connection of Woollett and Mrs. Newsome with the social and economic ideology encouraging the acquisition of large amounts of goods and services, and with a consumerist society.

The novel makes a point of Strether’s determinedly dodging Maria Gostrey’s curious questions and guesses about the nature of the article produced in Woollett. In so doing, the novel puts emphasis on the satire of the above values, concepts and ideologies. The comedy of their exchanges arises from Strether’s fussiness about his explanations and the comparable emptiness of his answers. The sensation that the novel provides is that of the article’s banality connected to the sense of its meanness, which renders the article’s production and selling undignified affairs, whose details Strether does not want to talk about. Now that he is in Maria’s company, and for reasons of Strether having opportunity to begin to see American values in the light of European cultural and social ones – such as “the social and aesthetic beauty of the Parisian world” (Dietrichson 87) – the American article is unmentionable,

whereas it continues to be a thing openly discussed in the America of Woollett. This unmentionability, however, also empties of meaning the activities, concepts, values and ideologies associated with the article. Were we to follow the logical implications of the new way of thinking of Strether's European self, Woollett would seem to manufacture and make money off something which actually amounts to almost *nothing* – in the sense of the article not having any non-material value, or having other than a material status. As much as *it* sells in America, where its value is unassailable because America puts emphasis on the material value and status, it has no intrinsic or a very high value/status in a value system and culture which gives precedence to non-materialistic values – which is why the object also has no real dignity there. This does not tell us that Europe is not materialistic, but it does showcase the ladder of values in America. A host of ironies and paradoxes can be said to emerge in relation to business activities, materialism and consumerism if these notions are reconsidered in a similar light by which the American ethos of Woollett is suddenly devoid of its only culturally available context of meaning – that being the materialistic, consumerist context.

His postponements, however, made her wonder—wonder if the article referred to were anything bad. And she explained that she meant improper or ridiculous or wrong. But Strether, so far as that went, could satisfy her. “Unmentionable? Oh no, we constantly talk of it; we are quite familiar and brazen about it. Only, as a small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use, it's just wanting in—what shall I say? Well, dignity, or the least approach to distinction. Right here therefore, with everything about us so grand—!” In short he shrank.

“It's a false note?”

“Sadly. It's vulgar.”

“But surely not vulgarer than this.” Then on his wondering as she herself had done: “Than everything about us.” She seemed a trifle irritated. “What do you take this for?”

“Why for—comparatively—divine!”

“This dreadful London theatre? It's impossible, if you really want to know.”

“Oh then,” laughed Strether, “I *don't* really want to know! (A 86)

Of course, money itself is often discussed and it carries with it negative meanings, and sordid connotations and overtones. Comedy underlines these meanings. Money is the very reason for Strether's presence in Europe – to make Chad “come into the business” (A 85). “That's the root of the evil. There's money, to very large amounts, in the concern” (A 85). For Strether, the power of money is undeniable and matter-of-fact. James establishes the American indifference to the murky, corrupt practices that were used to acquire the American wealth when he contrasts Strether's and Maria's views on Chad's own relation to the family money, and their views of money's possible role in Chad's refusal to come

back home. Strether fails to discern any reason for Chad possibly having any reservations about the origin of the Newsomes's wealth.

James ridicules Mrs. Newsome as part of his firm comic hold on her when she is discussed by Strether and Maria at the intimate dinner in London.

“Ah they couldn't have come—either of them. They're very busy people and Mrs. Newsome in particular has a large full life. She's moreover highly nervous—and not at all strong.”

“You mean she's an American invalid?”

He carefully distinguished. “There's nothing she likes less than to be called one, but she would consent to be one of those things, I think,” he laughed, “if it were the only way to be the other.”

“Consent to be an American in order to be an invalid?”

“No,” said Strether, “the other way round. She's at any rate delicate sensitive high-strung. She puts so much of herself into everything—” (A 83–84)

The scenes at the dinner are among the interactions in the novel that reveal Strether's perceptiveness and sense of comedy, which allows him to see his situation as funny. His comic sense is a counterpart of sorts to the reader's. The comedy here as well as in other conversations with Maria Gostrey is lively, imaginative and full of wit. The social milieus in the novel offer James opportunity to demonstrate his talent for writing jaunty social banter, which, however, also serves to ridicule and stigmatize the consequences of the effect of materialism and consumerism on the values. Accordingly, James lets the comedy of the scene here suggest that Mrs. Newsome would rather be “an American invalid” (A 83) than give up her materialistic values – the pursuit of which keeps her “very busy” (A 83) – since she sees the commercialized values as the corner stones of her American identity, which infuses her existence with a sense of value and purpose. In disaffiliating herself from these values, she would hold herself to be an ‘invalid’ American.

As illustrated, Strether's sense for detached comic judgement in the novel is a source of direct and implied satirical evaluations of the morality and the value system of America. No matter what observations Strether's comic perceptiveness allows him to ponder in the course of the novel, his comic perspicacity and self-awareness do not ultimately alter his basic fatalism about the way things are. Just as Strether does not abandon his conventional American moral correctitude by the end of the novel – even though he was spurred by his European experience to acknowledge that he had wasted the best years of his life in being a mere spectator regretting the fact that his life and its opportunities are slipping

through his fingers – so does he not exchange the financial comfort provided by Mrs. Newsome in Woollett for the aesthetically and spiritually enriching life with Maria and for Paris.

In summary, in *The Ambassadors* the comedy assists in the penetrating, derogatory exposition of the American system of materialistic, consumerist values by allowing an American the opportunity to contrast European and American socio-cultural and economic values. The American consumerism and materialism is symbolised especially by the family of the Newsomes and the New England town of Woollett, whereas the European values are symbolically represented by the world of Paris. The comedy in the novel satirizes the materialistic, consumerist values of the American society of James's days through the ridicule and stigmatization of the acquisitiveness and materialistic outlook of Mrs. Newsome, and through her association with the values, concepts and ideologies of commerce, industrialism, monopoly and consumerism – symbolically associated also with Woollett. The comic effects and the comic sense of Strether reveal, mock and criticise the fact that the American consumerism- and materialism-inspired values are very high on the ladder of American values when compared to Europe. James also establishes the American indifference to the questionable practices that lead to the acquiring of wealth at any cost.

III.v. “The Turn of the Screw” and the Unconscious Energies

In my interpretation, the tale invites the reader to enjoy it for its Gothic effect, and I believe that it is the author’s employing himself in the composition of the tale while following more or less exclusively the conventions of that genre which explains why James does not have time to interface with the fictional social world, and through it with the social and cultural values of the real world as such. It is not, after all, required or even possible to do that in a Gothic horror tale which is concerned singularly with exciting strong emotions and which focuses on creating the portrait of the character’s inner life. In accordance, the likeness of the society in the novel is rather undistinguished, undeveloped and rough-hewn – the novel catches a glimpse of society, so to speak. No sustained treatment of what would near a fully-fledged portrayal of the fictional social scene can be properly identified for in the novel James leaves the social scene behind – both the fictional and the real one – to apply himself to mystery, suspense and terror. For these reasons I think it impossible to claim any substantial links between the comedy in this work and the reflection of the modern social scene with its problems, which is why I will devote myself only to the attempt to explore the comedy in the tale. However, since I propose to interpret the tale solely on the grounds of its Gothic effect, the study that follows below – of the conventions of the Gothic tale and of their realization in James’s tale, recounted here for the purpose of their relation to the comedy – is effectively also the examination of the means by which the tale defies the interpretative associations combining a reading of the text for the reflection of modern social problems, and a comic reading of the text.

The specific perspective on the analysis of the comedy in the tale which I propose here is based on the relief theories and incongruity theories developed as the result of the philosophical study of humour. I claim that James’s intended effect of the tale on the reader is produced in the interaction with the effects of the genre whose conventions he borrows – Gothic fiction. James reworks its elements to his liking but basic similarities between the genre and James’s tale hold. To prove this, I will make reference to the text of the tale to isolate examples of these conventions. We will then proceed to explain the basic premise of the relief and incongruity theories, and to relate them to the tale to see in what way “The Turn of the Screw” can be read comically.

Let us now, first, examine the mechanisms of horror in Gothic fiction and compare them to those of James's tale. Gothic fiction is a mode of presentation or genre which aims to entertain the reader by producing the sensations in which intermingle horror and pleasure, which is also the prevailing blend of effects of James's tale. The first sentence of the narrative itself immediately opens on an atmosphere of suggested mystery, veiled threat and great suspense.

The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as, on Christmas Eve in an old house, a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to say that it was the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child. (TS 11)

The adjectives "breathless," "gruesome" and "strange" help to create the mood. The company meets "in an old house," where they quietly listen, absorbed in the story. The "visitation . . . on a child" suggests violence on the innocent. In this way, the framing narrative of James's tale educates the reader about what to expect later on and about how the reader is supposed to react to what he reads. In it, James also establishes the interest of the main story and the nature of its effect on the reader, which is that of Gothic fiction, as follows:

"It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it."

"For sheer terror?" I remember asking.

He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. "For dreadful—dreadfulness!"

"Oh, how delicious!" cried one of the women. (TS 12)

James entices us in this manner to enjoy the narrative as a tale of Gothic fiction, which means being entertained by the effect of terror that the fiction stimulates. Before James introduces the sight of the ghosts or the feeling of the uncanny, the governess shares her impressions of the estate. The architecture in the tale becomes important following its central role in Gothic fiction.

In Gothic fiction, frequent settings include abandoned or isolated places, which often serve the purpose of invoking the sense of confinement of some sort. Settings in Gothic fiction are meant to associate contradictory feelings. On one hand, they may evoke the sensations of pure, intense fear and terror. Or they may generate the simultaneous feelings of mental anguish, pleasure and awe – thus being the sources of the sublime. Another, diametrically different, aspect of the experience of Gothic settings, if they indeed allow such feelings, is in their being a source of certain romantic beauty and comfort for the reader. The atmosphere of the scenes is often oppressive, gloomy and mysterious, and the negative sensations mix with the positive ones.

In James's tale, the governess hired to care for the two young orphans arrives at a country house in Essex. This is not the ruin of a medieval castle but it shares some features with the conventional settings in Gothic fiction. First of all, Bly is a remote, ancient and large country estate. In the story, the governess keeps changing her mind about her impressions of Bly, by which way also James communicates her unreliability as the narrator and her excitability – she is full of contradictory feelings and suffers from the fluctuations of moods and opinions. Even though she will come to perceive the atmosphere as eerie and sinister, her initial sensations of the place are romantically idyllic. The estate is hence a source of both comfort and discomfort.

Be that as it may, the house and its grounds in the novel feel like a confined stage. The tale will reveal that, in the mind of the governess, the characters are unaccountably besieged by the ghosts. The ghosts follow them around the house and around the estate. Quint appears on the tower, by the window, on the stairs – there is no hiding from them, no escaping them.

Let us take a look at what other stereotyped Gothic devices James employs. Gothic fiction routinely works with the liminal states of mind and the mental derangement of characters caused by acute emotionality. The role of light and sound in the narrative is significant, too – they create the atmosphere, mirror the emotions and draw responses from the characters. The uneasiness, anxiety, trepidation, panic or dread in a character are evoked by the presence of some suggested threat or danger – actual or imagined, unknown or mysterious, imminent or latent. Oftentimes, the difference between the real and the imagined is not clear to a protagonist or to the reader. A character's capacity to think clearly and make sound judgment may be impaired as a result of his emotions or may be conducive to his feelings. That James is playing upon all of these motifs, constantly and from the very beginning, is obvious if we consider a passage like this one, describing the day after the governess's arrival:

But it was a comfort that there could be no uneasiness in a connection with anything so beatific as the radiant image of my little girl, the vision of whose angelic beauty had probably more than anything else to do with the restlessness that, before morning, made me several times rise and wander about my room to take in the whole picture and prospect; to watch, from my open window, the faint summer dawn, to look at such portions of the rest of the house as I could catch, and to listen, while, in the fading dusk, the first birds began to twitter, for the possible recurrence of a sound or two, less natural and not without, but within, that I had fancied I heard. There had been a moment when I believed I recognized, faint and far, the cry of a child; there had been another when I found myself just consciously starting as at the passage, before my door, of a light footstep. But these fancies were not marked enough not to be thrown off, and it is only in the light, or the gloom, I should rather say, of other and subsequent matters that they now come back to me. (TS 20–21)

Since James is clearly using interpretations of the vehicles of emotions typical for Gothic fiction, it can be assumed that his purpose in “The Turn of the Screw” is to let the reader experience the whole spectrum of feelings associated with the experience of reading Gothic fiction, including their escalation toward the sensation of overmastering emotional anguish.

I will now proceed to giving space to the relief and incongruity theories of humour, and to relating them to the tale and its Gothic devices in order to demonstrate in what way “The Turn of the Screw” can be read comically.

In “The Physiology of Laughter” (1860), Spencer develops a theory of laughter that is intimately related to his “hydraulic” theory of nervous energy, whereby excitement and mental agitation produces energy that “must expend itself in some way or another.” He argues that “nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion.” As a form of physical movement, laughter can serve as the expressive route of various forms of nervous energy. Spencer did not see his theory as a competitor to the incongruity theory of humor; rather, he tried to explain why it is that a certain mental agitation arising from a “descending incongruity” results in this characteristically purposeless physical movement. Spencer never satisfactorily answers this specific question, but he presents the basic idea that laughter serves to release pent up energy. (Smuts)

In the *Rhetoric* (III, 2), Aristotle presents the earliest glimmer of an incongruity theory of humor, finding that the best way to get an audience to laugh is to setup an expectation and deliver something “that gives a twist.” (Smuts)

In my reading of “The Turn of the Screw” as a Gothic tale on the grounds of its Gothic devices and effects, I propose that the comedy in the work does not exist as any kind of linguistic or literary vehicle, method or technique of presentation. The comedy is a potential effect induced by the narrative on the mind of the reader. We immediately ask: how is it possible for the vehicles of horror and the effect of terror to produce the sensation of comedy if they lie toward the opposite end of the spectrum of reactions, compared to the comic effect.

The immediate outcome of the reader’s interaction with the adduced devices and effects of the Gothic narrative are manifold. Fright, panic, alarm, disgust, consternation – and other extreme reactions – produce, as explained by the relief theories, an excess of mental energy. Nonetheless, it does not follow that one becomes invested with the Gothic effects to the extent that any such strong feelings can be said to be guaranteed to break the surface of one’s perception or to influence one to the point that the emotions demonstrate themselves as a palpable, physical reaction, as the relief theory proposes. However, if

enough energy accumulates, it seems reasonable that the energy may engender the uncontrollable physical expression of nervous energy in the form of laughter.

This physical laughter – in its outward, physical demonstrations – is similar to the somatic reactions to the comedy in James claimed by, for example, Hartsock. The difference is that the sensation of the comedy in the tale is created by the Gothic mechanisms of horror. The corporeal reaction to horror which they produce is an involuntary, reflex response on par with the irrepressibility of a nervous, laughing shriek of a person who, having been massaged by the special effects of the inside of a haunted house ride, suddenly cannot keep his cool anymore and loses control over his mind and body for a second. It is an instinctive reaction and also a venting mechanism. However, it is different from simply being startled into shouting out. In the novel, as in the ride carriage, the pressure builds up gradually. This is the potential of the terror begotten by the tale if the reader is sufficiently attuned to its minute movements – i.e. if he allows himself to be affected, or if he is capable of being affected, in this way.

However, rather than proposing that this is, realistically, the effect the novel has on an average reader, I claim that it is the narrative's silent potential, which, in these jaded times, may not be readily apparent. The likelihood of its potential impact increases if the reader accepts the tale's rules of the game, which are the same ones as when people read other horror literature: if one subscribes fully to the suspension of reality and permits himself to be manipulated and absorbed by the story – in other words, if one reads to be scared.

Nonetheless, I propose – ultimately – a different, more complete answer as to how the tale acts on the reader so that he may perceive its comedy and laugh physically. Whether we accept or not the relief theory's proposition of laughter as a mechanism of the release of pent-up mental, unconscious energy (as claimed by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Smuts)), it is apparent that, like the governess and the critics, the common reader vehemently searches for meaning to be uncovered in the tale. The central problems of the interpretation hinge on whether the ghosts are real or not. Unless this is solved, no definite conclusions may be made about the whole of the story. This fact does not make the tale less entertaining to the reader. However, it is crucial for the interpreting mind to know that answer to be able to decide what perspective under the suspension of reality to eschew as to the degree of reliability of the narrator. She seems unreliable, but to what extent? Knowing whether she

sees the ghosts or not allows us to finally comprehend the internal logic of the fictional world and enables us to make important conclusions so that we may proceed to a definite interpretation. The beauty of the tale is that we know nothing about the governess's perception for sure, which is good because the tale would not work if we knew even very little. However, since we know nothing about the factuality in the novel of the existence of the ghosts, we cannot solve unequivocally other questions that arise in relation to the governess's consciousness and her decisions.

Consequently, not knowing anything about her consciousness means not knowing anything about the tale. We can then only speculate, and the ambiguities are never really solved, no matter whether we see the ghosts as real or not. Only when the ambiguities are solved can we know about the ghosts and so know about the internal logic of the fictional world and be able to interpret it. We cannot decide about the ghosts first.

The comedic impact of the tale on the reader in the reading I propose consists of several stages. Firstly, the reader is influenced by the devices of Gothic fiction, which may or may not engender strong emotional reactions. Conceivably, they may engender no reactions at all if the reading is approached as a mere exercise in interpretation or criticism. Whichever it may be, the devices, together with the rest of the tale, provide the material – and thus the opportunity – for contemplation of the available meaning since they are the vehicles of the meaning. Next, following our confrontation of the meaning, we may hence conceivably arrive at any interpretation other than the one I am offering. This is a distinct prospect made possible by the general ambiguity of James's novels. And, after all, why should we all share the same interpretation?

However, I would posit that – as Poirier suggests in reference to *The Portrait of a Lady* (245) – that James has in mind for us a specific interpretation rather than just any one that occurs to us – that James offers us a solution that has to do with his use of the Gothic devices. I would argue that the Gothic devices are as much part of generating the meaning – with the Gothic theme of a supernatural presence as probably the most prominent means – as they are part of the subterfuge of hiding the real meaning. On their account, critics and readers get mired in the ambiguities and the ensuing difficulty with uncovering meaning. These may be pursued – and yet they are, in an important sense, immaterial. After all, James himself admitted that the tale is “a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic

calculation, an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught (the ‘fun’ of the capture of the merely witless being ever but small)” (*The Art of the Novel* 172) – “my values are positively all blanks save so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness . . . proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures” (*The Art of the Novel* 177).

I would suggest that this fact and the truth of it are borne out by the style of the writing itself. The tale is a trap for the interpreting mind of the reader and the critic, which constitutes the narrative’s function/effect and true meaning. Whatever is our reaction to the text – whether we are afraid, contemptuously aloof . . . whether we believe the ghosts are real or not – James’s overriding intention is for our brain to be caught in the traps of ambiguity. I have attempted to at length argue that the Gothic devices and methods are the pivot of the tale. Most importantly, the Gothic devices suggest something crucial about the true meaning of the tale. A gothic tale is read for the experience of the entertainment with the emotions it arouses, and it is capable of providing these to the reader in spite of him realizing that the Gothic in the tale is just a plan and that the supernatural presence in the tale – as well as other elements – are only a matter of usage. Similarly, the dissonant meanings, obscurity and ambiguity is part of the entertainment of the fictional world, which is not meant to be deciphered completely, or even at all. In other words: not only do we enjoy the tingling and the horror of such fictional scenarios even though we realize that ghosts do not exist in real life, we also enjoy ourselves in spite of the knowledge that ghosts appear in Gothic fiction as characters exactly because we are reading a Gothic work. We do not even care that the presence of ghosts is unexplained and inexplicable, and that a host of other things does not strictly make sense.

Realizing that James is signalling the truth of the tale as an elaborate trap by using the Gothic devices, it seems discussions about what constitutes the literal meaning of the novel – about what has really happened and whether the ghosts exist or not – are beside the point. The discussions about the meaning are not suspended by the fact that ghosts do not exist in our reality but because the fiction’s meaning is so ambiguous that definite answers cannot be given, which is in itself the right answer to which the Gothic in the tale points. The Gothic acts as a means of obfuscating of the meaning in the tale and, as we have now established, a means of unravelling it.

Realizing that “The Turn of the Screw” is an interpretive trap is the point of the joke played by James, which allows us to see the comedic effect of the Gothic horror in the tale. Because we always look for meaning in what we read we must always get caught by the tale as we read it – that is the tale’s function. The meaning of the tale is that it does not have one. This is a paradox. Another paradox is that the tale obtains the meaning we ascribe to it here as we try to interpret the apparent content, which is in itself – according to the rules it establishes, not the rules of our world – uninterpretable. And so James laughs and we may laugh with him when we realize the whole of this truth. This is the twist the tale provides, which – according to the incongruity theory – engenders comedy and laughter. I would claim that the total comedic effect is two-fold, if we are somebody who invested his emotions in the novel – if we have allowed the Gothic devices to work their magic. The comedy springs from the combination of the pent-up unconscious energies of the relief theory, and the twist of the incongruity theory.

The tale does not require that we come under the influence of the effects I have described so far, and, still, James is able to serve all his readers. However, if James does not tell us what the meaning is, he tells us what the meaning is not. He uses many signals – including the unreliability of the narrator, or the framing narrative structure – asking us to step back and not to be too absorbed in the interpretation. The narrative endeavours with all its might to push the meaning out of the realm of reality, which is another way of saying ‘the social,’ in the same way that James relinquishes the realism of the portrayal of the social environment until only a superficial semblance of it remains in the form of, for example, people listening to a story around a fireplace, or a handful of characters whose presence resembles that of the disembodied ghosts in the story themselves.

However, since we cannot help but read and interpret the tale first, and only then we may realize there is something suspicious about James’s presentation – if we make those connections – we are destined to experience the sense of the comedy based, if not on our visceral reactions, than on the incongruity between our previous search for the meaning and the acquired present knowledge, and between the ostentatiously avowed function of the tale as a source of meaning, and its discovered, true meaning – the tale being only an interpretative trap.

III.vi. “The Beast in the Jungle”

Given its dramatic compactness – mirrored by its actual size – resulting from the intention to keep the story moving at a brisk pace, “The Beast in the Jungle,” with its narrow focus on the Jamesian theme of un-lived life, is incapable of sustaining a consequential or meaningful enough image of society for the reader to be able to produce a durable commentary on it.

The main reason for this is that the text follows the internal perspective of Marcher on the world around him, and that his point of view is narcissistic, so it is mostly not concerned with the social world in the novel, nor is it interested in the objective picture of actuality, not even the fictional one – i.e. Marcher’s perspective has no referential value in relation to what truly *exists* outside of his mind in the fiction world – or the non-fictional one, for that matter. After all, I argue below that Marcher’s imagination is defunct and running amuck. Consequently, Marcher is not in possession of the expressions and mental contents of the ‘usual’ mind, which his fixation on a single idea, and the simultaneous inability to fixate the oscillation of his imagination by means of reason, demonstrate. On those grounds, his mind and his internal perspective on the social world – which the tale minimalistically portrays at those rare moments – cannot be trusted.

In the scene at Weatherend, for example, James is seemingly making reference to materialism in relation to art. However, he is not using the reference to satirize or criticise the concept of materialism as such since Marcher’s attitude is not one of the refusal of the values but rather one of the insecurity at the inability to find any way to interface with the world, and the social and cultural values on the whole, in any manner which is endurable to him. Marcher could just as well be saying literally anything else here as long as it would communicate his incompatibility with and opposition to the fictional world of the tale, and the original dramatic intention of James would still be met.

Similarly, when James uses the expression “in a greedy world” (BJ 23) later, the tone of the statement cannot be taken to represent any reflection of the social scene and cannot be seen in a negative light since the tone is not supported by any sort of a sustained treatment of what would amount to the portrayal of the negative aspects of society. Expressions like this one function rather as an arbitrary way of referring to the world outside of Marcher – expressions which, by whatever content, help to define him in contrast and against the world, and help him to set himself aside from it. Marcher could be saying

“in a greeny world” instead, and the words would make as much sense as the original ones. The alteration would make little difference to his mind or his creator’s since Marcher is not genuinely alienated by any materialistic aspect of the society. On one hand, I comprehend Marcher to be another of James’s unreliable narrators – a sole, untrustworthy access point to the fictional world. On the other hand, in alignment with the tale’s conception of a life unlived, I see James envisaging the main protagonist as standing outside of the context of society and its framework of reference.

Consequently, I think it impossible to establish a solid, clear link between James’s social reality, its reflection in the work and the comedy found therein, which is why this subchapter shall deal with the comedy in the work only. As in the case of the previous tale, the analysis here attempts to establish the boundary beyond which an insight into the social scene of James’s times, and hence into the relation between the reflection of it and the comedy in the work, is not attainable. The following study of the interiority of Marcher’s imagination is effectively the study of the outline of that boundary, which stands in Marcher’s way of seeing the true shapes of the world around him, and which prevents us from seeing anything resembling the reflection in the novel of the actual, non-fictional social world.

Accordingly, I here present a reading of “The Beast in the Jungle” based on the idea of the comedy in the tale as “reduced laughter,” (Bruns 2) while reiterating the findings of Bruns about James’s comedy. I claim that the problem of egotistical Marcher – as it is demonstrated in his dispassionate detachment both from society in general and from May, in his obsessive attachment to the vague notion of an event that may make his life important, and in his hidden, internal frustration, anxiety and agitation – lies in his imagination. May Bertram in the tale possess the kind of imagination which is superior to that of John Marcher – a perspective on life which, if Marcher had paid attention to it, might have persuaded him to live his life after all. This comic awareness which May possesses embodies the concept of James’s comic sense based on reduced laughter. I will compare the imagination of Marcher to that of May to determine how his imagination varies from hers in order to demonstrate the shortcomings of Marcher’s imagination which make it a defunct model of imagination. In showing in what ways Marcher deviates from the perspective embraced by May Bertram, I will be allowed to demonstrate Brun’s observations about “The Beast in the Jungle” and the concept of Jamesian comedy as reduced laughter.

Let us see what exactly the concept of reduced laughter – embodied by May – implies. Since in the Jamesian satire comedy intermingles with tragedy, Bruns draws our attention to how James’s comic sense is similar to Bakhtin’s theories about folk humour and the carnivalesque; to Bakhtin, the comic sense may subsume the serious, the two forming the philosophy of “true open seriousness,” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 121, qtd. in Bruns 2) which is another term for “reduced laughter,” a central feature of Dostoevsky’s as well as James’s work (Bruns 2). Based on the similarities, Bruns proposes that James’s comedy could be described using the notion of the reduced laughter. Correspondingly, Bruns finds laughter in James “extremely quiet,” being associated with a “moral and philosophical reflection,” one which visualizes world as “open and incomplete,” and which insists “that we, as social beings, must remain open to others” (3). The defining trait of “The Beast in the Jungle” is that it takes form of a “dialogue on the threshold,” (Bruns 3) at what Morson and Emerson call “the gates of the other world” (Emerson 60, qtd. in Bruns 3). The protagonist, John Marcher, never crosses the threshold – or the moment “arrives as its own failure to arrive” (Bruns 3). The threshold moment is described by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* as “the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)” (Bakhtin 248, qtd. in Bruns 3). John Marcher and May Bartram live both in “threshold time”, not in “biographical time,” and they each “understand the threshold in very different ways” (Bruns 3). Their different modes of perception could be characterized in broad terms as “tragic” – in the case of Marcher, who perceives the moment of crisis as inescapable fate – and as “carnival” – in the case of May, who sees the threshold as open possibility (Bruns 3).

It follows that the difference of their respective modes of perception is also one of their respective imaginations – of his inability to imagine a different life than the one led in the shadow of his obsession with the unknown, and of her imagined solution to Marcher’s problematic consciousness. Therefore, Marcher possesses a tragic imagination, and May a carnival one.

Marcher’s problems spring from the deficiency of imagination. Imagination is one of James’s favourite subjects, and in this tale James reveals all its potential pathology and the ramifications of its insalubrious obsessiveness with a single notion. Through Marcher’s *idée fixe* James dramatizes his classic theme of un-lived life. From the point of view of the definition of the comedy in James’s tale

proposed here – that of the comic seriousness in the sense of ‘reduced laughter,’ i.e. not comedy as a physical response, but comedy as an attitude of openness towards people, ideas, and the world in general – Marcher is a deeply unfunny character on account of his interiority. His imagination is, consequently, disastrously tragic.

The defect in Marcher’s imagination consists in both its impotent fixity and its bizarre uninhibitedness. Here is a man who has too much of imagination in some respects and none of it at all in others at the same time. His imagination is grim-faced in its unyielding fixation on the idea that something is to happen to him. “Something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and the turns of the months and the years, like a crouching Beast in the Jungle. It signified little whether the crouching Beast were destined to slay him or to be slain” (BJ 24). This fixation reflects the fact that Marcher’s imagination is brutally active and yet insufficient. He has closed himself off to the possibility of imagining that the thing to happen is only an illusion, and to the possibility that he could yet begin to reflect on different directions his life might take. With his mind thus fixed, he has opened himself to the endless speculations about what the thing might be – and to the endless agitation and anxiety (he has “never been settled for an hour in his life” (BJ 23)). This is not, however, true openness in the sense of the reduced laughter of James. James’s best characters – those who champion the ideals of imagination and freedom, like Isabel – insist on the enlargement of experience and sensuality. In Marcher’s tragedy James seems to be criticising the limitations of a mind which is not truly imaginative of the possibilities of the world.

The crux of the problem of the operation of Marcher’s consciousness is that he has no actual relationship to the social world around him – Marcher lives in contentment and has no ambition to step out of his isolation. He is a lone wolf in the crowd without seeming – or even actually being – an awkwardly behaving social recluse. His chameleon skills are part of his seemingly garden-variety character. However, in terms of reduced laughter, his social existence is marked by humourlessness because – as a social being – he is incapable of remaining open to others.

He had thought himself, so long as nobody knew, the most disinterested person in the world, carrying his concentrated burden, his perpetual suspense, ever so quietly, holding his tongue about it, giving others no glimpse of it nor of its effect upon his life, asking of them no allowance and only making on his side all those that were asked. He hadn’t disturbed people with the queerness of their having to know a haunted man, though he had had moments of rather special temptation on hearing them say they were forsooth “unsettled.” If they were as unsettled as he

was—he who had never been settled for an hour in his life—they would know what it meant. Yet it wasn't, all the same, for him to make them, and he listened to them civilly enough. This was why he had such good—though possibly such rather colourless—manners; (BJ 23)

Marcher simply cannot relate to anyone properly even though he is capable of engaging with other people. It is in the third sentence of the tale that we learn that “the party of visitors at the other house, of whom he was one, and thanks to whom it was his theory, as always, that he was lost in the crowd, had been invited over to luncheon” (BJ 10). Among “the dreams of acquisition at Weatherend . . . John Marcher found himself, among such suggestions, disconcerted almost equally by the presence of those who knew too much and by that of those who knew nothing” (BJ 10).

This world, in which he is perfectly capable of functioning and of whom he is an unobtrusive part, passes him by – means nothing to him. He is encompassed by his interiority, which conceptualizes the world as complete – contrary to the principles of reduced laughter. And because he cannot, and does not want to, put himself in a proper relation to the external – society, individuals, or their values – he relies on his imagination to acquire some sort of relationship to the world. However, his imagination makes him arrive at flawed conclusions because Marcher's mind does not embrace the openness to actuality around him – in other words, he does not embrace reduced laughter. Instead, he is obsessed with his internal meanings and interpretations.

This is demonstrated in his disposition towards time, past actuality and history – he simply has no way of relating to them. “The great rooms caused so much poetry and history to press upon him that he needed some straying apart to feel in a proper relation with them” (BJ 10–11); “He accepted her amendments, he enjoyed her corrections, though the moral of them was, she pointed out, that he *really* didn't remember the least thing about her; and he only felt it as a drawback that when all was made strictly historic there didn't appear much of anything left” (BJ 13). What his getting wrong all of the particulars of the meeting with May in Rome implies is that – as he has a very tenuous relation to actuality and the exterior – his imagination is free to take over his awareness of the world when its factuality has been pushed aside by time. His mind does not need to remember the outside when it is not in principle receptive to the idea of openness to the outside. This reaching out with imagination at this moment when his mind cannot remember and when all immediate exterior sources of understanding – which he could conveniently mimic to pass as normal in society – are unavailable suggests that his

imagination, of all the mental processes, is the one that allows him to make the most sense of the world, one on which he relies on to make connection with the outside world. The problem is that the source of Marcher's imagination is his unlaughing, unfunny and closed-off consciousness, which precludes him from being wide-open to the social world, to the actuality of the past and present, and to all the possibilities of his life.

On the other hand, May's imagination is carnival since it is fed by her carnival mind, which is itself an embodiment of the notion of reduced laughter. Her mind is open to social experience, capable of truly communicating with other beings, and open to meanings and possibilities. Bruns views May as "a mirror to his [Marcher's] thoughts and ideas, complicit with them in every way"; her consciousness, however, "functions quite differently than Marcher's" since she "understands consciousness in terms of its potential, its freedom and openness, and (in Bakhtinian language) its unfinalizability. She struggles to baffle Marcher's doom by performing what could be called a comic reading of his predicament: there are no 'Beasts'—only other people" (4). May's open, unfinalized consciousness is the opposite of Marcher's finalized one. She is a potential asset for Marcher because her consciousness allows her to imagine another fate for Marcher, and to imagine that her presence will be sufficient to baffle Marcher's doom. So, she agrees to watch with him and wait for the event he is expecting, and they continue to live in this strange union of minds for years. Her fine, carnival mind dares to imagine an end to Marcher's waking nightmare of a non-blinking vigil for the unknown, an end brought about by her ability to participate in the communion of minds – in the sharing that changes the other. The reason the dialogues between Marcher and May Bartram do not become dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense – in which the "dialogics create comic loopholes through which we escape laws, systems, 'Beasts' of burden" – is that Marcher perceives Bartram as a "witness to rather than participant in his consciousness" (Bruns 6). Consequently, the fact that May Bartram shares in Marcher's secret does not change the monologic character of the secret, or of Marcher as a "monologic hero," for although the two characters interact verbally, they have "*nothing* to talk about," and "John Marcher does nothing but allow May Bartram to enter into his own monologic field of vision" (Bruns 7).

To summarize, it is possible to identify comedy in the tale if the comedy is conceptualized in the Bakhtinian sense of reduced laughter, which is an appropriate move, considering the fact that

James's comedy is infused with comic seriousness. Reduced laughter functions as a "means of critical reflection"; it is a "form-shaping, meaning-bearing attitude, and not ... a literalization of an expressive response" (Bruns 3). The humour in the tale, therefore, is not thought of here as a physical response, the vocalization of a sensation that rings out. Instead, it is a philosophical attitude towards life as such. Its essence is in the openness towards possibility, towards the otherness, towards true social communication and mutual sharing of minds. In the story, May is the embodiment of these values of reduced laughter. Her openness shapes the possibility of her imagination. In particular, she imagines a better fate for Marcher.

However, Marcher is the opposite of May, and so her sharing of company with Marcher never becomes intimate and never leads to the sharing of the minds. Consequently, Marcher's imagination never outgrows itself. Their dialogues remain monological in the sense that May does not break through the shell of Marcher's interiority. Her dialogical effort is in vain because Marcher's imagination is as firmly circumscribed by his interiority as his consciousness. Both are bogged down in unsmiling self-absorption. Marcher's imagination fails in bringing him peace and actual life lived since he is obsessed with oneself as a fixed meaning in lieu of sharing in the company of May and of enjoying in the relativity of life and meaning. Understanding this philosophy of reduced laughter, embodied by the character of May, would have saved Marcher. Instead, his withdrawal from the social world into himself made his life a lamentable disaster.

Conclusion

The subject of this thesis was the study and interpretation of the interlacement of the world of comedy in several works of Henry James and the reflection in these fictions of certain specified problems and challenges of modern society which assist to bring forth the social ambience therein.

The thesis argued that the comedy in the analysed works of Henry James satirizes several challenging, problematic socio-cultural and economic developments of contemporary modern times through the ridicule and stigmatization of the mostly despicable characters who, under the sway of these developments, perpetrate their negative influence on the lives of other characters in the selected works.

Chapter I outlined briefly several critical approaches to the comedy in James's works, commented on their validity, revealed my outlooks, and pointed in the direction of the critical opinions and approaches I would later embrace toward the comedy in the selected works.

Chapter II established the currency of James's social insight, discussed the influence of the international social differences on James's works, and outlined the portrayal of the American and European scenes in James. The chapter then identified the negative influence of the socio-cultural and economic developments of: consumerism, materialism, moral abasement, objectification, commodification, commercialization, predatory financial acquisitiveness, rampant egotism, the interpenetration between the public and private spheres, and performativeness.

In Chapter III, I conducted the analyses in the six works of James with the intention of investigating the comedy therein, and of establishing the link between the comedy and the reflection in the fictions of the problems isolated in Chapter II. The following are my findings.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, James uses the plain comedy as a component in the mechanism of the comedy that implicitly satirizes the socio-economic developments of modernity through the ridicule and stigmatization of Sarah Stringham, Maud Lowder, Kate Croy and Merton Densher, who are on the receiving end of the most incisive satire because they cleave to the values of the materialistic, consumerist society. In these characters James ridicules and stigmatizes the selfish acquisitiveness, materialistic outlook, objectification, performativeness, moral abasement, and the interpenetration of the private and public spheres.

The comedy in *The Golden Bowl* satirizes the materialistic, consumerist American society of the nineteenth century through the discrediting mockery of the materialistic, acquisitive morality of the Ververs and the American business culture – its capitalists and industrialists – personified specifically by Adam Verver. The comedy questions the means of derivation of the American wealth by means of the satire of the unscrupulous means through which Adam Verver acquired his wealth. James ridicules and denounces the objectification and commodification of the Prince and Charlotte by the Ververs, and in so doing denounces the morality of objectification and commodification itself.

James contextualizes *The Portrait of a Lady* within the consumerist, materialistic society of the nineteenth century, and uses the devices of the plain comedy in *The Portrait of a Lady* to mock and criticise in a circuitous manner the consumerist, materialistic social values via the ridicule of Madame Merle's and Gilbert Osmond's egotism, moral abasement, acquisitiveness, materialism and objectification, consumerist outlook, and performativeness.

In *The Ambassadors*, the comedy satirizes the consumerist, materialistic values of the American society through the ridicule and stigmatization of the acquisitiveness and materialistic outlook of Mrs. Newsome, and through her association with the values, concepts and ideologies of commerce, industrialism, monopoly and consumerism. The comic effects and the comic sense of Strether reveal, mock and criticise the fact that the American consumerism- and materialism-inspired values are very high on the ladder of American values, compared to Europe. James also scorns the American indifference to the questionable practices that lead to the acquiring of wealth at any cost.

In an attempt to extend the range of the analysis of the comedy in this thesis, I included “The Turn of the Screw” and “The Beast in the Jungle” as examples of the ‘borderline’ works of Henry James, in which the comedic effect in a traditional sense is not one of their pronounced features. These works allow us to appreciate the nature of the extreme limit beyond which the insight into the social scene, and the connection between the comedy and the modern social scene cannot be easily established.

In my interpretation, “The Turn of the Screw” invites the reader to enjoy it exclusively for its Gothic effect, which is why I think it ultimately impossible to claim any substantial links between the comedy in this work and the reflection of the modern social scene with its problems. However, the treatment of the Gothic effects in the novel is effectively also the examination of the means by which

the tale defies the interpretative associations combining a reading of the text for the reflection of modern social problems, and a comic reading of the text. The perspective on the analysis of the comedy in the tale I proposed is based on the relief theories and incongruity theories of humour. I claimed that James's intended effect of the tale on the reader is produced in the interaction with the effects of the genre whose conventions he borrows – Gothic fiction. I explained how the impact of the Gothic devices produces excess unconscious energies, which engender reflex laughter. I also described how the realisation of the futility of the interpretative effort invokes the feeling of incongruity, which, in turn, generates the awareness of comedy.

Given its dramatic compactness, "The Beast in the Jungle" is incapable of sustaining a consequential or meaningful enough image of society. Consequently, it is impossible to establish a link between James's social reality, its reflection in the work and the comedy found therein. However, the study of the interiority of Marcher's imagination is effectively the study of the outline of the boundary which prevents us from establishing the link. In the analysis of the tale, I presented a reading based on the idea of the comedy in the tale as reduced laughter, reiterating the findings of Bruns. I claimed that the problem of egotistical Marcher lies in his defunct imagination, and I contrasted his imagination to that of May, who possesses imagination which reflects the advantages of espousing the principles of reduced laughter.

In conclusion, Henry James's narratives may at the first glance seem morally ambiguous or elusory since James does not confine his characters into ideological corners, his style abounds with absences and indirectness, and the conclusions of his most famous narratives are for the most part shrouded in multivocal possibilities. However, I find that within that scintillating knot of potentialities brought to life by the author a judgement on the characters and society still abides – not clamorous nor uncouth nor unbecoming to the stylistic decorum of James, but more of a discriminating observation and a contemplation about deeper truth. It is satisfying that such is the case with James, even though the notion of tying up of the loose ends of interpretation in his works with categorical certainty still equals to an idle fancy. In any way, I attempted in this thesis to render an explanation of the comic sense of Henry James, and to tease out the relation that the comedy in the selected works has to the social afflictions of modern age in these fictions. While I may have appeared too eager in coaxing out some of

the meanings in my thesis, and may have seemed to exaggerate somewhat the proportions of the effects under scrutiny, let me say in my defence that I have always applied myself to the interpretation of James's narratives in question from within the words of the texts, and that my readings – if some of them come across as too shrill – in no way mean to suggest that James himself upsets the polished surfaces of the style of his narratives. James's major novels are psychologically and psychoanalytically suggestive, impressionistic masterpieces of art, whose discolorations – if they can be said to have some – still advance the fine filigree of his designs. Excluding the two experimental, shorter narratives, whose comic readings I have already presented – the same goes for the commentaries about their relationships to the problems of modernity – I have arrived at the discovery that in James's major novels that I have been here concerned with the comedy in relation to the social maladies expresses the quiet, uncommitted and impartial but derisive chastisement of the infamy of those evils and of those who yield to them or actively embrace them, especially in order to harm others. In my opinion, James's remarks on the state of the civilisation and on its blemishes stand even today, and, in that contemporary light, seem – if anything – only too gentle and dispassionate.

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