THE ABUSE OF CONFIDENCE AS A MAJOR THEME IN THE NOVELS OF HENRY JAMES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	THE INITIAL PHASE	9
	<u>The American</u> <u>Washington Square</u>	
III.	THE TRANSITION	24
	<u>The Portrait of a Lady</u> <u>The Aspern Papers</u> <u>The Spoils of Poynton</u>	
IV.	THE MAJOR PHASE	53
	<u>The Ambassadors</u> <u>The Wings of the Dove</u> <u>The Golden Bowl</u>	
V.	CONCLUSION	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY		98

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The first notebook of Henry James begins with a sketch of a proposed novel that in time took the title of *Confidence*.[1] James chose the title with intended irony, for *Confidence* is the story of compounded musunderstandings that seem to point to someone's having abused the confidence of another. In the sketch found in the notebook, the misunderstanding, the supposed abuse of confidence, results in confusion, violence, and social disintegration. In published form, *Confidence* was not a very successful novel, possibly because its ending was weakened to appeal to the magazine-reading public for which it first appeared. James himself did not think the work of sufficient importance to appear in the famous collected edition of his works which he prepared toward the end of his career (1907-1917).[2] Nevertheless, *Confidence*, at least as James first envisioned it, holds a certain significance. For it is a pertinent example, even in its ironic title, of what is perhaps the most favored of the literary themes of Henry James--the abuse of confidence.

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[1]F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York, 1955), pp. 3-6.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

Again and again one encounters the abuse of confidence in the novels of Henry James, either as focal point of the plot or as a peripheral by-product of character and situation. The theme assumes a grand variety of complexities and colorations, but almost all such variations take place within a recurring pattern of conflict between love or close friendship and a selfish desire for material gain, frequently represented quite directly as money. These two elements seldom appear in the same proportion, and their relative importance varies from novel to novel. Nevertheless, they are a salient feature of many of the novels, and the abuse of confidence is concomitant with their presence.

The particular significance which James assigns to these elements is partially the result of his unusual background. Whereas many writers may experience and observe love and a few may also experience and observe wealth, Henry James was born to a peculiar situation wherein both factors were represented to an unusual degree.

The intensely Calvinistic grandfather of Henry James immigrated to the United States from Ireland, sometime around 1789. He was a man of great vitality and business acumen and, when he died in 1832, he left an estate valued at some three million dollars. Since Henry's father had abandoned his studies for the Presbyterian ministry to pursue ideas

which were heretical to Calvinism, the grandfather attempted to disinherit him.[3] But, with the help of the rest of the family, the will was altered. Having received his share of the fortune, Henry's father was free to develop his own ideas of religion and philosophy. In time, he gained the respect and admiration of many of the foremost philosophers of the day, Emerson among them.

> Forever in correspondence with Swedenborgians, Sandemanians, Fourierists, and others of the sectarian underworld, he was likewise known to Carlyle, Mill, and others in England, which he several times visited. Nearly everyone thought him remarkable. "He is," observed Emerson, "the best man and companion in the world."[4]

Henry James Senior finally centered his philosophy on Swedenborgianism, a philosophy of Christian mysticism which held that men, by the very act of their creation, were estranged from God. Men would never evolve to the divine state, the elder James believed, until they

> allow [ed] themselves to be inwardly "refined out of that supreme love of self and the world that alone constitutes hell." When, in short, the communal sense (had) at last replaced egregious selfhood, the Divine Natural Humanity [would] make its appearance on earth and the creation be done.[5]

Thus it may be seen that the elder James's philosophy was a philosophy of love--a love based on the Christian ethic of self-abnegation. Such an idealistic philosophy requires

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[3] F. W. Dupee, Henry James (location not given, 1951), pp. 5-6.

[4] Ibid., p. 10.

[5] Ibid., p. 11.

its advocates to sit in constant judgement of the motives of themselves and others lest anyone be guided by "love of self," thereby acting to the detriment of the "communal sense." Even though the elder James never actively preached Swedenborgianism to his children, and even though the younger Henry James claimed to have become acquainted with the details of the philosophy only after reading the Literary Remains of his father,[6] the influence of the elder James must have been considerable, for the James family existed in close and harmonious activity.

> The family worked, traveled, and amused itself as a single unit, a body of equals; homesickness overtook any member of it who was obliged to be absent for very long from the others. Above all they talked and debated together, for the elder James, so articulate himself, encouraged his children to speak their least wish or thought, transforming everything within them into consciousness and sociability.[7]

Reared in such an environment, James naturally developed a keen sensitivity to the sanctity of human relationships. Obviously, to abuse the confidence of another would be to act in the interest of one's "supreme love of self." To employ love as the device by which one gains such confidence would be to compound one's sin.

The place of money in James's conception of the abuse of confidence may also be partially accounted for by his early conditioning. Having inherited the millions from

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[6]Ibid., p. 24. [7]Ibid., pp. 23-24.

Grandfather James's estate, the family was, as James phrased it in later years, "never in a single case. . .for two generations, guilty of a stroke of business."[8] Such a statement suggests the following speculation. James, since he was born to money, developed a fraternal understanding of others who had money. This community of interest obviously would be natural for a person in his situation. On the other hand, James developed an equally intense interest in those who wanted money and did not have it. For to confess to having lived for two whole generations on an inherited bounty is to confess to being ignorant of the ways in which money is acquired. As ignorance begets fear, having money and not knowing, or caring to know, how it was made makes one fearful of being victimized by every individual who is aware of this ignorance. Furthermore, when one comes into money quickly, easily, and in large amounts, one's anxiety is heightened by the suspicion that he might be parted from his money with equal facility.

In such a situation, the James family chose to avoid business. They could not, however, avoid people. And one need know nothing of business to know that there are always people, unscrupulous people without money, who are willing, in fact eager, to acquire money by abusing the confidence of those who do have it--even if it means abusing the

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[8]Dupee, p. 6.

confidence of love. It is likely that James witnessed the confidence schemes being enacted upon other moneyed people. Living in the fluid, ever-expanding society that characterized New York during the period surrounding the Civil War, the James family may at some time have been the object of such an attempt. At any rate, within the James family, such a possibility was more than merely hypothetical, and it seems natural that James would be conversant with the various aspects of such a possibility.

Although the two basic factors of love and money were seldom missing from James's theme, his conception of the abuse of confidence was not static. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how James originally viewed this theme, how his view underwent significant alteration, and how at last, in the novels of his maturity, his treatment of this frailty became a triumph of humanistic comprehension. In general, the demonstration of James's progress will focus upon his characterization of the necessary parties to any abuse of confidence--the abuser and the abused, towards which James's changing attitudes best reveal his growing awareness of the difficulties encountered in a valid assessment of moral culpability.

Since the abuse of confidence is represented throughout the full body of James's works, including a considerable number of the short stories, it would be impossible to present a thorough analysis of the subject within the limitations of this thesis. Consequently, the study will be confined to

eight representative novels, which, when examined in the order of their writing, exemplify three distinct periods in the evolution of James's theme. The American, 1877, and Washington Square, 1881, represent James's initial position, which is characterized by his tendency to assign absolute moral culpability. The Portrait of a Lady, 1881, The Aspern Papers, 1881, and The Spoils of Poynton, 1897, represent a transitional period, which is characterized by James's growing awareness of the complications and difficulties involved in assessing guilt. The guilty, although never excused, are at least allowed an explanation of their motives. At this time, James is no longer an absolutist, but he has yet to arrive at his third and final moral position which seems at times to approach moral relativism. This final position is evident throughout the three novels of James's mature period, The Wings of the Dove, 1902, The Ambassadors (published in 1903, but actually written before The Wings of the Dove), and The Golden Bowl, 1904.

As James altered his portrayal of guilt in the abuse of confidence, he also altered the role of the victim. In the novels representative of the early and the transitional periods, the ultimate response of the victim is passive acceptance of his situation. In the three later novels, however, the response of the victim undergoes a significant evolution: the victim's acceptance of abuse is no longer passive, and when he reacts positively he automatically is

called upon to assume moral responsibility for some of the circumstances of his victimization.

All of the aforementioned factors--love, money, the abuse of confidence, the guilt growing out of it, the response of the victim--contribute to the moral view constantly evolving towards an ultimate statement in the three novels of James's maturity. This thesis will attempt to explicate in full that statement. For James's theme of the abuse of confidence, together with all of its elements, was in itself only the vehicle of a finely attuned moral awareness.

CHAPTER II

THE INITIAL PHASE

Henry James's initial period as a novelist began in 1876 with the publication of his first claimable novel, *Roderick Hudson*, and ended in 1881, when the appearance of *The Portrait of a Lady*, long planned and well executed, marked the end of his apprenticeship and the beginning of a new, more mature phase. Between *Roderick Hudson* and *The Portrait* came *The American*, 1877, *The Europeans*, 1878, *Daisy Miller*, 1879, *Confidence*, 1880, and *Washington Square*, 1881. From these novels *The American* and *Washington Square* have been chosen to exemplify James's initial application of the abuse of confidence as a theme. *The American* has been selected over the several other novels in which the theme appears for the simple reason that, with the possible exception of the much shorter *Daisy Miller*, it is the best known and most widely read novel of the initial phase. *Washington Square*, though not so well known as some of the other works, has been included because it is the last of the series and therefore offers not only an early treatment of James's theme, but also a more effective contrast with the theme as seen in *The Portrait* which appeared in the same year.

The American

In *The American*, the abuse of confidence is interwoven with James's famous international theme, which presents the new American civilization in conflict with the older European culture. Christopher Newman, a successful American businessman, represents the new world. A candid, direct sort of fellow, Newman is self-assured, innocent, and extremely wealthy. Also, like many successful businessmen, he is aggressive--he either refuses to acknowledge or fails to recognize obstacles which stand in his way.

This latter point in Newman's personality must be duly stressed, for it accounts for the particular form of abuse which he encounters. In general, the victim of abused confidence is considered to be one who has been the object of some conspiracy to gain his confidence and then profit by it. But in Newman's case, as well as others to be considered, it is demonstrated that the ways in which confidence may be abused are too various and subtle to be so simply categorized. That Christopher Newman blindly insists on placing confidence in the Bellegardes, people who have never solicited his confidence and who consequently feel no compunction in abusing it, does not alleviate the heartbreak and frustration which result. Nor is the result diminished by the Bellegardes' refusal to profit from Newman, for the motives behind their

refusal are in no way altruistic. Thus, as James relates it, Newman's case is an extraordinary but nonetheless credible instance of abused confidence.

The story of Christopher Newman's abuse begins when, shortly after his arrival in Paris, he announces to a new acquaintance, Mrs. Tristram, that he has amassed enough money and is now interested in taking a wife--a magnificent woman who may be "perched on the pile, like a statue on a monument."[1] Mrs. Tristram introduces him to Clare de Cintre, the widowed daughter of the Bellegardes, a nearly impoverished noble family of "fabulous antiquity." When Newman attempts to call on Clare, he is "gravely but urbanely" turned away by the reigning head of the family, Clare's brother, Urbain de Bellegarde.

Newman abandons his proposed courtship and travels about Europe for a summer; but on his return he straightforwardly resumes his attentions to Clare. This time, he is tentatively received, but not welcomed, at the Bellegardes' establishment. Newman soon concludes that Clare de Bellegarde is everything he has dreamed of, and after a remarkably brief campaign, he proposes marriage. Clare neither accepts nor rejects him, but insists that for six months he make no further mention of the subject.

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[1]Henry James, The American, Vol. II of The Novels and Tales of Henry James, (New York, 1935), p. 49.

Undaunted by Clare's terms, Newman arranges to meet the rest of the family. When Newman is introduced to Clare's mother, the elderly Madame de Bellegarde, he instinctively recognizes her as the real head of the family. With characteristic directness, Newman approaches the old lady and tells her that he "wants to take a wife,"--her daughter. Clare's mother refuses to favor his "project." Newman counters by telling her that he is very rich, naming an impressive "round number," and Madame de Bellegarde reluctantly begins to reconsider Newman's proposal.

Several days later, Urbain announces to Newman that he has been formally accepted by the heads of the family. Newman is aware that the Bellegarde's acceptance of an unpolished manufacturer of bathtubs, no matter how rich he may be, is going to be extremely difficult for them. He desires a more thorough commitment, and thus addresses Madame de Bellegarde:

> "I will do for your daughter, if she will accept me, everything that a man can do for a woman. I am happy to tell you that, as a promise--a pledge. I consider that on your side you make me an equal pledge. You will not back out, eh?"[2]

The response of the Bellegardes is in character with the grand pride to which they so often refer:

> "I don't know what you mean by 'backing out,'" said the marquise. . . ."It suggests a movement of which I think no Bellegarde has ever been guilty."

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[2]James, The American, p. 234.

"Our word's our word," Urbain pronounced." We recognize that we've given it."[3]

Newman is more than ever aware that the elder Bellegardes despise him, but, with this assurance of their good faith, he feels free to pursue a relaxed and confident courtship. At the end of the appointed six months, Newman again proposes, and this time Clare accepts him.

Newman is elated. To announce his engagement, he proposes to give an elaborate party. The Bellegardes are scandalized at the prospect of such a vulgar display. But, if Newman _must_ have a party, it is the Bellegardes who will give it, and they do.

It is this party that proves Newman's undoing. Newman conducts himself with what he believes to be considerable reserve. But Madame de Bellegarde is deeply humiliated by Newman's easy familiarity towards her aristocratic guests, who have been "selected for their typically august character." She can no longer endure the prospect of Newman's entering the family. When several days later Newman calls on Clare, he is informed that the marriage is off, that Clare is preparing to leave town.

Newman is staggered. He demands explanations, but Clare can give none. The poor girl is obviously within the power of her mother and her brother; they have somehow intimidated her. Accused of having acted falsely, Urbain

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[3] _Ibid._, pp. 234-235.

de Bellegard replies:

> "We of course quite repudiate the charge of having broken faith with you. We left you entirely at liberty to make yourself agreeable to my sister. We left her quite at liberty to entertain your proposal. When she accepted you we said nothing. We therefore quite observed our promise. It was only at a later stage of the affair, and on quite a different basis, as it were, that we determined to speak.[4]

As for their reason for such a shift, the Bellegardes simply explain that they had once thought that they might be able to accept Newman, but his behavior at the party has proved to them that--"We really cannot reconcile ourselves to a commercial person."[5] Suffering from "a burning, tingling sense of personal outrage," Newman leaves the Bellegardes, determined to find some method to set things right.

The apparent solution to Newman's problem comes to him from the deathbed confession of Clare's younger brother, Valentin. Valentin informs Newman that there is a powerful family secret, the possession of which will induce the Bellegardes to meet any terms. Madame de Bellegarde, as it turns out, is guilty of the murder of her husband. Armed with irrefutable evidence of the crime, Newman accosts the Bellegardes. He insists that they persuade Clare to leave the convent to which she has fled. But the Bellegardes are adamant. They bluff. They will not meet Newman's terms. Newman considers exposing the Bellegardes. He sees, however,

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[4]James, The American, p. 368. [5]Ibid., p. 371.

that he cannot change them or the society which they represent. To seek revenge would only be to become as small, as mean, as egoistic as the Bellegardes themselves. Newman is too great a figure for that, too magnanimous. He destroys the evidence and lets them go.

Perhaps the best explanation of the abuse of confidence as seen in The American is found in the critical preface to the revised edition, in which James attempted, by various devices, to strengthen the quarrel between Newman and the Bellegardes.[6] Looking back on it, James admits that The American still lacks verisimilitude. His mature judgement tells him that the Bellegardes would "positively have jumped... at my rich American." But, James relates, "I was so possessed of my idea that Newman should be ill-used--which was the essence of my subject--that I attached too scant an importance to its method of coming about."[7] All that mattered at the time was that Newman encounter a trick-- "any damnable trick."[8] This frank admission accounts not only for James's lack of reality, but also for the intensity with which he characterizes the Bellegardes as thoroughly decadent. To perpetrate a "damnable trick," one must call on damnable characters.

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[6]Max F. Schulz, "The Bellegardes' Feud with Christopher Newman," American Literature, XXVII (March, 1955), pp. 42-55.

[7]Henry James, The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces, by Henry James (New York, 1934), p. 35.

[8]Ibid.

The focal point of James's characterization of the Bellegardes is a pride so intense that it has become both murderous and suicidal. This insane pride, for example, forces the Bellegardes to reject the influx of new American life, and to refuse the money which might have revived them. So lethal is the Bellegarde's pride that Stephen Spender sees the entire family as dead from its own poison.

> The Marquise destroys her husband's life and the happiness of her daughter. The attractive but purposeless younger son [Valentin] is killed in a farcical anachronistic duel. The daughter, because she attempts to escape from her death at home, is self-condemned to a living tomb, for that is Newman's vision of a Carmelite convent. The remaining members of the family are living corpses.[9]

It is to this pride, this supreme love of self, that the Bellegardes are responding when they violate the spirit, if not the letter, of their agreement with Newman.

The distinction on which the Bellegardes act is a fine one, sufficient to justify their conduct to themselves. But it offers scant satisfaction to Newman, who has assumed that they would act honestly, or better put, as he himself would have acted. Moreover, if one should allow the Bellegardes the "justice" of their fine distinction (which James does not) and even if one should admit that an experienced businessman like Newman should have been more cautious (another lack of verisimilitude on James's part), the Bellegardes are revealed in the end to be inexcusably guilty. Their response

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[9]Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element (London, 1937), p. 40.

to Newman's threat of exposure shows that their conduct has been based on a calculated faith in Newman's "remarkable good nature" which they have not scrupuled to use against him. They have abused Newman's confidence in their integrity and then, ironically, have relied for their own protection on their confidence in Newman's integrity.

As related in the preface, James's main interest in The American centered on Newman's reaction to the Bellegardes' abuse. As James conceived the story, the victim would be badly hurt, would harbor feelings of revenge, but would let his betrayers go. He would not forgive them, but at the end of the novel he would settle for the "moral necessity" of his "unappreciated magnanimity." And that, in effect, is Newman's reaction. His response to ill treatment, although initially active, almost aggressive, becomes the more passive reaction "of a strong man indifferent to his strength and too wrapped in fine, too wrapped above all in other and intenser, reflexions for the assertion of his 'rights.'"[10]

Thus, the abuse of confidence as seen in The American establishes the characteristics of James's early application of the theme. In this initial phase, the guilt of the offenders is absolute, and the response of their victim is ultimately passive.

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[10]James, The Art of the Novel, p. 22.

Washington Square

The same moral pattern observed in The American is also present in Washington Square. Shorter and less complex than The American, Washington Square is the straightforward relation of an actual incident which James recorded in his notebook in 1879.[11] The plot of Washington Square turns upon Catherine Sloper, the only daughter of a wealthy doctor. Her father has never recovered from the loss of his wife and his son, and he somehow feels that Catherine is a poor recompense. Although she is a good girl, she is neither pretty nor bright. She is not "abnormally deficient," but she nonetheless takes a "secondary place." Twenty years old when the main action of the story begins, Catherine is without any prospects except the inheritance of a sizeable fortune from her father. This prospect is sufficient, however, to induce the handsome and clever Morris Townsend to pay court to the surprised girl, who has never before had a suitor.

It seems to Catherine that Morris Townsend talks "the way a young man might talk in a novel; or, better still in a play, on the stage. . ."[12] and innocent and unworldly Catherine is quite taken with him. That Morris is indeed an actor is

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[11]Matthiessen, Notebooks, p. 12.

[12]Henry James, Washington Square, (New York, 1959), p. 31.

apparent to Catherine's father. Through various inquiries, Dr. Sloper confirms his suspicion that Morris is a mercenary adventurer, and he refuses to consent to the courtship. Furthermore, if Catherine marries Townsend against the wishes of her father, he promises to disinherit her.

Catherine is deeply hurt, not by her father's threat, but by his disapproval and harsh words. When her father orders Morris away, Catherine corresponds with her lover and meets him in secret, but she dutifully refuses to elope. Her father, however, continues to taunt her, and in time she informs Morris that she will marry him whenever he is ready. Morris backs away, of course, for he will never be ready to take the girl until Dr. Sloper relents about the inheritance.

Weary of the deadlock that follows, Dr. Sloper takes Catherine to Europe, where he hopes she will lose interest in her lover. But the trip abroad only strengthens Catherine's love for Morris and lessens her regard for her father. Upon returning to New York, Catherine tells Morris that her father has not softened towards him. Morris is disturbed. He has hoped that while in Europe Catherine might work on her father and bring him around. The unsuspecting girl does not detect the resultant change in Morris.

> "Nothing is changed--nothing but my feeling about father. . . .I have been as good as I could, but he doesn't care. Now I don't care either. I don't know whether I have grown bad; perhaps I have. But I don't

> care for that. I've come home to be married--that's all I know."[13]

Morris realizes, finally, that he is cornered. But he has no intention of existing on the meagre income (meagre, at least by his luxurious standards) which Catherine's mother has left her. He hedges and attempts to excuse himself, finally announcing that he cannot bear the thought of Catherine's renouncing her comforts for his comparative poverty. The imperceptive Catherine is only encouraged by such a noble gesture. Morris becomes exasperated. He attempts to provoke Catherine into quarreling with him, but Catherine simply fails to understand; she refuses to quarrel. Finally, since there is no honest way to escape the deceitful situation he has created, Morris manages a retreat which, it is finally apparent to Catherine, means his abandonment of her.

> It seemed to her that a mask had suddenly fallen from his face. He had wished to get away from her; he had been angry and cruel, and said strange things, with strange looks. She was smothered and stunned.[14]

Now, at last, Catherine understands why Morris has been interested in her. She tries to believe otherwise, even pretends that Morris's departure is only some evil hallucination; but he does not return.

As time passes, Catherine lapses into an ineffectual spinsterhood. In old age, Catherine's father, fearful that

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[13]James, Washington Square, p. 149.

[14]Ibid., p. 171

after his death Morris may come back to resume his attempts, continues with his plan to disinherit her. But Catherine is beyond caring. When after many years Morris does appear, hoping at least to pick up the inheritance left Catherine by her mother, Catherine sees that he is unchanged, is still as selfish as ever, and refuses him.

In Washington Square, James once again assigns unquestionable guilt, this time to the person of Morris Townsend. Morris according to the prevailing opinion of the reliable people of the book, is"not a gentleman," he is "abominably selfish," "shallow," and "cruel." He is, in fact, an unscrupulous reprobate who "ought to be horsewhipped." Though he is scarcely troubled by pride, he is every bit as self-seeking and egoistic as the Bellegardes. He does not hesitate to direct his mischief at a girl who is so simple and trusting that she literally does not know the meaning of the word "mercenary."[15] Failing in his first effort, he makes himself doubly detestable by repeating his attempt. All things considered, Morris Townsend is a thoroughly despicable character, as "damnable" in his own rude way as the more sophisticated Bellegardes.

As for Catherine, she has neither the strength nor the intelligence of a Christopher Newman. From her first awareness that Norris has only been trying to use her,

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[15] Ibid., p. 67

> her life is over. Nothing which happens now can have any effect upon her. James wished to prove this beyond any shadow of a doubt, and so he added . . . [the] chapters detailing subsequent events and showing her passivity.[16]

Catherine's refusal of Townsend's second offer resembles in spirit Newman's refusal to blackmail the Bellegardes. Both reactions have a negative quality which exemplifies James's initial conception of the theme: the overpowering, unrelieved guilt of those who abuse confidence, and the ultimately passive response of their victims.

James was probably aware that this clear-cut, black-and-white, sort of characterization is the stuff of melodrama. But James, by virtue of his position on the social and economic ladder, was inclined naturally to regard the confidence game more seriously than such a writer as Mark Twain. In Twain's fiction, the confidence man is generally a picaresque figure, an amusing and nearly forgivable rogue, who cleverly dupes his deserving victims. But James took himself and his work more seriously--perhaps even as Somerset Maugham once stated, too seriously--[17] and he thus was beset by the problem of creating sympathy for his victim while still making the villain attractive enough to inspire plausible confidence. Such a task might prove difficult for the most experienced writer, much less one still in apprenticeship. Thus, if in

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[16]Cornelia P. Kelley, _The Early Development of Henry James_ (Urbana, 1930), p. 280.

[17]John Beechcroft, "Maugham on Henry James," _Saturday Review_, (December 4, 1954), p. 18.

his early period James occasionally relied on the melodramatic, his offense may be easily forgiven in the light of his later achievement.

CHAPTER III

THE TRANSITION

As he continued to develop moral acumen Henry James became increasingly aware of the difficulty inherent in assessing guilt in absolute terms. Black-and-white morality might serve those authors interested only in satisfying the Victorian appetite for melodrama, but since this moral view was basically unreal, it would not long serve such a writer as James. A dedicated artist, he was commited to upholding the integrity of his medium. As he stated in 1884, "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."[1] Consequently, as his works matured they became increasingly concerned with more accurately revealing the social complexities involved in judging misbehavior. This new concern is to be seen in most of the major works written during the time in which James was making the transition between his initial phase and the final period, which F. O. Matthiesen terms the major phase.[2]

This transitional period covered roughly twenty years (1881-1902), during which were produced such works as

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[1]Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," The Portable Henry James (New York, 1965), p. 393.

[2]F. O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase (New York, 1944).

The Portrait of a Lady , 1881 , Daisy Miller, 1883 , The Bostonians , 1886 , The Princess Casamassima, 1886, The Aspern Papers, 1888 , The Spoils of Poynton, 1897 , and The Awkward Age, 1899 . From this period three works have been selected, one each from the early, late, and middle portions, to demonstrate James's changing conception of the abuse of confidence. The Portrait of a Lady, the most widely read of the works from this period offers an outstanding example of abuse. The Aspern Papers and The Spoils of Poynton, two well-known shorter works, exhibit interesting variations on the theme.

The Portrait of a Lady

In writing The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James was responding to the artistic challenge of presenting a work of fiction in which an intelligent woman was the true center of interest. To James's way of thinking, no English or American writer had yet succeeded at the task. Possibly because of a certain lack of interest in the problem, few writers had even attempted it. James admitted that this lack of interest was not entirely unjustified, in that "Millions of presumptuous girls, intelligent or not intelligent, daily affront their destiny, and what is it open to their destiny to be, at most, that we should make an ado about it?"[3] James felt, however,

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[3]James, The Art of the Novel, p. 48.

that many authors avoided portraying women not because the woman's role in life was really of such minor importance--any honest appraisal of life denied that idea--but rather because they feared the problems involved. As far as James was concerned, such writers might be considered authors, but they were not true artists.

For Henry James, "the really addicted artist," "difficulty braved" was the "beautiful incentive." James proposed not only to brave the difficulty but to intensify the danger. Rather than taking the easy and obvious way of making his study a view of the relations of those surrounding the woman, he would "place the center of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness."[4] Thus was born Isabel Archer, the central figure of The Portrait of a Lady.

James's rendition of Isabel Archer is indeed a portrait, "like portraits on canvas. . .with all the gradations and completeness, the finish and pressure of effect that [his] medium can manage."[5] It is a large and intricate work, filled with "detail of the minutest,"[6] in which the abuse of confidence provides the major theme, the-picture-within-the picture of The Portrait of a Lady.

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[4] Ibid., p. 51.

[5] Laurence B. Holland, The Expense of Vision (Princeton, 1964), p. 43.

[6] Henry James, The Art of the Novel, p. 55.

The first sight of Isabel occurs when with her abrupt charm and disarming candor she walks across the lawn at Gardencourt, the Touchetts' English estate, and presents herself to her cousin Ralph Touchett, his invalid father, and the illustrious Lord Warburton. Her presence is explained with the revelation that Mrs. Touchett has discovered her niece back in Albany, and because she is sympathetic to the girl's poverty and approves of her independent attitudes, she has offered to show her the world. Isabel, who has "a great desire of knowledge," "an immense curiosity about life," and "whose deepest enjoyment [is] to feel the continuity between the movements of her own heart and the agitations of the world,[7] sees the offer as a chance to "live," to escape the common life which she feels is her only prospect if she agrees to marry her business-minded suitor, Casper Goodwood.

Gardencourt is not characterized by any great activity, but Isabel is delighted by the people she meets there. Her uncle is kind and sympathetic towards her, her cousin finds her amusing, and Lord Warburton is infatuated--so infatuated that he soon proposes marriage. Isabel firmly but gently refuses him, telling him that she has no wish to marry. When Warburton presses for her reasons, she replies, "I can't escape my fate. . .I can't escape unhappiness. . .in marrying you, I shall be trying to." To marry Lord Warburton, with

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[7]Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, Vol. III of The Novels and Tales of Henry James (New York, 1922), p. 45.

his great wealth and complete assurance of high station in life, would be to insulate herself "from life, from the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer." The disappointed Warburton recognizes the presumptuousness of Isabel's response: "I never saw a person judge things on such theoretic grounds,"[8] he declares with some justice.

When Isabel's cousin Ralph hears that she has refused such a grand figure as Lord Warburton, the girl takes on an added interest for him. He wonders what such a girl might do in the world if she were not poor; if, in fact, she were wealthy. Ralph discusses the idea with his father. The old man suggests that after he dies Ralph might marry the girl and share his enormous inheritance with her. But Ralph is himself an invalid and holds little hope of long outliving his father. He proposes instead that his father provide for Isabel by making over to her the major portion of what would have been his own inheritance. In doing so, Ralph explains, his father will "facilitate the execution of [Isabel's] good impulses." His father is at first unconvinced. "Isabel's a sweet young thing," he says, "but do you think she's as good as that?" "She's as good as her best opportunities," is Ralph's reply.[9]

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[8]James, The Portrait, pp. 187-188.

[9]Ibid., p. 264.

So it is decided that instead of five thousand pounds Isabel will receive seventy thousand pounds and will leave Gardencourt as an heiress--unaware, of course, that Ralph is behind this important change in her situation.

Meanwhile, Madame Merle, an old acquaintance of Mrs. Touchett, arrives at Gardencourt. Isabel is much attracted to this newcomer. Charming, highly accomplished, and rather worldly, she fulfills Isabel's ideas of "a great lady." Madame Merle is equally impressed with Isabel. The older woman finds Isabel's intelligence and fresh sincerity very appealing, and in the days that follow, the two women become quite close.

During this time they come to discuss many things. Isabel confides to Madame Merle all of her great ambitions about encountering Europe and life in general. Madame Merle accepts these confidences and offers in reply the sage advice of broad experience. Among other things, Madame Merle warns Isabel of the perils of staying so long in Europe that one becomes aimless. Herself an expatriate American, she speaks from experience, but also offers as an example a friend of hers, Gilbert Osmond, who lives in Florence. Osmond, she tells Isabel, is exceedingly clever but without ambition. He has "no career, no name, no position, no past, no future, no anything."[10] Isabel listens attentively to all of Madame

[10]James, The Portrait, p. 281.

Merle's warnings, but she is unimpressed by the dangers described to her. She believes herself clever enough to encounter life under any circumstance; all she longs for is a little money to make it easier.

Then Mr. Touchett dies. Isabel soberly appraises her new status, and sets out to see Europe with Mrs. Touchett.

When in time Isabel and her aunt arrive in Florence, Madame Merle, aware of Isabel's good fortune, arranges for her to meet Gilbert Osmond, with whom she discusses the proposed meeting. "Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous?" he cynically inquires. Madame Merle replies, "She corresponds to your description; it's for that I wish you to know her." In fact, Madame Merle is quite direct, "I want you...to marry her."[11] Responding to Madame Merle's directions, as well as Isabel's appeal, Osmond puts aside his customary indolence and begins to charm the girl.

Osmond is not without attractions. He lives with his convent-bred daughter, Pansy, in an exquisitely appointed hilltop villa, the furnishings of which proclaim him to be a man of unusually cultivated tastes.

> For Isabel, however, he is more than merely a man of cultivated taste. He is poor; he is solitary; he is handsome, in the finest, least obtrusive way. He is grave and somewhat sombre, yet with an effect not at

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[11]James, The Portrait, pp. 344-345.

> all depressing but only intriguing. He has evidently suffered and this has left scars, but the scars are not disfiguring. And above everything he has personal distinction of a kind and in a degree overwhelming to her.[12]

Osmond's personal distinction provides the fundamental attraction for Isabel. It makes him seem the first really interesting man she has met--far more interesting than Lord Warburton or the colorless Casper Goodwood. This attraction is further enhanced by what Isabel sees as Osmond's "noble contentment . . . in the pursuit of his cultivated tastes--in spite of the poverty that forces him to pursue them on a scale so gallingly modest."[13]

In time Osmond becomes confident enough to propose to Isabel. Her imagination has long been leading up to this point, and against the wishes of family and friends, all of whom have expressed their disapproval of Osmond, she marries him.

Three years later when the story resumes, things have not gone well between Osmond and Isabel. "They think very differently" on everything.[14] When Ralph and Lord Warburton arrive at the Osmonds' Roman villa, Ralph sees that Isabel's smile is a "representation," not the real truth. "Of old she had been curious and now she was indifferent . . . The free,

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[12]Dorothea Krook, _The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James_ (New York, 1962), p. 39.

[13]_Ibid_., p. 40.

[14]James, _The Portrait_, Vol. IV, p. 93.

keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something."[15] What Isabel is supposed to represent, Ralph decides, is Gilbert Osmond.

Since the time of Isabel's marriage, Madame Merle has carefully avoided the Osmonds. Isabel is somewhat puzzled by this behavior, but she still disagrees with her aunt's opinion that the marriage was made by Madame Merle. Nevertheless, when Isabel returns home one day and surprises Osmond and Madame Merle engaged in intimate conversation, she receives the discomforting impression of their being "old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them."[16] Madame Merle knows that Lord Warburton was once in love with Isabel, and she has come to Rome in hopes that she may convince Isabel to induce Lord Warburton to propose to Pansy, who is now of marriageable age. When Osmond bluntly asks the same thing of her, Isabel recognizes how similar his argument is to that of Madame Merle. That there is some plan between the two, Isabel cannot now deny.

That night she sits alone in her drawing room and examines for the first time her growing knowledge of how completely mistaken she has been about Osmond. "She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel;

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[15]*Ibid*., pp. 142-143

[16]*Ibid*., p. 165

she simply believed he hated her."[17] Somewhere, somehow, she has miscalculated.

> He had told her he loved the conventional; but there was a sense in which this seemed a noble declaration. In that sense, that of the love of harmony and order and decency and of all the stately offices of life, she went with him freely, and his warning had contained nothing ominous. But when, as the months had elapsed, she had followed him further and he had let her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, <u>then</u> she had seen where she really was.
>
> She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. Of course it had not been physical suffering; for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. She could come and go; she had her liberty; her husband was perfectly polite. He took himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers.[18]

She finally comes to understand that her husband objects not to her opinions, her general view of life, but to "her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his--attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park."[19]

Still, in her awareness that Osmond has been equally disappointed, she does not hate him. In fact she seeks to please him as regards Lord Warburton and Pansy. But she

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[17]James, <u>The Portrait</u>, Vol. IV, p. 190.

[18]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 196.

[19]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 200.

knows that Lord Warburton is courting her stepdaughter only so that he may be near her, and her attempt is thus half-hearted.

When Warburton leaves Rome without asking for Pansy, Osmond is furious. He accuses Isabel of having acted against him. Pained by Osmond's attitude, Isabel is further upset by Madame Merle's arriving to inquire what Isabel has done to Lord Warburton. As Madame Merle stubbornly insists on Isabel's explanation, Isabel comes to realize the horror of the whole affair. "Who are you--what are you?" Isabel demands. "What have you to do with my husband? What have you to do with me?" Looking directly at Isabel, Madame Merle answers, "Everything!"[20] Isabel is crushed. She realizes, finally, that her aunt has been right from the first: Madame Merle _has_ arranged her marriage.

Shortly thereafter, Osmond's sister reveals the whole story to Isabel, informing her that Osmond and Madame Merle are old lovers, and that Pansy is not the daughter of Osmond's first wife but of Madame Merle. Since neither of the two lovers was well provided for, they had separated with the thought of helping each other. Madame Merle, whose foremost thought was to provide for her daughter, successfully plotted Isabel's marriage to her former lover.

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[20]James, _The Portrait_, Vol. IV, p. 327.

Fully aware of how foully she has been used, Isabel no longer feels any obligation to obey Osmond. Against his wishes, she leaves for Gardencourt to be at the bedside of her dying cousin. There she encounters her old suitors, Lord Warburton and Casper Goodwood, both of whom are aware of how miserable her life has become. Warburton, although he is engaged to be married, pointedly tells her that she may stay on at his home, and Casper begs her to come away with him. But Isabel has promised Pansy that she will not abandon her. Refusing all offers, Isabel Archer starts again for Italy.

And thus ends the story of Isabel, or at least that portion which James intended to show. Anticipating the criticism which would be raised by this ending, the objections to his not having "seen the heroine to the end of her situation," James stated simply that "the whole of anything is never told."[21]

If one is to understand the case of Isabel Archer--the abuse of her confidence, her subsequent downfall and suffering, her voluntary return to Rome--one must conceive of The Portrait as a tragedy, with all of the associations which this conception implies. Unless Isabel is seen as a tragic figure who somehow contributes to her own downfall, one might accuse James of having produced only another somewhat

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[21]Matthiessen, Notebooks, p. 18.

melodramatic instance of victimized innocence as in Washington Square. Isabel, however, unlike Catherine Sloper, carries a proper share of the moral responsibility for the disaster which overtakes her.

As James pointed out in the preface to the revised edition, Isabel is a presumptuous creature; she is one of those who "affront their destiny" rather than confronting it.[22] Her presumptuousness is symptomatic of an innate tendency to romanticize her life. Isabel insists on seeing herself at the center of some great design, on seeing "her fate as a spiritual melodrama."[23] James wanted this tendency clearly shown, and in revising The Portrait he altered certain passages "to sharpen the reader's impression of how incorrigibly romantic Isabel's approach to life is."[24] Scattered throughout the opening pages of the book are numerous examples of these romantic tendencies, but the most striking instance is seen in her offhand rejection of Lord Warburton's offer of marriage. Warburton's conclusion that he has never seen "a person judge things on such theoretic grounds," reveals his awareness of the romantic presumptions on which Isabel's peculiar logic is based.

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[22]James, The Art of the Novel, p. 48.

[23]Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 131.

[24]Matthiessen, The Major Phase, p. 155.

Yet when Isabel tells her cousin Ralph of the reasons behind this refusal, she reveals still another defect in her character. Having considered her explanation, Ralph conjectures, "You want to drain the cup of experience.""No," Isabel replies, "I don't want to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink. I only want to see for myself."[25] In this passage is exposed a nascent aestheticism which James has already prepared for in his frequent references to Isabel's vanity, her self-centeredness, and her tendency to self-dramatization--all of which, as Dorothy Krook points out, are "functions . . . of her desire to appear good as well as be good, and therefore also the first signs of her growing commitment to the aesthetic view of things."[26] Isabel's open enthusiasm for the values she believes are embodied in Madame Merle; her desire to be like Madame Merle, so cultivated and civilized, so wise and so easy, offer still another example. In choosing Osmond, Isabel reaches the peak of her aesthetic inclination. Her cousin has warned her that Osmond is a "sterile dilettante," but she cannot comprehend his meaning. She sees only that Osmond is "fine;" that he is "the devoted custodian and martyr of the life of perfection."[27] Ironically, Isabel never comes to understand this element of aestheticism

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[25]James, *The Portrait*, Vol. III, p. 213.

[26]Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness*, p. 58.

[27]Chase, p. 67.

as a weakness in her personality. In the scene in which she ponders the ruin of her marriage, she reflects that

> when he pointed out to her so much of the baseness and shabbiness of life, opened her eyes so wide to the stupidity, the depravity, the ignorance of mankind . . . she had been properly impressed with the infinite vulgarity of such things, and of the virtue of keeping one's self unspotted by it.[28]

In choosing Osmond, Isabel is therefore gulty of having confused her aesthetic sensibilities, her sense of taste, with what she naively believes to be a sense of beauty or truth.

Isabel's examination of her marriage further reveals to her that she, too, has been guilty of deception. Isabel considers Osmond's side of the case:

> There were times when she almost pitied him; for if she had not deceived him in intention she understood how completely she must have done so in fact. She had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was. It was because she had been under the extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth.[29]

> She lost herself in infinite dismay when she thought of the magniture of <u>his</u> deception. It was a wonder perhaps, in view of this, that he didn't hate her more . . . She had known she had too many ideas; she had more even than he had supposed, many more than she had expressed to him when he had asked her to marry him. Yes, she <u>had</u> been hypocritical; she had like him so much.[30]

Even though Isabel's deception is the result of love, she is nonetheless guilty; for largely because of her deception the

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[28]James, <u>The Portrait</u>, Vol IV, p. 197.

[29]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 191

[30]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 194.

love has failed.

The consideration of Isabel as a tragic figure has a significant effect on the role of those guilty of abusing her confidence. In taking up her share of the guilt, Isabel offers some relief to the guilt which Osmond and Madame Merle must carry. Their guilt is in no way excused, but in showing that Isabel is also culpable, James offers a point of comparison. He demonstrates the relativity of blameworthiness. In other words, since all have had some hand in producing the unhappy situation in which they find themselves, none may be presented as either totally guilty or thoroughly innocent. Consequently, the old black-and-white moral presentations of James's early period have been effectively displaced by a more mature, more comprehensive conception.

James further eases the guilt which Osmond and Madame Merle have incurred by allowing them certain redeeming characteristics, and by including them in the suffering which results from their conspiracy. For example, Osmond, in spite of his horrifying selfishness, does have a keen mind and an exquisite taste. Furthermore, there is some evidence that, for all her money, he would not have married Isabel had he not found her so attractive--had he not, in fact, been in love with her.[31] His disappointment is thus genuine and intense, and he suffers accordingly. The "charming,"

[31]Krook, pp. 52-54.

"superior," "pre-eminent" Madame Merle, for her part, has been acting out of a mother's love, and thus her actions are more easily forgiven. Yet she, too, must suffer. Although Madame Merle does manage to provide for Pansy, she must bear the heartbreak of seeing the girl place her affection in another woman. In the long run, she loses everything--her daughter, her former lover, her friends --and is exiled. to America.

Isabel's recognition of her responsibility in the abuse of her confidence alters not only the role of the abusers, but also the role of the victim. Were Isabel like Catherine Sloper, totally blameless, or like Christopher Newman, incapable of comprehending her part, she would be under no obligation to return to her unhappy situation. She would have ended like those victims of James's initial phase, unable or unwilling to take action. Although it would probably be overstating the case to say that Isabel's return constitutes an active response--especially since she seems to have no idea except to look after Pansy--her return at least implies an intention of assuming some control over the outcome of her marriage. This deviation from the victim's role of the early period, although admittedly slight, constitutes the beginning of a moral conception that James was not to develop fully until the major phase.

The Aspern Papers and The Spoils of Poynton

The Aspern Papers and The Spoils of Poynton are two of James's shorter novels which, because of their brevity, are convenient to examine together. Like so many of James's stories, each is based on an actual occurrence which James dutifully recorded in his notebooks. The papers of Jeffrey Aspern were in real life those of Percy Shelley, and the fictional battle for the "spoils of Poynton" had an actual counterpart within a family in Scotland.[32] These two stories offer interesting sidelights on James's theme.

The Aspern Papers begins with the discovery by the narrator, a devotee of the long dead Jeffrey Aspern, that the great poet's former mistress, Juliana Bordereau, is still alive and is in possession of a number of Aspern's letters. The old woman lives with her unmarried niece in "a dilapidated old palace on an out-of-the-way canal" in Venice. The Misses Bordereau are "shy, mysterious," and, on the subject of Aspern's papers, unapproachable.

The narrator relates how he assumes a disguise and presents himself to the Misses Bordereau as a writer who finds their aging palace delightfully picturesque, especially its garden, and would like to rent a portion of it. He hopes

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[32] Matthiessen, Notebooks, pp. 71-73, 136-137.

thereby to gain their confidence so that when Juliana, who is "tremendously old--so old that death might take her at any moment"[33]--finally dies, he may be at hand to seize her papers.

His intentions are immoral, the narrator readily admits: "Hypocrisy, duplicity are my only chance."[34] But he is ready to do anything for Jeffrey Aspern. As he archly phrases it, "One doesn't defend one's gods: one's god is in himself a defense."[35] Therefore, if he must, he says, he will even make love to Juliana's niece.

Juliana is suspicious, but she rents several rooms for an exorbitant price. Six weeks elapse during which the narrator makes so little headway that he is unable even to determine for certain whether or not the old woman still has the papers. Consequently, he decides to increase his attentions to her niece, Tita.

Tita is a decidedly unattractive figure. Aside from being over fifty and physically plain, she has also lived an extremely sheltered life. In fact, "it was impossible to allow too much for her simplicity."[36] The narrator takes pains to put himself in her way on every available occasion and daily sends her flowers from the garden he pretends to

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[33]Henry James, The Aspern Papers, Vol. X of The Novels and Tales of Henry James (New York, 1922), p. 24.

[34]Ibid., p. 12 [35]James, Aspern Papers, p. 5.

[36]Ibid., p. 54.

admire. In time he manages to gain Tita's confidence, and he is sufficiently sure of himself to disclose his purpose to her. To his great satisfaction, Tita confirms the existence of Jeffrey Aspern's papers. Then, knowing that Juliana's suspicions are growing by the day, he begs Tita to intervene should the old woman attempt to destroy them.

It has meanwhile become apparent that Juliana has some plan. Her behavior indicates that she is fairly certain that the narrator is there under false pretenses. She begins to encourage his attentions to Tita, and makes it quite clear that the inflated rent he is paying is intended for Tita's support. Then Juliana baits him by offering him an outrageously overpriced portrait of Jeffrey Aspern. From his reaction, the old lady is now assured of what he is seeking, and she is subtly informing him of the price he must expect to pay.

Not until after the old woman's death does it occur to him what that price must be--not until Tita approaches him. "I would give you everything--" Tita says, "and she would understand, where she is--she would forgive me."[37]

> That was the price--that was the price! And did she think I wanted [to marry her,] poor, deluded, extravagant lady?...Did she think I had made love to her even to get the papers? I had not, I had not; I repeated that over to myself for an hour, for two hours, till I was wearied if not convinced....It took it out of me to think I had been so much at fault, that I had

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[37]James, The Aspern Papers, p. 135.

> unwittingly but none the less deplorably trifled. But I had not given her cause--distinctly I had not. I had said it to Mrs. Prest that I would make love to her; but it had been a joke without consequences and I had never said it to Tita Bordereau. I had been as kind as possible, because I really liked her; but since when had that become a crime where a woman of such an age and such an appearance was concerned?[38]

The narrator's attempt to explain away his behavior is hardly convincing. Having slept on the problem, his desire to possess the papers once more gains control. When he again encounters Miss Tita

> She stood in the middle of the room with a face of mildness bent upon me, and her look of forgiveness, of absolution made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger; she was not a ridiculous old woman. This optical trick gave her a sort of phantasmagoric brightness, and while I was still the victim of it I heard a whisper somewhere in the depths of my conscience: "Why not, after all--why not?" It seemed to me I _could_ pay the price.[39]

Miss Tita, however, has come to say goodbye. Realizing that this man does not, cannot love her, she has burned the papers.

> The room seemed to go round me as she said this and a real darkness for a moment descended upon my eyes. When it passed Miss Tita was there still, but the transfiguration was over, and she had changed back to a plain dingy, elderly person.[40]

From start to finish, the narrator of the Aspern Papers reveals himself as a man given to chronic rationalization. As Maxwell Geismar phrases it, "He is the first in a line of

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[38]James, _The Aspern Papers_, pp. 136-137

[39]_Ibid_., p. 142. [40]_Ibid_., p. 143

the 'obsessed' Jamesian protagonistswhose appeal lies in the fact that not only do their actions belie their words, but their words belie their words."[41] His constant attempts to justify his shabby behavior indicate that he is at bottom a fundamentally moral person who knows he is misbehaving but who cannot or will not resist his obsession.

The "Blessed Juliana" is from the first suspicious of his motives; she realizes that such an elaborate and prolonged deception could only result from a deeply rooted obsession, and she relies on it. She prolongs his stay, thereby milking him for more of his money, while she sets and sweetens her trap. She understands his obsession far better than he, and she demonically calculates the pressures it will bear. However it turns out, she will win, and he will lose--he can have the papers and the burden of looking after Tita, or he can lose everything including the time and money he has already invested. Ironically, because of his eagerness to abuse confidence, he is himself duped. "His efforts are countered by a creature who has an impulse to grasp life even stronger than [his], and he gets his deserts--it is dog eat dog."[42]

Tita is perhaps bruised by the encounter, but she is certainly not crushed. If she is to be considered as another of James's passive victims, it may be said that she can well

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[41]Maxwell Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites (Boston, 1963), p. 81.

[42]Quentin Anderson, The American Henry James (New Brunswick, 1957), p. 148.

afford the part, inasmuch as she now possesses the gold which Juliana bilked from the narrator. As for the blessed Juliana, she has the posthumous satisfaction of knowing that the narrator--the "publishing scoundrel," she calls him--cannot escape the trap she has set for him. Therefore, in this case of abused confidence, it may be safely said that the guilty party is the only real victim.

The developments in The Aspern Papers are therefore within the general lines of the transitional period. James allows the guilty narrator some excuse in showing that outside the area of his obsession he is a generally decent person. And the frustration he brings on himself (one hesitates to call it suffering) allows him at least some expiation. Nevertheless, it must be added, his frustrations seem only to add to his original obsession.

An obsession is also the central motivation of The Spoils of Poynton. Unlike the narrator of The Aspern Papers, who is driven by an acquisitive lust, Mrs. Gereth is obsessed with the idea of holding what she already has. For more than twenty-five years, she and her husband have been carefully furnishing their home at Poynton. Everything has been meticulously chosen during their travels in various parts of the world, and Mrs. Gereth rightfully considers it the most beautiful home in England. Now, however, her husband has died and left Poynton and its furnishings to their son Owen.

Owen's character has two aspects: "one of them his monstrous lack of taste, the other his exaggerated prudence."[43] His lack of taste is the primary concern of Mrs. Gereth. She lives in secret dread that he will marry someone like himself, who has no appreciation for Poynton's loveliness.

Her dread is realized when Owen's attention comes to rest on Mona Brigstock. Mona is an expressionless creature whose taste is represented in the "imbecilities of decoration" and "aesthetic misery" seen in her home at Waterbath. Horrified at the prospect of Mona's becoming the mistress of Poynton, Mrs. Gereth spends much of her time attempting to turn Owen's attentions to the candidate of her own choosing, Fleda Vetch. Fleda is not in some ways so attractive as Mona, but she shares Mrs. Gereth's fine sense of taste. Mrs. Gereth is confident that Fleda would appreciate Poynton, and, more important, would leave its arrangements unmolested.

With ulterior motives, Mrs. Gereth invites Fleda to stay with her at Poynton. There she satisfies herself that Fleda is as much in love with the furnishings as she, and she suggests, not too subtly, that Fleda would make a far better keeper of Poynton than Mona. Fleda is fond of Mrs. Gereth and of Poynton; moreover, she is secretly in love with Owen, but she will have nothing to do with the idea implied in Mrs. Gereth's suggestion.

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[43]Henry James, _The Spoils of Poynton_, Vol. X of _The Novels and Tales of Henry James_ (New York, 1922), p. 8.

The time comes for Mrs. Gereth to surrender Poynton to Owen. But Mona has resolutely insisted that the poor woman leave everything but her personal belongings, and, consequently, Mrs. Gereth refuses to move. Owen solicits Fleda's aid, and Fleda arbitrates the dispute as best she can. He agrees to allow his mother a few prized objects, and she submits to move to Ricks, a serviceable but unattractive residence on another part of the estate.

Fleda is becoming more and more upset by Mrs. Gereth's quarrel with her son. She understands the woman's fine taste and her concern over her furnishings, and is sympathetic to her position. But she is in love with the "beautifully dense" Owen and is also sympathetic to his right to marry and to occupy the home which is rightfully his. She encourages Mrs. Gereth to move quickly and quietly and counsels Owen to give his mother more time.

Then, while Fleda is away in London, Mrs. Gereth makes a <u>coup</u>. Overnight she packs the greater part of her furnishings and spirits them away to Ricks. Owen is dumbfounded by this maneuver, and Mona refuses to marry him until he returns the "spoils" to Poynton. Once again, Owen prevails on Fleda to help.

In the negotiations which follow, Owen, since Mona has taken such a hard line with him, falls in love with Fleda. He pleads with her to marry him and make everyone happy -- everyone, that is, but Mona. Fleda, who must consider all

the moral aspects of such a proposal, will not agree to marry Owen until he has formally and completely ended his arrangements with Mona. Owen leaves with that intention, and Mrs. Gereth, in the belief that everything is finally working out as she has planned, returns the furnishings. But her decision is premature. When Mona hears that Poynton has been restored, she refuses to release Owen. Therefore, Owen and Mona marry and settle down to enjoy, if not appreciate, the fine furnishings.

Shortly thereafter, Owen invites Fleda to go to Poynton while he and Mona are away and to choose for herself whichever object she most desires. Fleda sets out, but when she arrives, she finds that Poynton and all its belongings have burned to the ground.

As regards the abuse of confidence, the most noteworthy point in <u>The Spoils of Poynton</u> is its absence. Fleda Vetch has sufficient reason and ample opportunity to profit from abuse, but she conscientiously refuses to be drawn into any scheme in which it is involved. Not even for the love of Owen and all the fine things at Poynton will she consider compromising her high sense of morality. She is therefore an interesting contrast to Isabel Archer, inasmuch as she is able to separate her moral ideals from her aesthetic ideals.

Furthermore, "not only does she refuse to manipulate others, she refuses, herself, to be manipulated. The moral lines she feels are delicate. She takes all into her hands.

Everyone has absolute worth. Scruples beset and surround her."[44]

In the actual reading of the story, however, one frequently becomes impatient with such punctiliously applied morality. One wishes for Fleda

> to act, to break from the net of scruples and seize the chance. It would be for the good, of the good. It would save the spoils, save Owen, save Mrs. Gereth, save love for herself; but Fleda Vetch understands, as few people in Henry James ever do, the high brutality of good intentions. She cannot accept happiness on the condition of moral compromise, for that would be to betray the ground on which, ideally, happiness ought to rest. Indeed it would betray happiness itself, and love, and the people and their possessions that have precipitated the problem and suggested the attractive and fatal price.[45]

Many critics hold the opinion that Fleda Vetch is one of the few ideally unselfish persons ever to appear in James's major works. That her type appears so rarely seems to be no indication that James was dissatisfied with her. In his preface, he seems to speak fondly of her, saying that she was given the central place in the story because "she had character"; that she was understanding; and that she was "successful only through having remained free."[46] James's only criticism of Fleda seems to be her inability to act. She is "only intelligent, [not] distinctly able." She is, consequently, to use James's own term, "sterile."[47] He means, of

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[44]William H. Gass, "The High Brutality of Good Intentions," Accent, XVIII (Winter, 1958), p. 70.

[45]Ibid., pp. 70-71.

[46]James, Art of the Novel, pp. 128-129. [47]Ibid., p. 131.

course, that Fleda is sterile only in the sense that she is never able to take an active hand in the affair. She sees and understands, but is arrested by moral considerations.

However, some critics find Fleda sterile in a fuller sense.[48] Her intelligence, her perception, her judgement, her high moral consciousness, and great discretion are seen as an accumulation of characteristics resulting in a person too good to be real. She is too idealized a figure to represent life as it is; and thus, since she is without life, she is sterile. Even granting that such a person as Fleda might exist, her sterility still extends beyond James's mild application of the term. It would seem that a person as morally intelligent as Fleda is supposed to be would either join in to set things right or, recognizing a hopelessly immoral situation, would disassociate herself. But Fleda neither acts nor withdraws, and one suspects that her continued presence stems from the pleasure she takes in exercising her own moral niceties. Therefore, her lofty morality, if it is to be believed, bears the distinct taint of priggishness, and is sterile in that such behavior profits no one.

Furthermore, James's belief that Fleda is successful through having remained free is in itself open to discussion. A. H. Quinn holds that Fleda is not a free spirit, simply because her insistence on standing by principles regardless of consequence represents a failure of knowledge, and knowledge

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[48]Geismar, p. 143; also Krook, p. 403.

particularly self-knowledge, is an essential condition of freedom. She is a person so bound up in her high-minded ideals that she cannot apply them successfully to the encounter over Poynton. Fleda, as Quinn phrases it, is "excellent in algebra but weak in arithmetic."[49] In short, with all her fine moral awareness, she is pathetically lacking in plain "horse sense."

Whatever opinion one has of Fleda Vetch, one can see that The Spoils of Poynton does not hold the answer to the abuse of confidence. Those who persist in seeing Fleda's renunciation as James's ideal solution to the problem seem only to be attempting to limit James to the narrower boundaries of their own conceptions. It is unlikely that anyone has ever devoted more consideration to the problem than James himself, and he was of the type least likely to offer a pat answer to a question he knew to be so complex. That the two interpretations of Fleda Vetch can inspire such avid partisanship is, at this point, more a tribute to James's ability to present his problem than to his ability to offer its solution. James's answer lay still in the future.

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[49]A. H. Quinn, "Morals and Motives in The Spoils of Poynton," Sewanee Review, LXII (Autumn, 1954), p. 576.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAJOR PHASE

Eighteen ninety-five was a great turning point in James's career. He had announced some five years before that he had produced his last long novel. He would continue to produce short stories, but his real talent, he believed, was for the play. That illusion lasted for five years, until the crushing failure of _Guy Domville_, to which the audience reacted vilely. James's plays were a failure, not only on the stage but in themselves. He had been cruelly mistaken.

Yet James never regretted this experience, for it bore valuable consequences for his later development. If his insights into character were too subtle to be worked out on the stage, if his plots were too intricate, too lacking in physical action to appeal to the playgoing public, he would yet persevere by making his ideas to function in the medium he knew best. Undaunted, he returned to the long novel.

His renewed determination resulted in James's major phase as an artist, during which, in close succession, he produced his three greatest works: _The Ambassadors_, published in 1903 but written before _The Wings of the Dove_, published in 1902, and _The Golden Bowl_, published in 1904. The style which James developed for these works is not always felicitous.

Whole passages are tortuously involuted and meanings are constantly subjected to interpolations and parenthetic qualifications which seem at times to demand too much of the reader. Yet as F. O. Matthiessen puts it,

> though James's later evolution . . . involved the loss of an engaging lightness, he knew what he was about, and . . . if we want to find the figure in his carpet, we must search for it primarily in the intricate and fascinating designs of his final and major phase.[1]

The abuse of confidence is a central part of all the novels of the major phase, and it is within them that James attempted to produce an answer to the problem which had so song been one of his chief concerns.

The Ambassadors

Of all of James's major works, The Ambassadors has proved by far the most popular with the critics.[2] Doubtless, James approved their choice. He wrote in his preface that it was "frankly, quite the best, 'all round'" of any of his productions.[3] That he had profited from his attempt at play writing is seen in the elaborate scenario created for the preliminary sketches submitted to his publisher[4] and also in his proud reference in the preface to the book's "scenic consistency."[5]

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[1]Matthiessen, The Major Phase, p. xv. [2]Ibid., p. 18.

[3]James, The Art of the Novel, p. 309.

[4]Henry James, "The Ambassadors: Project of Novel" (Edna Kenton, ed.), Hound and Horn, VII (Spring, 1934), pp. 541-562.

[5]James, The Art of the Novel, pp. 322-323.

The ambassadors of the title are the emissaries sent by Mrs. Newsome, a wealthy New England widow, to restore to the home town of Woollet and to the family business her son Chad, who has lingered too long in Paris, reputedly detained by a sordid liaison. When the story opens, the first of the ambassadors, a middle-aged writer named Lambert Strether, is in England, en route to Paris. Strether has been given his post because of his past relationship to the family, especially to Chad's mother. She has been subsidizing the literary magazine of which he is the editor, and shortly before his departure she and Strether have become unofficially engaged.

While stopping over in England, Strether meets two characters who will contribute to his experience. Waymarsh, an old friend of Strether, is a rather stodgy, small-town lawyer from Milrose, Connecticut, who has come to Europe for a vacation. Maria Gostrey is a new acquaintance, a thoroughly Europeanized American, who is to become Strether's confidante.

Waymarsh is not taking much pleasure in his vacation; he is too much out of his element. He complains to Strether,

> the fact is, such a country as this ain't my kind of country anyway. There ain't a country I've seen over here that does seem my kind. Oh I don't say but what there are plenty of pretty places and remarkable old things; but the trouble is that I don't seem to feel anywhere in tune.[6]

Waymarsh's comment reveals that he cannot square what he has seen with his New England bias.

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[6]Henry James, The Ambassadors, Vol. XXI of The Novels and Tales of Henry James (New York, 1922), p. 9.

When the three go for a few days to London, before Strether and Waymarsh continue on to Paris, Maria and Strether are able simply to enjoy the sights, but Waymarsh is uncomfortable until he can get away to visit a jewelry store. He therefore reveals that he cannot enjoy life without the sense of materially posessing it, by engaging in commerce. These are the things his New England mentality can best comprehend, and if, as some suggest, his purchase is a watch, the symbolism of his act is heightened. It exposes not only his comfort in material values, but a typically New England preoccupation with time.[7]

When Strether dines with Maria, he compares his values with those of Waymarsh. More importantly, he begins to compare Maria with Mrs. Newsome, and Mrs. Newsome, at least as far as romance is concerned, seems to him the inferior figure. After their acquaintance has grown sufficiently, Strether confides to Maria the details of his mission, and she, sensing a fundamental honesty and humility about him, promises to help if she can.

It soon becomes apparent that Strether may not turn out to be the best representative of New England diplomacy. His expanding awareness of what Europe may have to offer is already beginning to conflict with the intentions of his

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[7]R. W. Stallman, "The Sacred Rage: The Time Theme in _The Ambassadors_," _Modern Fiction Studies_, III (Spring, 1957) p. 44.

constituents back in Woollet. For the first time in his life, he feels free from the New England mentality which insists that the world must be made over according to its own superior plan. Now his sole desire has suddenly become to re-orientate his thinking.

> Everything he wanted was comprised moreover in a single boon--the common unattainable art of taking things as they came. He appeared to himself to have given his best years to an active appreciation of the way they didn't come; but perhaps--as they would seemingly here be things quite other--this long ache might at last drop to rest.[8]

Arriving in Paris, Strether finds that Chad is temporarily away. While awaiting Chad's return, he busies himself examining the young man's quarters on the Boulevard Malesherbes. He feels a vague, romantic uneasiness surround him there, and he correctly calculates that Chad, if there is any indication to be taken from his rooms, will not be the callow New England boy he last saw in Woollet.

Chad arrives and Strether is amazed at how the boy has changed. He is in fact, no longer a boy but a clever, urbane young man. Therefore, the somewhat flustered Strether dutifully determines to take a direct line with him. He straightforwardly asks if he is involved with a woman. Though there is, in fact, a woman, Chad cannot offer a direct answer to such a question. He knows that any way he attempts to explain his situation can receive only one interpretation from anyone

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[8]James, The Ambassadors, p. 83.

from Woollet. Chad is therefore evasive; he arranges for Strether to meet the woman, a Madame de Vionnet.

Meanwhile Strether, with the help of Maria Gostrey, ponders his problem. Maria understands his American naiveté and is careful not to lead him into any unjust decisions. When he sees Chad as evil, Maria points to how much of a gentleman Chad has become. When Strether agrees, Maria commends his judgment but qualifies it by saying that Chad is "not so good as you think."[9]

At a party held at the home of a famous sculptor, Strether finally meets Madame de Vionnet. The encounter is a significant event, but more important are the sensations he gathers there. Left alone in the garden of Gloriani, the sculptor, his conceptions undergo an important change. Heretofore, he had been accustomed to thinking of art as "a sanctuary from all forms of evil."[10] But when he considers the beauty and vitality inherent in the personality of Gloriani, a man who is known to have had not one, but many mistresses, he understands the narrowness of his conception. At that moment, the sensual Gloriani symbolizes to Strether the beauty of Europe. And now, for the first time, the ambassador from Woollet recognizes how the highest aesthetic values may be intermixed with, may possibly even be the product of questionable moral values.

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[9]James, The Ambassadors, p. 171.

[10]J. A. Ward, "The Ambassadors: Strether's Vision of Evil," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XIV (June 4, 1959), p. 51.

Strether is impressed with the revelation. He realizes how much of life has escaped him because of the puritanical limitations that have been imposed on him, limitations that he himself has mistakenly subscribed to, and he is deeply troubled. That evening, in the same garden, he is talking alone to Chad's young friend Bilham. Strether sees himself in young Bilham, and, overwhelmed by the knowledge of what he has missed, he exhorts the young man to "Live!"

> Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life . . . I haven't done so enough before--and now Im old; too old at any rate for what I see . . . The right time is <u>any</u> time that one is still so lucky as to have. You've plenty; that's the great thing; you're as I say, damn you, so happily and hatefully young . . . Do what you like so long as you don't make <u>my</u> mistake. For it was a mistake. Live![11]

Chad has all the while been coaxing Strether into becoming better acquainted with Madame de Vionnet. Strether at first seeks to hold back, but he is honest and determined to understand the situation he is dealing with. He therefore consents to visit Madame de Vionnet. Confident that Strether will find her as charming as he, Chad agrees to abide by Strether's decision.

Strether is infatuated with Madame de Vionnet. Satisfied with her gracious answers to the candid questions he asks about her relation to Chad, he consents to try to explain their situation to Chad's mother. Strether knows that he

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[11]James, <u>The Ambassadors</u>, pp. 217-218.

has placed himself in a compromising situation. He believes their relation is innocent, but he understands as well as Chad, now that there is no way to explain the situation to the Woollet-minded Newsomes.

Strether's conviction that the affair is innocent is strengthened when he encounters Madame de Vionnet piously worshiping at Notre Dame. This encounter helps him "to stick fast at the point he [has] reached . . . Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself. If it wasn't innocent, why did she haunt the churches?"[12]

A considerable period has by now elapsed since Strether was dispatched from Woollet. Fully believing that only good can come from Chad's interest in Madame de Vionnet, he has been contentedly steeping his senses in the beauties of Paris. But the dyspeptic Waymarsh, whose puritanism is beyond change, cannot abide Strether's apparent acquiesence in Chad's dissolute behavior, and he tattles to Mrs. Newsome that Lambert Strether needs seeing after. Mrs. Newsome replies that unless Strether returns immediately, she will dispatch a new group of ambassadors. Strether has no choice but to delay. By now he believes that Chad's first allediance is to Madame de Vionnet, who has done wo much to educate him and to make a gentlemam of him.

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[12]*Ibid.*, XXII, p. 10.

While Strether is debating his problem with himself, the new ambassadors arrive. Chad's sister, Sarah, her husband, Jim Pocock, and her sister-in-law, Mamie Pocock, whom Chad is expected to marry, are the new representatives from Woollet. Sarah Pocock is the acknowledged leader of the group and a zealous champion of New England Puritanism. She immediately sides with Waymarsh and cattily refuses Madame de Vionnet's attempt at friendship.

Jim Pocock is a shallow-minded New England businessman. Insensitive, coarse, and disgustingly salacious, he considers the whole trip delightful sport, is convinced that both Chad and Strether are keeping women, and is eager to join them.

Of the new ambassadors, Mamie Pocock is the only one with depth sufficient to understand and appreciate the refinements Madame de Vionnet has produced in Chad. Mamie is not, however, in love with Chad.

After Sarah has sized up the situation to her satisfaction, she corners Strether in his rooms. There she self-righteously condemns him for having compromised Mrs. Newsome and herself. Mrs. Newsome, she informs him, has been deeply humiliated, and he may now consider their relation ended. Having clarified her position, Sarah and the other Pococks, in company with Waymarsh, leave for the purer atmosphere of Switzerland.

Strether is not too much upset by his break with Woollet. He has known it was only a matter of time, and he settles back to enjoying his encounter with Europe. He has been in

Paris for some time now, and he thinks of himself as beginning to understand the workings of the world. But his innocence is still intact; not until he ventures upon Chad and Madame de Vionnet together at a countryside inn does he realize that their affair is not so virtuous as they have led him to believe. He has come to think of himself as "proof against mystification . . . When he reached home that night, however, he knew he had been, at bottom, neither prepared nor proof."[13]

Strether is surprised, but not dismayed, and he is rapidly adjusting even to this new turn of events, when Chad announces that he is preparing to return to Woollet. As J. W. Beach views the situation, it now seems to Strether that Chad Newsome is the husband of Madame de Vionnet. She has been the source of his new and finer personality, and Chad's "moral dignity depends upon the continuance of a relation long established and grounded in sentiment and taste."[14] But Strether fails to convince Chad of his obligation, and the young man, unable to overcome his Woollet background, leaves for America to take his place in the family business.

In answer to a request from Madame de Vionnet, Strether pays her one last visit. There she pleads that her greatest sorrow is in his ruined opinion of her. Under other

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[13]James, The Ambassadors, Vol. XXII, pp. 261-262.

[14]Joseph Warren Beach, The Method of Henry James (New Haven, 1918), pp. 138-139.

circumstances, she tells him, they might have been good friends. "You see how, as I say, I want everything. I've wanted you too," she tells him. Strether, well aware of how thoroughly he has been manipulated, cannot resist a hint of sarcasm. "Ah but you've _had_ me!" he declares as he goes out the door.[15]

Strether would like to remain in Europe. Mrs. Newsome may want no more of him, but Maria Gostrey, an incomparably superior person, finds him very attractive. Moreover, Maria loves him for what he is, not, like Mrs. Newsome, for the things she believes he should be. But Strether cannot stay; it would not be right. As he explains to Maria, his only logic in leaving is to "not, out of the whole affair...have got anything for myself."[16]

In _The Ambassadors_, the abuse of confidence produces a variety of interesting involvements. Chad and Madame de Vionnet at first allow Strether to misrepresent their situation to himself. Acting on his misconception, Strether is trapped into compromising himself with Mrs. Newsome. Then, when the lie is out, Chad abandons both Strether and Madame de Vionnet to return to Woollet. In attempting to assess the guilt in this pattern, one encounters the fundamental problem of first determining who are the victims and how

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[15]James, _The Ambassadors_, Vol. XXII, p. 289

[16]_Ibid_., p. 326.

badly have they been used. This is not so simple an assignment as it first appears.

Strether, for example, seems the most likely candidate to be considered a victim. But when one considers him in that role, one sees that in the end Strether has profited from his use. Had not Chad, from the very first, helped Strether forestall his judgements, Strether would never have stayed in Europe and, consequently, would never have experienced his wonderful moral and aesthetic transformation. Strether himself realizes how much he has gained. He agrees with Maria Gostrey when she tells him that "with your wonderful impressions you will have got a great deal."[17] Of course Strether must still face the unpleasant reception awaiting him back in Woollet, but he is fortified with the knowledge that it is he who represents the superior, not they.

Mrs. Newsome hardly qualifies as a victim. Doubtless, she is humiliated by Strether's refusal to carry out her mission. But the mission is unjustly conceived, and, as James intended, one feels a certain satisfaction in Mrs. Newsome's frustration.

Since neither Waymarsh, Maria Gostrey, nor the Pococks can be victims, and since Chad is the least likely of all ever to be victimized, one is left with the poor, abused Madame de Vionnet. But even Madame de Vionnet hardly qualifies.

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[17]James, The Ambassadors, Vol. XXII, p. 326.

After all, she has herself been at the center of the conspiracy to maintain Strether's ignorance of the real nature of her affair with Chad. And when Strether makes his last visit to her, he realizes that his new knowledge of her character has changed his impressions. She may indeed be a countess, but her behavior has reduced his romantic opinion of her.

> She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apprition, it had been given him in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maid servant crying for her young man.[18]

Madame de Vionnet is, then, an aging woman who has, against all the laws of nature and experience, attempted to perpetuate a liaison with a man young enough to be her son. Her failure may therefore command one's pity, but not one's sympathy. If she suffers, it is from her own doing.

What of Chad, the source of Madame de Vionnet's suffering? Can he really be blamed for leaving? Has anyone, least of all Madame de Vionnet herself, honestly believed that a restless, adventuresome young man like Chad could stay in Europe just to romance with a woman almost old enough to be his mother? As his departure reveals, all of Chad's refinement and gentility are only a veneer. Under it all,

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[18] James, The Ambassadors, Vol. XXII, p. 286.

he is still a product of New England and New England values, and it is to these things that he must return.

Thus in the end there are no victims in the full sense of the word. All have profited. Strether has his wonderful impressions of Europe, Chad has gained social grace, and Madame de Vionnet has had Chad, which, even if it is only for a while, is as much as a woman in her situation has any right to expect.

In answer to those who hold that the behavior of Fleda Vetch is James's ideal answer to the abuse of confidence, one need only ask how The Ambassadors would have resolved itself if Strether had acted like Fleda-- had stayed on in Europe but scrupulously refused any involvement. One can only speculate, but aside from the obvious effect of Strether's tale becoming much shorter and duller, one might assume that he would have had no life at all. He would have gone on as he had in Woollet, actively appreciating things as they didn't come, rather than as they did. In doing so, he would be choosing the same sterile existence that is so appealing to Fleda and her friends. But fortunately for Strether, he is determined to live, to live all he can in the time remaining to him. As he tells young Bilham, and it seems James would agree, "it's a mistake not to." How Strether proposes to "live it up" in Woollet is a question that James wisely does not attempt to answer.

The Wings of the Dove

Of The Wings of the Dove, James wrote in his preface that he could "scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not vividly present to me."[19] The idea had come into his mind with the death of his beloved cousin Minnie Temple. Minnie had fought a courageous but futile battle against tuberculosis and had finally died in her twenty-fourth year. The Wings of the Dove was conceived partially as James's tribute to his cousin. It is not so well executed as other of James's late works and is structurally out of balance,but it was a source of satisfaction to James that he could write "to an old friend of them both, 'Our noble and unique little Minny's name is really now, in the most touching way, I think, silvered over and set apart.'"[20]

In the novel, Minny Temple is represented as Milly Theale, and The Wings of the Dove is largely Milly's story. But it is also the story of Kate Croy and Merton Densher, and with them the book begins. The setting is London. There Kate Croy, an attractive young woman in her early twenties, lives with her aunt, Mrs. Lowder. Mrs. Lowder has high hopes for Kate, as do also the girl's father and sister. All of

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[19]James, The Art of the Novel, p. 288.

[20]Matthiessen, The Major Phase, p. 47.

them wish for Kate to marry money--Mrs. Lowder to satisfy her own ambitions, and Kate's father and sister so that they may also enjoy her wealth. Kate, however, has fallen in love with Merton Densher, a young journalist who has not enough money to support Kate in the style which her relatives demand.

It appears that Kate can only decide on one of two ways: she can either marry Merton Densher, thereby sacrificing her family's ambitions, or she can gratify her family, thereby sacrificing the man she loves. Her decision, on the surface seems innocent enough: "I shall sacrifice nobody and nothing, and that's just my situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything."[21] Densher sees no way for her plan to work out, but he has some confidence in Kate's determined attitude, and he leaves her to ponder their problem while he goes off on assignment to America.

Meanwhile, Milly Theale and Susan Sheppard Stringham make their first appearance. Milly, a young woman of about Kate's age, is the sole survivor of a well-to-do New York family. She has inherited an immense sum, but because of some insidious disease which is never named, she has little prospect of living to enjoy much of it. Milly's friend, Susan Stringham, is an older woman, a Bostonian who fancies

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[21]Henry James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol. XIX of The Novels and Tales of Henry James (New York, 1922) p. 73.

herself something of a writer. When first met, the two are touring Europe and have already traveled up the Italian peninsula and into the Swiss Alps. Mrs. Stringham is unaware that Milly is seriously ill, but she notes a certain pensiveness in her companion. One afternoon while they are staying at Brünig, Susan is shocked to find Milly precariously seated on a large rock overhanging the valley below. Susan's first impression is that the girl is considering taking her life, but as she silently observes her, fearful of making any sound, she forms a different impression.

> This was the impression that if the girl was deeply and recklessly meditating there she was not meditating a jump; she was on the contrary, as she sat, much more in a state of uplifted and unlimited possession that had nothing to gain from violence. She was looking down on the kingsdoms of the earth, and though indeed that of itself might well go to the brain, it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them . . . It wouldn't be for her a question of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life.[22]

Milly has been silently contemplating her problem and has apparently decided to make the best of what time is left her. She abruptly announces to Susan, "I want to go to London."[23] Susan, always anxious to comply with Milly's slightest wish, writes immediately to an old classmate who, as fate would have it, is none other than Kate's aunt, Mrs. Lowder. The two depart for London, where they are immersed

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[22]James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol. XIX, pp. 124-125.

[23]Ibid., p. 133.

in the rapid swirl of the great city's society.

Milly is largely unimpressed with the fashionable people she meets at Mrs. Lowder's. She finds the grand Lord Mark, one of Kate's wealthy suitors, especially superficial. Speaking to him of the society which he represents, she tells him, "You're blase, but you're not enlightened. You're familiar with everything, but conscious really of nothing. What I mean is that you've no imagination."[24] Milly feels, however, that Kate is a beautiful exception to the general run of people with whom she is surrounded. Kate seems fresh and unaffected, open and sincere; and, consequently, Milly feels strongly drawn to her.

Milly becomes increasingly anxious about the vague illness that is pursuing her, and she decides to consult with the famous Dr. Luke. The great doctor subtly and very kindly confirms her fears. In a way far more gentle than Strether's toward young Bilham, he tells her that she must live--must actually <u>live</u> the life that is left her. "Hard things have come to you in youth, but you mustn't think like will be for you all hard things. You've the right to be happy. You must make up your mind to it. You must accept any form in which happiness may come."[25] She should leave London, he tells her. "See all you can . . . Worry about nothing . . . It's a great rare chance."[26]

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[24]James, <u>The Wings of the Dove</u>, Vol. XIX, p. 162.

[25]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 242. [26]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 241.

While still in New York, Milly had made the acquaintance of Merton Densher. Even though Milly and Kate have become quite close, his name has never passed between them. Then one day, while walking in the National Galleries, Milly encounters Kate and Densher together. All are a little embarrassed; something seems a bit awkward about the encounter, but good manners save the occasion, and they all leave together in fine spirits. Kate sees their common acquaintance as a way of furthering her affair with Densher. Since her aunt disapproves of her keeping company with him, Kate enlists Milly's aid as a convenient third party. She can pretend to be going out with Milly when her real intention is to meet Densher. This arrangement also allows her the advantage of letting both Milly and Aunt Maud believe that Densher is in love with her, but that she is only being kind to him.

Kate is by now beginning her intrigue. She is sizing up her opportunities and weighing her chances for success. Densher understands none of her scheming. It seems to him that she is only procrastinating, and he becomes impatient. He wishes her to quit trying for everything, to take things as they are and marry him now. Kate replies, thereby hatching her plot, that he must bide his time and cultivate Milly's friendship: "A friend always helps--and she's a friend....She particularly likes _you_. I say, old boy, make something of that."[27]

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[27]James, _The Wings of the Dove_, Vol. XX, p. 18.

By now Kate has guessed, as Densher has not, that Milly is incurably ill. Kate knows that Densher will balk if he becomes aware of the full circumstances surrounding Milly, so she artfully leads him into the plot without revealing her complete plan. Her vitality dominates him, and before he knows which direction her scheme is taking, he already feels himself caught up in her "wondrous silken web."[28] When he does determine that Milly is ill, Kate explains it all away by pointing out to him what a consolation he is to the sick girl.

In time Densher sees Kate's design. Kate knows that Milly is already attracted to Densher. Therefore, he is to marry the dying woman, make her last days as happy as possible, and then return to Kate with the fortune he has inherited. Kate has correctly calculated that neither her aunt nor Susan Stringham, both of whom have become aware of Milly's condition, will oppose Milly's marriage to Densher, for they will go to any lengths to make her last days happy.

Since Sir Luke has advised Milly to leave London, she travels to Venice. She is accompanied by Kate, Susan, Mrs. Lowder and Densher. There Kate continues to supervise the proceedings of her plot. Densher is truly fond of Milly, and he finds his role increasingly unattractive. He complains to Kate that she should accept him as he is and let him end

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[28]James, <u>The Wings of the Dove</u>, Vol. XX, p. 64.

their deception. But Kate sets him back: "We've gone too far....Do you want to kill her?...We've told too many lies."[29] Densher agrees to continue the plot, but only on the condition that Kate prove her good faith by spending a night with him in his rooms. She submits to him, thus putting their affair on the new and more mercenary basis of a contractual obligation.

Kate and Mrs. Lowder return to England, leaving Densher to carry out the rest of the deception. By now, however, Densher has come to a fuller awareness of Milly's fine character. He has, in fact, fallen in love with the spiritual beauty which Milly's unselfish nature represents. As he stays on in Venice, he becomes more and more aware of the contrast between Milly's generous nature and the harshly materialistic nature of Kate. Up to this point he has managed to think of the scheme as being motivated by at least some sense of altruism. It has been a pretense, admittedly, but his design has been to make Milly's last days happy, as well as to profit. Now, however, he knows that no matter how comforting his presence may be to her, he is betraying her deeply honest and sensitive spirit. "He was staying so little 'for' Milly that he was staying positively against her."[30] Still he stays on, but only out of obedience to the bargain that he has made with Kate. He can no longer, however, effectively carry on

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[29]James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol. XX, p. 64.

[30]Ibid., p. 250.

the deception. His "courting" becomes an obviously half-hearted effort, and when Lord Mark, from jealous spite, tells Milly of Kate and Densher's engagement, she understands everything and "turns her face to the wall."[31]

Densher soon guesses what has happened. He sees Milly only once more, and when she offers him an opportunity to deny Lord Mark's accusation, he refuses to lie any further. He leaves Venice to return to London.

Densher is in London for three weeks before he ventures a meeting with Kate. They sit together in the same park where once they had met as innocent lovers, but things are no longer on the same footing. Densher has changed, has become a new and better man for his experience, but Kate is still the same grasping schemer.

On Christmas Eve Densher receives a letter. He knows intuitively that it has come from Milly, sent to arrive after her death. He hands it unopened to Kate who tosses it into the fire. They know without having read it that Milly has written to inform him that she has left him her fortune. Several days later, Densher receives the inheritance from the executors of Milly's will, but he sends the envelope on to Kate, again unopened. Densher has determined to put Kate to a final test. If she can come up to the mark by refusing to accept the money, they will then have an equal moral basis

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[31]James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol. XX, p. 270.

on which to re-establish themselves. But Kate has not scrupled to open the envelope and count the money. "You see," she tells him," I've not hesitated this time to break your seal."[32] It seems as if nothing more need be said, but Densher spells it out for the morally imperceptive Kate: she can have him or the money, but not both. Kate then skirts the issue by attempting to hand the decision off onto Densher. She makes it a choice of her surrendering the money on his giving his "word of honor" that he is not in love with Milly's memory.

> "Her memory's your love. You _want_ no other."
> He heard her out in stillness, watching her face but not moving. Then he only said: "I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour."
> "As we were?"
> "As we were."
> But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end. "We shall never be again as we were!"[33]

In _The Wings of the Dove_ there is no problem of assigning the characters their roles. Unquestionably, Milly Theale has been shamefully abused by Kate Croy and Merton Densher.

Kate has artfully planned the whole selfish intrigue with the idea that she may gain both love and money. As is usual with James's villains, her deceitfulness is the product of undisciplined, egoistic desires. Such behavior is never excusable, but it is sometimes more easily conceived of if

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[32] James, _The Wings of the Dove_, Vol. XX, p. 397.

[33] _Ibid_., p. 405

one understands the motivations behind it. Consequently, James dedicates the first portion of The Wings of the Dove to an explanation of Kate's background.

Kate's problem begins at home with her ne'er-do-well father, who constantly derides her for her lack of filial affection. He is pettishly annoyed that Kate has given her sister half of the meager inheritance left her by her mother, and in spite of the fact that he has long been estranged from the family, feels that Kate should be doing something for him. Kate, although she neither loves nor respects her father, feels a sense of family pride and wishes to somehow provide for the man.

The sister to whom Kate has already been so generous is the widow of an ineffectual parson and the mother of several small children. She has selfishly taken the money which Kate provided and feels no compunction in asking Kate to do more. Kate recognizes that her sister is one of the kind who devour people "without tasting."[34] The woman thinks herself absolutely destitute in her modest surroundings at Chelsea and tells Kate, "I can't imagine how you can think of anything else in the world but the horrid way we're situated."[35]

Her father, her sister, even her sisters-in-law are all in agreement that Kate must put herself in the hands of her

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[34]James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol. XIX, p. 33.

[35]Ibid., p. 36.

aunt, who will make a "success" of her. "They laid it down, they rubbed it in, that Lancaster Gate was to be kept in sight, and that she, Kate, was to keep it."[36] With such backing it is almost predetermined that Kate will behave as she does. Her reaction to the opportunity provided by Milly Theale is largely the result of her conditioning.

Merton Densher's responsibility in the affair is more excusable, and James allows him a fuller share of redemption. He has, after all, been caught up in Kate's "wondrous silken web." It is to his credit that in time he develops sufficient moral consciousness to disentangle himself and do penance for his sin. His moral stance in the end shows how completely he has been transformed.

There are, then, two "villains": one who is partially excused because she has been so thoroughly conditioned to the wrong values, and one who is partially excused because he holds different values and is thereby able to comprehend his sin and do penance. James makes it quite clear from the tone of his novel that the ultimate blame for Milly's abuse lies with the society that has fostered Kate's false values, and it is this society that is the final object of the moral indictments contained in The Wings of the Dove.

Heretofore in the development of James's theme, one has encountered several different types of victims, each

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[36]James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol. XIX, p. 38.

characterized by his varying degree of passivity. There has been, for example, the totally passive victim of the initial phase. There has been Isabel Archer of the transitional stage, whose return to her unhappy marriage implies a certain intention of action. And, in the major phase, there has been Lambert Strether, who seems to have some intention of actively encountering the forces back in Woollet. In the case of Milly Theale James presents a new and most important type. Her decision to will her fortune to Merton Densher represents a significant departure from the behavior of the earlier types, and Milly Theale thus becomes James's first actively responsive victim.

Since her bequest provides the final barrier to the marriage of Kate and Densher, some have seen Milly's response as an act of vengeance. In viewing Milly in this way, however, they are overlooking James's stated intention as recorded in his notebook. James saw Milly's choice as an "act of generosity, of passionate beneficence, of pure sacrifice, to the man she loves."[37] Furthermore, it is difficult to interpret Milly's act as vengeful if one considers James's semi-allegorical presentation of Milly as a Christ figure. In the scene in the Alps, for example, she "was looking down on the kingdons of the earth," much as Christ in the

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[37]Matthiessen, <u>The Notebooks</u>., p. 172.

wilderness. Densher comes to see her beautiful consciousness as "crucified" with pain.[38] Kate later tells Densher, "Your change came--as it might well-the day you last saw her. She died for you then that you might understand her."[39] And, of course, Milly is several times referred to as a dove, a traditional religious symbol.

Taken as a Christ figure, Milly acts in keeping with her thoroughly benevolent spirit. The fact that her gift, contrary to her intentions, does not allow Kate and Densher to marry, in fact, prohibits their marriage, results not from vengeful intent on Milly's part, but from the nature of the gift and its recipients.

Any way one views Milly's act, and the results are admittedly ironic, the fact remains that Milly has reached beyond the grave to take an active hand in the denouement of her abuse. The magnanimous intention behind Milly's reaction represents a new and more complete moral view that James continued to develop into the last and perhaps most important novel of his career.

The Golden Bowl

All three of the novels of James's major phase re-work his international theme, but each has a progressively more limited field of vision. In The Ambassadors the conflict is

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[38]James, The Wings of the Dove, Vol., XX, p. 339.

[39]Ibid., p. 403.

carried on from both sides of the Atlantic, from Woollet to Paris and back. In The Wings of the Dove the encounter takes place primarily within London society. The Golden Bowl narrows still further to become a domestic drama focusing on four individuals within one family.

The head of this family is Adam Verver, an American millionaire who has retired early to devote his life to collecting objects of art. Among these objects is the penniless but authentic Italian prince who is to marry his daughter Maggie. Since the death of his wife, Mr. Verver and his daughter have become quite close. They are happily pursuing a life of aesthetic indolence, and the prince, who was born to leisure, is eager to join them.

The novel opens on the prince making his way through the streets of London to visit Mrs. Assingham, the woman who has arranged his marriage. He is anxious to discuss with her the plans for the ceremony, which is now only days away. At Mrs. Assingham's, however, he meets with Charlotte Stant. The prince and Charlotte were once lovers back in Rome, but as neither had any money they decided to "put the Apennines between them as quickly as possible."[40] Now, Charlotte has returned from her home in America to attend the wedding. She has come not as a guest of the prince's family, but of the Ververs, who are unaware that the prince and Charlotte are even acquainted.

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[40] Henry James, The Golden Bowl, Vol. XXIII, of The Novels and Tales of Henry James (New York, 1909), p. 74.

Because Charlotte's presence endangers his opportunity, the prince is amiable but somewhat reserved towards his old love. Nonetheless, for the sake of former times, he agrees to accompany her through the shops of London ostensibly in search of a suitable gift for Maggie. Charlotte's quest is long and difficult, for her position as a person of fine taste and very little money duly limits her choice. Finally, in an out-of-the-way shop in Bloomsbury, she discovers an ornate crystal bowl covered in gold. Charlotte would make it a gift to the prince, but he points out that beneath the gold there is a crack, a flaw in the crystal.

After the wedding, the prince settles himself into the Verver family, where he is quite content to allow Maggie and her father to resume their old pattern of close and affectionate slothfulness. He does not mind being ignored, is in fact quite accustomed to it. He realizes that his only inherent value is as a collector's item, a conversation piece; and rather than begrudging the fact, he seems to enjoy his position. Even after the birth of his son, he has no objection whatsoever to Maggie and her father spending most of their time together.

Even so, Maggie decides that her marriage has created a disproportion in her otherwise ideal relationship with her father. She therefore suggests that Mr. Verver marry her poor but very sophisticated friend Charlotte. As a favor to Maggie, Adam Verver begins courting Charlotte, finds her

even more attractive a person than his daughter has described her, and proposes to her. Charlotte knows that Mr. Verver is acting to satisfy Maggie, that she is being considered as a means rather than an end, but she also knows that because of this he will make few demands on her, and, moreover, he is wealthy enough to satisfy her every whim.

Still, Charlotte hesitates. She understands that her entering the family may create problems that the Ververs have no way of foreseeing, and she wires Prince Amerigo for his advice. Although James coyly refuses to let the reader know the exact words of the prince's reply, one is lead to assume that Prince Amerigo tells Charlotte to do whatever she thinks expedient. Charlotte offers to let Mr. Verver see the prince's reply, but he gallantly refuses to look at it. He believes, of course, that Charlotte is merely being scrupulously considerate of all members of the family, and he has no idea of the implications contained in the message. Her gesture towards honesty is sufficient to allow Charlotte to go ahead and accept Mr. Verver's proposal.

It would seem that things might now take on a more normal balance. Maggie has a husband, her father has a wife; the prerequisites of order have been fulfilled. But when Adam and Maggie see how well their spouses seem to get on together, they feel free to indulge their old father-daughter affections with a clear conscience. Thereupon, Charlotte and Prince Amerigo, having nothing to do with

themselves, feel tacitly encouraged to resume their illicit relationship. Yet they feel great concern for their respective mates. The Ververs, they feel, are much like preoccupied children; they must be left to their play; they must, above all, not be hurt. "It represents for us a conscious care," they agree. "It's sacred."[41]

The affair between Charoltte and the prince goes smoothly for some time. Mrs. Assingham is the only one who suspects that things are amiss, but it was she who arranged Maggie's marriage to the prince, and since she was aware that Charlotte and the prince had been intimate, she dares say nothing. If the affair comes into the open it will destroy Mrs. Assingham's already tenuous position in society.

But Maggie cannot long be put off. She has observed how Charlotte and Amerigo have come to think and act in concert, and she has noticed that their actions have become increasingly indulgent toward her father and herself. Maggie has begun "to doubt, for the first time...of her wonderful little judgement of her wonderful little world."[42]

The concrete evidence of the relation between Charlotte and Amerigo comes to Maggie in the form of the golden bowl. On the occasion of her father's birthday, Maggie happens into the same Bloomsbury shop which Charlotte and the prince

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[41]James, The Golden Bowl, Vol., XXIII, p. 312.

[42]Ibid., p. 380

had visited so long ago. There, as fate would have it, she purchases for her father the golden bowl. When the proprietor calls to repay Maggie for having overcharged her, he notices portraits of Charlotte and the prince and remarks that they are the same two who had looked at the bowl years before.

Maggie confronts her husband with the evidence, but rather than accusing him or making foolish ultimatums, she leaves him to draw his own conclusions. When Charlotte's behavior indicates that the prince has chosen not to tell her of Maggie's knowledge, Maggie realizes that the outcome of the situation rests with her. She may take the common way of indulging her wounded ego in a self-righteous display of moral indignation, thereby making an irreclaimable ruin of the family and, more important, injuring her innocent and unsuspecting father, or she may find some other method. Since she loves everyone concerned, including Charlotte, and since she also realizes that her attitude towards her father is largely the cause of the situation, she decides on the latter alternative. She will hold off and, working from within rather than without, will force the issue to a different, less injurious resolution by intelligently applying the silent power of love.

> Maggie Verver abstains from pressure...because this is not only the most loving thing to do in the circumstances but also the most intelligent. To begin with, it is intelligent to exploit--yes, exploit--her husband's and her friend's terror of exposure. It is intelligent to

> exploit their compunction at what they have done. It is intelligent to hold them in an unbroken suspense, first, about how much Maggie knows and, presently, about what, if anything, she is going to do . . . It is supremely intelligent to keep them always in the wrong, herself always in the right--perpetually "one up" on them--by never breaking the silence she had resolved to maintain.[43]

As a result of Maggie's self-control, her husband realizes what a truly superior being she is, returns solely to her, and leaves Charlotte to pursue her own course in confused isolation. "It was as if [Maggie] had passed in a time incredibly short from being nothing for him to being all; it was as if . . . every turn of his head, every tone of his voice might mean that there was but one way in which a proud man reduced to abjection might hold himself."[44]

Poor Charlotte cannot comprehend what is happening. She has not been so much shut out as shut in. She has been caught up in the strange metamorphosis of Maggie's character. Maggie understands that Charlotte has been contemptuous of her abilities, and now Maggie pities her. Maggie imagines Charlotte's pleading voice coming to her from behind a confining glass:

> "You don't know what it is to have been loved and broken with. You haven't been broken with, because in _your_ relation what can there have been, worth speaking of, to break? Ours was everything a relation could be, filled to the brim with the wine of consciousness; and if it was to have no meaning, no better meaning than that such a creature as you could

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[43]Krook, _The Ordeal of Consciousness_, p. 269.

[44]Henry James, The Golden Bowl, Vol. XXIV of _The Novels and Tales of Henry James_ (New York, 1922), p. 228.

> breathe upon it, at your hour, for blight, why was I myself dealt with all for deception? Why condemned after a couple of short years to find the golden flame--of, the golden flame!--a mere handful of black ashes."[45]

It is not long before Charlotte feels the futility of her situation. Maggie has carefully prepared the relationships so that Charlotte is allowed the ironic pretense of saving her own marriage. Charlotte, her back to the wall, tells Maggie she is taking Mr. Verver back to America with her. "I must risk your thinking me selfish," she tells Maggie. "Let me admit it--I am selfish, I place my husband first."[46] She and her husband are returning to America, she informs Maggie, not for just the season but for as long as Charlotte wishes. "I want . . . to have him at last a little to myself; I want, strange as it may seem to you . . . to keep the man I've married. And to do so I see I must act."[47] Her father's absence is the necessary sacrifice Maggie has foreseen. She and the prince bid Charlotte and Mr. Verver the proper farewells and settle down to their new life together.

The roles of guilt or innocence in The Golden Bowl are the most complex and ambiguous of any in James's novels. As Walter Wright summarizes it,

> Maggie Verver and her father Adam exemplify the evil which James identified with American Puritanism and materialism; they use their wealth to buy a husband for

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[45]James, The Golden Bowl, Vol. XXIV, pp. 329-330.

[46]Ibid., p. 314.

[47]Ibid., p. 315.

> Maggie and a wife for Adam, and they draw upon a ruthless moral code to hold the two victims, Charlotte and Amerigo in subjection--such is one extreme interpretation of James's The Golden Bowl. Maggie is a virtual saint, who, in her love and wisdom, symbolizes a divine compassion that can even rescue such sinners as Amerigo and Charlotte--such is the opposite view.[48]

James gives ample evidence to support either claim. Therein lies the greatness of his work. For, as Wright continues,

> [James] was doing something much greater in scope, which encompassed both extremes. There is very great evil in The Golden Bowl, but there is also wondrous good. What is more important is that the evil and the good are not typified by separate characters; they exist in each.[49]

Charlotte and Prince Amerigo have betrayed confidence, but "no more extraordinary decree has ever been launched against such victims than this of forcing them against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid."[50] Maggie and her father may have selfishly forced the liaison of their spouses, but Maggie's response to Mrs. Assingham's inquiries are indicative of the Christile love which she brings to bear on the situation:

> "...I am mild. I can bear anything."
> "Oh 'bear'!" Mrs. Assingham fluted.
> "For love, said the Princess.
> Fanny hesitated. "Of your father?"
> "For love, Maggie repeated.
> It kept her friend watching. "Of your husband?"
> "For love," Maggie said again.[51]

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[48]Walter F. Wright, The Madness of Art: A Study of Henry James (Lincoln, 1962), p. 242.

[49]Ibid., p. 243.

[50]James, The Golden Bowl, Vol. XXIV, p. 289.

[51]Ibid., p. 116.

Whether one sees The Golden Bowl as a balanced analysis of human strengths and weaknesses, a thesis against moral tyranny, or a hymn in praise of divine pity and love, one must admit that as a victim of abuse Maggie Verver responds admirably. She has confronted the problem of social deception directly, and mastered it. She has survived a complete breakdown of her most cherished assumptions, but rather than spreading the ruin, she has chosen through love and intelligence to salvage and rebuild on firmer ground.

Because of her physical limitations, Milly Theale' was unable to translate her power into any managed activity. "Her lack of contact with 'real life' was...a serious limitation in her consciousness. Maggie, however, effects a compromise between her ideals ahd her social duty, and hence is able to become an agent of positive good."[52] As the active agent of good, Maggie Verver represents the highest form of morality in the evolution of James's conception of the abuse of confidence.

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[52]Frederick C. Crews, The Tragedy of Manners: Moral Drama in the Later Novels of Henry James (New Haven, 1957), p. 112.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Many critics see the moral conceptions presented in James's novels as the direct product of the philosophy which he absorbed from his father. Quentin Anderson, for example, represents the extreme of this view in a recent criticism which maintains that the entire body of James's works "employ the mode of vision which colored his childhood."[1] Other critics, though they admit to the certain influence of James's father, are inclined to take a more moderate view. One fundamental and very significant difference between James the philosopher and James the novelist is pointed out by Naomi Lebowitz, who concludes that as Henry Junior grew older, he

> seemed to move farther and farther away from any devised system of thought and morality found in his father and to become more and more engaged in expressing his central novelistic commitment to the individual lives of his characters, so different from the philosopher's primary concern with universals....He was concerned with defining _his_ kind of novel, what he might term the novel of personal relationship.[2]

One can see of course that this difference between father and son is primarily a difference in approach to morality rather than a divergence of moral views. Henry Senior

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[1]Quentin Anderson, _The American Henry James_, pp. xi-xii.

[2]Naomi Lebowitz, _The Imagination of Loving: Henry James's Legacy to the Novel_ (Detroit, 1965), p. 14.

as a philosopher preferred to explain the particular in terms of the universal; as an artist, his son commented on the universal by examining the particular. Both men, then, maintained a similar and consistent interest in the integrity of human relations.

Being an artist, Henry James the younger had to deal with problems which were outside his father's concern. His father, when he encountered the evils resulting from the abuse of confidence, could generalize and speculate on the frailties of mankind, could contemplate sin with philosophical detachment, and look to the future for the long awaited advent of Swedenborg's heaven on earth. Henry Junior, on the other hand, was more earthbound. He was committed to the more immediate portrayal of life as it was or, within the bounds of probable reality, as it might be. He had to deal with moral problems on the more practical basis of encounters between individuals. He could not portray the results of evil through the abstracted examples of the philosopher, but used instead the frustrations, torments, and anxieties embodied in the fictional beings of his own creation.

As has been seen, James's early efforts resulted in the oversimplified morality of melodrama. The villains of these encounters were irredeemably guilty; their victims were irreproachably innocent. Neither they nor the situations which James assigned to them were always believable. If

James's reputation had for some reason to be limited to these early works, it is doubtful if either his works or his name would have long survived. But at this time he was only learning the methods of his craft.

Having fulfilled his apprenticeship, James entered his transitional phase with the production of The Portrait of a Lady. The work is beautifully executed, and had James ended his career on this novel, its craftsmanship would doubtless have secured him a position among the world's great writers. The Portrait would not, however, have secured for him a position as a philosophical moralist. His artistry had allowed him the means of adequately presenting the circumstances of social deception. James had made it increasingly difficult for one to arrive at simple moral judgements about a given character, for he was taking great care to set forth both sides of the question with the sympathy each deserved, and he had learned to stay in the background, to present his drama only through the eyes of the participants. Nevertheless, he was capable at this time of dealing only with the incident of abuse and not its aftermath. He could effectively lay the trap for Isabel Archer, could satisfactorily explain how she herself sprang the trap, but could offer no adequate

solution to the misery which followed. James admitted before beginning The Portrait that to place Isabel in such a situation would raise questions.

> The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished--that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation--that I have left her en l'air--.This is both true and false. The whole of everything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done [the outline] has that unity--It groups together. It is complete in itself--and the rest may be taken up or not, later.[3]

As has been pointed out, there were also questions raised over the outcome of The Spoils of Poynton. James created a peculiar moral dilemma, then resolved it by the grand renunciation of Fleda Vetch. But poor Fleda, as many have remarked, is worse off after the encounter than before. She has only the same thin consolation, "the moral necessity, of...practical, but quite unappreciated magnanimity," that had sufficed for Christopher Newman of The American. But Fleda does not even have the material comfort of Newman with his millions. Perhaps James sensed the moral weakness of leaving Fleda with so little apparent consolation. This may account for his feeling obligated to end her story with the lurid fire which destroys all the precious things at Poynton in such a highly moralistic way.

The best analysis of the moral position which James held at this time is provided by J. A. Ward. James, Ward points out,

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[3]Matthiessen, The Notebooks, p. 18.

> inevitably compounds the sin of personal violation by associating it with betrayal . . . Nearly all the malefactors in James are Judas-like in exploiting and destroying those whose confidence they have gained. Improper intervention in the life of another is virtually the only sin that interested James. Specific human actions, considered in isolation from other matters, are never in themselves sinful . . . The only criterion is the injury of another person.[5]

James is thus shown to be, in certain respects, a relativist. Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, for example, are condemned not for their initial relationship, but for their intruding it into the lives of others. This relativism is consistent throughout James's works and carries over into the major phase where James is seen to be almost indifferent to Kate Croy's surrender to Merton Densher, and even seems somewhat sympathetic to the relationship between Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet.

Also, Ward continues,

> The evil character in James is almost never reflective. The characters who fully understand a situation are reduced to inactivity because of their knowledge. This knowledge is mainly a moral awareness that enables the perceiver to grasp the full implications of a situation and thus to recognize the moral limitations of any sort of private action. In this respect James is an Aristotelian; to him the will is subservient to the intellect; behavior and thought must be in accordance. Nearly all the James characters who have achieved total moral awareness are markedly passive; their sole action is to accept their conditions. They renounce escape, revenge, marriage, or any other course of action which would relieve pain or improve their situations. The less perceptive characters are limited to a selfish

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[5]J. A. Ward, The Imagination of Disaster: Evil in the Fiction of Henry James (Lincoln, 1961), pp. 12-13.

> view of life, and as a result their wills control them . . . . In James's fiction it is nearly axiomatic that the good are reflective and passive, and the evil irreflective and active.[6]

Ward's analysis is intended to explain the full body of James's works. As a general statement of James's moral attitude throughout the initial and transitional phases, it is sufficiently accurate. Ward's evaluation does not, however, account for the novels of James's major phase.

By the time James entered his major phase, he had apparently become aware of the serious limitations of his moral pattern as he had thus far developed it. James consistently held that morally conscious people do not abuse the confidence of others. This side of the Jamesian morality was well and good as far as it went. But inversely, morally unconscious people _did_ abuse the confidence of others. And the "renouncing sensibility" which James had postulated as the only answer to the situation was no longer entirely adequate to him. Renunciation might provide some high-minded consolation to those who practised it, but what of the transgressors? Were they to be left to continue the evil of their ways as were Morris Townsend and the Bellegardes of the initial phase? Was it sufficient that they were shown to suffer the rewards of their own evil as were Osmond, Madame Merle, and the narrator of _The Aspern Papers_ in the transitional phase?

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[6]Ward, _The Imagination of Disaster_, p. 10.

Either presentation was, in the final analysis, a peculiarly negative answer. For to accept evil was not necessarily to do good, was sometimes in fact evil in itself in that it allowed evil to be perpetuated. The basic weakness of such morality was that James's victims had thus far reacted only to the sacrificial element of the Christian ethic. All had managed in a sense to turn the other cheek, but they had been unable to react positively in doing good to those who persecuted them.

In the major phase, James remedied this weakness in his earlier moral conceptions. Lambert Strether does renounce the temptation to remain in Europe with Maria Gostrey. But because Strether had previously chosen to remain in Paris and actively meet with each instance of abuse, his renunciation of the aesthetic delights of European civilization has about it a more mature, more positive quality which is lacking in James's earlier victims. Then Milly Theale provides a partial answer to deception, by posthumously attempting to return good for evil. Finally, in The Golden Bowl, James provides the ultimate answer to abuse in the actions of Maggie Verver. In actively returning good for the evil that has been done her, Maggie exemplifies James's belief that right can be triumphant, that suffering need not be passive, that there is a larger, better answer to abuse than simple renunciation.

Admittedly, the final moral position of Henry James is not particularly original. The Christian ethic of returning good for evil is older even than Christianity itself. But a timely restatement of one of life's primary truths is frequently more valuable than an original but unproved statement based only on speculative philosophy. If one accepts a favored analogy of world historians, that the character of nations may be likened to the character of individuals, it may be seen that James's statement came at such a time as to make it peculiarly relevant to a rapidly decaying world morality. The Golden Bowl was published towards the last of James's career, only a decade before the outbreak of two world wars--the first resulting largely from the selfish empiricism and deceitful alliances of the nineteenth century, the second growing out of the vindictive and thus inequitable attempts to settle the first. The Jamesian world of princes and millionaires is gone now, destroyed by those wars, but on the more immediate level of the individual in society, James is perhaps more timely today than ever before. In a world characterized by the heightened impersonalization of human relationships, a world in which mass media conspire to exploit and encourage man's innate egoism, even narcissism, a world in which such vocal "philosophers" as Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden glibly expound the "ethic of rational

self-interest,"[7] the verities of James's morality remain unchanged. The abuse of confidence is still a sin; active charity is still the victim's best reply. Both the sin and its answer are as old as humanity itself, and it seems unlikely that the twentieth century, with all its grand achievements, will improve on either.

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[7]Ayn Rand, _For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand_ (New York, 1961).

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