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# The narrative perspective of consciousness in Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master".

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THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF CONSCIOUSNESS  
IN  
HENRY JAMES'S "THE LESSON OF THE MASTER"

by  
Judith E. Smullen

A Thesis  
Presented to the Graduate Committee  
of Lehigh University  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
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in  
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May 8 1980  
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## I. Abstract

Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master" has come under increasing critical scrutiny in recent years as critics become aware that even in so relatively a short and simple tale the artistry of the author has created a rich and complex portrayal of human consciousness. The story examines several themes, many of which are treated frequently by James, such as the conflict between the demands of art and the demands of life, the development of a young artist, and the relationship between an older "Master" and young disciple; the larger theme, which encompasses the others, is a study of the development and operation of human consciousness and its relationship to external reality.

The obvious field for the study of this theme is the character of Paul Dvert, the young artist through whose mind the events are viewed and whose ambiguous position as either victimized or saved by St. George's manipulations creates the tension in the plot. Paul's difficulty is the inability of his consciousness to know with certainty the contents of another's consciousness, be it Marian Fancourt's, Mrs. St. George's or her husband's.

Behind Paul's consciousness, however, lies the consciousness of the narrator, whose presence provides an additional level of ambiguity to the story and completes James's depiction of the fluid and mutable nature of awareness as it attempts to

make order and sense of the chaotic, ambiguous impressions received from external reality. As the narrator's function demonstrates, that which we confidently call "reality" as if it were easy to define is actually a reflection of the least tangibly real part of the human organism, its consciousness. Examination of James's Critical Prefaces reveals his awareness that consciousness is ultimately undefinable and may only be dramatized, as he does so eloquently throughout his works. Though any attempt to define the undefinable is foredoomed, the attempt itself provides insights both into the nature of consciousness and into the skill of the author who most consistently dedicated himself to understanding and representing the ambiguity of the human mind.



## II. Critical Overview

"The Lesson of the Master," first printed in the University Review in July and August, 1888, became the title story in an 1892 collection of short stories, and was then revised for inclusion in the New York edition of 1909. Amid the vast quantity of Henry James's works, this intriguing tale attracted little critical attention until the 1940's, when it was analyzed primarily as an autobiographic justification for Henry James's celibacy and his decision to write for an elite audience rather than the masses. R. P. Blackmur, in 1943, though he mentions that both the artist and society are "played"<sup>1</sup> by the author, basically accepts St. George and therefore the story at face value, believing that St. George marries Marian "partly to save Overt from succumbing to false gods, to save him from having everything but the great thing,"<sup>2</sup> which presumably will compensate for the loss of everything else. According to Blackmur, James's lesson in the story is that "the man fully an artist is the man, short of the Saint, most wholly deprived."<sup>3</sup> Q. D. Leavis, in the same vein, views the

<sup>1</sup> R. P. Blackmur, "In the Country of the Blue," Kenyon Review (Autumn 1943); rpt. in The Question of Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. F. W. Dupee (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1945), p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Blackmur, p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> Blackmur, p. 210.

story as an attempt by James "to justify to himself the line he took."<sup>4</sup> The Master and Overt are "Henry James potentials, played off against each other,"<sup>5</sup> each representing one extreme of the conflict between the demands of art and the demands of society, a viewpoint more plausible than the usual biographic reading of the story in which critics, such as Herbert Croly<sup>6</sup> and Ora Segel,<sup>7</sup> put St. George's works in Henry James's mouth. Since both Paul and St. George are hyperbolic, absurd characters, reading either as an exact replica of James is unjustifiable. Yet it is quite possible that James's exaggerations in drawing both characters represent extreme forms of the choices he and every artist must in some way make.

Osborn Andreas, in Henry James and the Expanding Horizon (1948), competently explores some basic components of James's works, such as his meddlers who assume "that they know better than their victims what kind of life the latter should lead,"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James: The Stories," Scrutiny, 14:3 (Spring 1947), p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Leavis, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Croly, "Henry James and His Countrymen," Lamp, 28 (Feb. 1904), pp. 47-53; rpt. in The Question of Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. F. W. Dupee (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1945), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Ora Segel, The Lucid Reflector: The Observer in Henry James's Fiction (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969) p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> Osborn Andreas, Henry James and the Expanding Horizon (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1948) p. 5.

and James's dissection of human consciousness. Andreas states that James "resolutely combatted . . . the notion that there is something harmful in experience, that too much experience coarsens the sensibilities or tarnishes the mind . . . . Every possible variety of experience is, in James's view, grist for the mill of the most conscious mind,"<sup>9</sup> a claim that could apply to the battered but growing consciousness of Paul Overt or to the witty, ironic consciousness of the narrator. Unfortunately, Andreas then excludes the stories of creative artists from the group dealing with these ideas because artists "are the people who have solved the problem of consciousness"; there is no need to teach them that consciousness "is the aim of existence."<sup>10</sup> His exclusion of the stories of artists and writers is contradicted by the central difficulty of "The Lesson of the Master," which involves the observation and evaluation of the consciousnesses involved, particularly those of Paul Overt and the narrator. Just the amount, if not the vehemence, of contradictory criticism of this story indicates that, far from being excluded, the stories of creative artists are the most subtle and complex examinations of the definitions and metamorphoses of consciousness, for exactly the reason for which Andreas wishes to exclude them. Being concerned with the nature and perception of reality, the

<sup>9</sup> Andreas, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas, p. 19.

artist's mind is particularly fertile territory for an analysis of consciousness. As is evident from all his works, particularly if we view the increase in subtle complexity from The American (1877) to The Ambassadors (1903), Henry James was pre-eminently attracted by the most difficult, ambiguous subjects, for which artists both real and literary certainly qualify. Though artists are perhaps more than other people aware of consciousness, awareness does not guarantee correct understanding or control of itself. Consciousness, being a process, is never fixed or absolute but a fluid and growing state which may be particularly well examined by the use of artists, whose domain is consciousness.

The other fallacy in Andreas' work, which he shares with later critics like Lee and Geismar, is classifying James as anti-love because love "dulled the sense of truth."<sup>11</sup> Maxwell Geismar in 1963 still sees the story as displaying James's "underlying fear of love and of women,"<sup>12</sup> a view shared by Dorothea Krook, though she believes James "came in time to change his view" on love and sexuality, a belief that she substantiates by reference to "The Beast in the Jungle," James's "most poignant testimony to the validity of passion."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Andreas, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Maxwell Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1963), p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothea Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), p. 369.

As recently as 1978, Brian Lee still perpetuates the "strong biographic element"<sup>14</sup> of the story and reads James not as simply anti-love but as anti-life: "No matter what the quality of life described . . . it is always opposed to art"<sup>15</sup>; James "cannot bring himself to talk of life without prefixing the adjectives 'clumsy,' 'brutal,' or 'vulgar.'"<sup>16</sup> Not only is the previous statement obviously inaccurate, as one can see by examining the descriptions of Marian as embodying "the purity and richness"<sup>17</sup> of life, but is also unjustifiable; the adjectives Lee lists are not even spoken

<sup>14</sup> Brian Lee, The Novels of Henry James: A Study of Culture and Consciousness (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Henry James, "The Lesson of the Master," Stories of Artists and Writers, ed. F. D. Matthiessen (New York: James Laughlin, n.d.), p. 104. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have elected to use the New York edition of the story, published in 1909 rather than the original editions of 1888 and 1892, because of its greater complexity of narration. The character of the narrator and his relation to the people in the story do not change from earlier editions, but they are more pronounced, more carefully delineated, more clearly an integral part of the whole, and therefore more interesting and fruitful for study. In many cases, an author's revision of his work years after its initial completion damages the cohesion and impact of the original, as in some later revisions by Walt Whitman in Leaves of Grass; but with as careful and conscious a writer as James, the revisions result in greater clarity and precision. James's Critical Prefaces demonstrate his commitment to perfection, a goal never to be reached in reality but one worthy of pursuit, for as Blackmur notes in his

by the narrator, much less Henry James, but by the dubiously honest and accurate St. George, who also thoroughly enjoys his place in the clumsy, brutal, vulgar London social world he denigrates to Paul Overt. Lee continues to say that in James's work ". . . feeling, warm heartfelt feeling, is always banal and futile . . . ,"<sup>18</sup> another questionable statement based as it is upon Paul Overt's sour-grapes expressions when he finds that a lady whom he deserted almost without word for two years has decided to marry an extremely handsome, attractive, witty, and popular man. If anything is banal, it is Paul's tortuous questioning of St. George's motives, which is treated with ironic levity by the narrator, as we shall see. If Lee's statement were true, neither St. George nor Marian should be attractive to us in comparison to the "artist" Paul Overt, who, according to Lee, "must be unhuman, extra human; he must stand in a queer aloof

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Introduction to The Art of the Novel (1934), "James found again and again, that the things most difficult to master will be the best" ("Introduction," The Art of the Novel: The Critical Prefaces, by Henry James [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962], ix). Blackmur also asserts that James's "intention and all his labor was to represent dramatically intelligence at its most difficult, its most lucid, its most beautiful point" ("Introduction," xiii). We can be sure, therefore, that the ambiguity of the latter edition was fully intended by the author, who, unlike many writers, never lost or deviated from his artistic commitment but only refined and mastered it.

<sup>18</sup> Lee, p. 52.

relationship to our humanity"<sup>19</sup>; yet both Marian and St. George are attractive people. Surely it is unquestionable that, whatever the amount of objectivity necessary for an artist, he must also possess sympathy for and understanding of our humanity, qualities certainly possessed by Henry James, as evidenced by both the warmth and volume of his personal correspondence and by the delicate rendering of his observations of people in his work. Especially in his handling of women, from Isabel Archer in A Portrait of a Lady (written in 1881, before "The Lesson") to Mme. de Vionnet of The Ambassadors (1903), Henry James displays an understanding of and sensibility to the foibles of human emotion remarkable for a writer living in Victoria's England.

James Kraft (1969) expresses the more moderate view that James is delineating "the necessity of keeping a balance as a writer between the demands of art--its duties and disciplines--and the experiences of life."<sup>20</sup> This view of the issue is shared by Granville Jones in Henry James's Psychology of Experience (1975), an excellent study of innocence in Henry James. He does not believe that James is anti-life but that James believed that, in the case of the artist, "if there is too much of it--too many impressions, too close an involvement--the imagination will be swamped or smothered and the artist will

<sup>19</sup> Lee, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> James Kraft, The Early Tales of Henry James (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), p. 70.

be destroyed."<sup>21</sup> Jones's justification for this view is "Paul's success in isolation," which "proves the efficacy of St. George's doctrine."<sup>22</sup>

The humorous elements of the story usually have been missed by critics for reasons detailed by Poirier,<sup>23</sup> though we reject J. I. M. Stewart's view that James was trying to write a serious story, wasn't good enough to do so, and therefore ended by creating sentimental farce. According to Stewart, St. George's complaints amidst the luxury of his environment were intended by James to be "sanctified confidences"<sup>24</sup> which the reader was to take as seriously as Paul Overt; the humorous hyperbole was unintentional.

By implication, Charles R. Smith notes the potential humor of the story, but he believes "The historical context [supports] internal evidence that 'The Lesson' employs neither humor nor irony to question the Master's lesson"<sup>25</sup>; the ambiguous ending

<sup>21</sup> Granville H. Jones, Henry James's Psychology of Experience (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1975), p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels (London: Chatto and Winders, 1960), pp. 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> J. I. M. Stewart, Eight Modern Writers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Charles R. Smith, "'The Lesson of the Master': An Interpretive Note," Studies in Short Fiction, 6 (Fall 1969), p. 655.



illuminates "the weakness of both" St. George and Paul, but does not "call the lesson itself into question."<sup>26</sup>

Smith does not explain why, if the message is to be taken so seriously, the examples used to illustrate the message are so absurd.

Georges Markow-Totevy in 1969 is the first critic to state definitely that "the prevalent tone is humorous, the situations ludicrous, the ideas often eccentric."<sup>27</sup> He goes so far as to state that "James is writing allegories, experimenting with deliberately exaggerated approaches and illustrations, but without claiming them as objective and conclusive, and hardly sharing the far-fetched, anomalous opinions he explores."<sup>28</sup> Markow-Totevy's reading is somewhat sloppy in detail; for example, he states that Mrs. St. George "is careful to destroy those [works] of better literary merit, because they would sell poorly,"<sup>29</sup> though she in fact destroys only one, and her motive is more ambiguous than Markow-Totevy recognizes; but description of the tone as humorous is valid, as shall be seen.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, p. 655.

<sup>27</sup> Georges Markow-Totevy, Henry James, trans. John Cummings (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> Markow-Totevy, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Markow-Totevy, p. 100.

Though a substantial amount of criticism has been directed toward the "lesson" of the story and to St. George, two of the four major characters, Marian Fencourt and Mrs. St. George, have generally been given superficial treatment if mentioned at all, though Wright in 1962 notes that "The extent to which the worldly Mrs. St. George actually helped to corrupt the 'master' . . . is obscure."<sup>30</sup> Peter Barry (1978) finally turns attention to Marian and Mrs. St. George, noting that both are ambiguities carefully constructed by the narrator. He notes the ambivalence in Paul's estimations of Mrs. St. George and the confusion between what her husband says about her and what she appears to be in reality.<sup>31</sup> He points out the conspicuous lack of narrative validation for the estimations of Marian Fencourt by St. George and Paul-- that she embodies life and possesses great intellectual and imaginative powers.<sup>32</sup> He also believes that in the long run the motives of Marian, Mrs. St. George, and St. George have "no bearing on the outcome since the result would be the same in any case"<sup>33</sup>: Paul's decision to remain in isolation

<sup>30</sup> Walter F. Wright, The Madness of Art (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Barry, "In Fairness to the Master's Wife: A Re-Interpretation of 'The Lesson of the Master,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 15 (Fall 1978), p. 388.

<sup>32</sup> Barry, p. 386.

<sup>33</sup> Barry, p. 385.

in Europe to write his novel is his own, made "at a time when he believed the Master to have withdrawn his prohibition against marriage."<sup>34</sup> Barry is sure that "it is, clearly, part of the author's conscious message that the artist must renounce certain aspects of life," but he is conscious too of the ambiguity of St. George: "Coming from an artist, however, such a proposition is suspect since it provides him with so convenient an alibi for his failings as a human being."<sup>35</sup>

Another perceptive analysis which considers the female characters is Shlomith Rimmon's The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James (1977). Rimmon discusses Marian Fancourt's character and motives in marrying St. George as examples of James's calculated ambiguity. In addition, she examines the narrator's diction, the tone of the narrative, the effects of the ending, and the function of structure in the most complete critical analysis of the story to date.<sup>36</sup> One weakness in her treatment is that she, like most other critics, does not question Paul and the validity of his perceptions, which are made ambiguous in the end by his worries about St. George's possible production of a new masterpiece end by the clear separation

<sup>34</sup> Barry, p. 386.

<sup>35</sup> Barry, p. 386.

<sup>36</sup> Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of Henry James (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977).

between Paul's consciousness and the narrator's.

Two remaining critical works on the story which should be noted are S. Gorley Putt's Henry James: A Reader's Guide (1966), which gives a basic, acceptable, if simplified, reading,<sup>37</sup> and Ora Segal's The Lucid Reflector: The Observer in Henry James's Fiction (1969), which makes some excellent observations on the story and treats it in considerable depth. However, Segal starts from the erroneous premise that "the observer's voice [Paul's] is indistinguishable from James's own"<sup>38</sup>; though he notes the distinction between the "authorial narrator's ironic voice" and the observer's,<sup>39</sup> he misses the implications of that distinction and continues to read both Paul and St. George straight. Segal believes Paul accepts the doctrine that James practised: to renounce "all human and material appendages in order to achieve perfection."<sup>40</sup> As noted, he then identifies St. George's words as James's.<sup>41</sup> He makes Mrs. St. George completely responsible for her husband's downfall and reads the ambiguous Miss Fancourt as "the perfect woman,"<sup>42</sup> seeing both women as simple functions of

<sup>37</sup> S. Gorley Putt, Henry James: A Reader's Guide (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1966).

<sup>38</sup> Segal, p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> Segal, p. 140.

<sup>40</sup> Segal, p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> Segal, p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> Segal, p. 127.

plot instead of the interesting and perplexing characters they are.

There remains one critic whose absolute authority on Henry James is unquestionable: Henry James himself. The Critical Prefaces to the New York edition, as James described them in the "Preface to Roderick Hudson," "represent, over a considerable course, the continuity of an artist's endeavour, the growth of his whole operative consciousness and, best of all, perhaps, their own tendency to multiply, with the implication, thereby, of a memory much enriched."<sup>43</sup> The Prefaces define criticism on its highest level. Unlike other critics noted in this paper whose purposes are to analyze, to delineate, to interrelate aspects of a given work of art, James's criticism analyzes critical consciousness itself, attempts to define the process of critical thought, to trace the growth of art from tangible, external reality, through the distillation process occurring in the individual imagination, to its ultimate expression in artistic form, be it musical, visual, or verbal, where it may enter another's consciousness.

Of the three general divisions of artistic production, the most difficult to discuss is the verbal, since one is attempting to use the same vehicle for examination as is the thing to be examined: words. With the visual and musical

<sup>43</sup> Henry James, The Art of the Novel: The Critical Prefaces, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 4.

arts, the thing to be examined is a concrete arrangement of shapes and colors or of sounds. Though individual words may be concrete if viewed distinctly, their arrangement into sentences and paragraphs and the relationships thereby created are not concrete, either as they occur in the form of a nouvelle or in the form of criticism of that form. Syntax produces relationships among concrete items, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives, that are not concrete. James uses language to examine what language means, an inherently frustrating and dangerous attempt since it leads one into areas where absolutes are impossible and only relativity can exist. Hence, his use of "operant irony," which "implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain."<sup>44</sup> The use of irony in his work, both literary and critical, is simultaneously its greatness and its curse: its greatness because ironic suggestion is as concrete a depiction of the fluidity of consciousness as is possible; its curse because the very nature of irony precludes absolutism and forces the reader to accept ambiguity, which human nature detests. Because external reality appears concrete and inflexible, we wish it to be actually so, though, as anyone who has ever argued with a spouse over the arrangement of furniture in the living room is aware, reality is anything but concrete and inflexible.

<sup>44</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 222.

If the proliferation of contradictory criticism of all James's work is not evidence enough to read James as consciously creating ambiguous reality, then the contents of the Critical Prefaces should be. The Preface to "The Lesson of the Master," which volume of the New York edition included also "The Death of the Lion," "The Next Time," "The Figure in the Carpet," and "The Coxon Fund," concerns itself primarily with the relationship between life and art, between the actuality of living human beings and their translation into "the art of representation."<sup>45</sup> The complexity of the Preface encourages one to accept as the end of the discussion some easily comprehensible concepts which, upon greater critical examination, are actually the beginning of the discussion. Close examination of the Preface suggests that some of the most basic differences of critical opinion of this story result from accepting what James seems to be saying rather than what he actually says.

The first understandable misunderstanding is that Henry St. George is an autobiographic depiction of his creator. James states that his "complete possession" of St. George, "my active sympathy with him as a known and understood and admired and pitied, in fine as a fully measured, quantity, hangs about the pages still as a vague scent hangs about thick orchard trees."<sup>46</sup> James further declares St. George's

<sup>45</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 224.

<sup>46</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 225.

"situation to have been in essence an observed reality."<sup>47</sup>  
He admits that "the material for any picture of personal states so specifically complicated [as those of the artists in this volume's stories] will have been drawn preponderantly from the depths of the artist's own mind."<sup>48</sup> All of these statements encourage the view of correspondence between James and St. George; however, intense examination of the story and the totality of the Critical Preface will reveal that this correspondence is part of the truth, but by no means the whole of it.

A second misunderstanding is the opinion that James sees art and life as mutually exclusive opposites and that the artist must entirely renounce connection with life in order to dedicate himself to the perfection of art. Encouraging that view is James's preliminary discussion of his pleasure in being allowed to produce the The Yellow Book a story of whatever length he wished, a freedom seldom permitted him by publishers who insist on "the arbitrary limit of length."<sup>49</sup> Following this is his defense for the creation of his "super-subtle fry": "If the life about us for the last thirty years refuses warrant for these examples, then so much the worse

<sup>47</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 223,

<sup>48</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 221.

<sup>49</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 219.



for that life."<sup>50</sup> If the fry don't really exist, in order "to baffle any such calamity" it is necessary "to create the record."<sup>51</sup> If taken literally and out of context, this implies that James believes that art is a fanciful representation of what life should be rather than a literal rendering of what life is. The third contributor to this misunderstanding is his discussion of the "beautiful talents the exercise of which yet isn't lucrative, and . . . other talents that leave any fine appreciation mystified and gaping," but which "may yet be observed to become on occasion a source of vast pecuniary profit."<sup>52</sup> This opposition between the artistically fine and the popularly lucrative is a result of "the mood of that monster," public opinion, "which consistently and consummately unable to give the smallest account of itself, naturally renders no grain of help to the enquiry."<sup>53</sup> The implication is that the artist will either write great things and be poor or write trash and be rich. This is further substantiated in his discussion of the fate of Neil Paraday in "The Death of the Lion," caused by people "not caring in the least what might become of the subject, however essentially fine and fragile, of a patronage reflecting such credit on all concerned, so long as

50 James, Critical Prefaces, p. 222.

51 James, Critical Prefaces, p. 222.

52 James, Critical Prefaces, p. 226.

53 James, Critical Prefaces, p. 227.

the social game might be played a little more intensely, and if possible a little more irrelevantly. . . ."54

From these examples it seems possible to conclude that James's real and justifiable bitterness at "this odd numbness of the general sensibility" is the theme of this work; that Henry St. George's advice is to be taken literally; and that St. George's marriage at the end of the story testifies to the validity of his advice. The last section of the Preface, however, defines the real ground the Master is working and precludes acceptance of any simplistic reading of "The Lesson of the Master." Throughout the Preface James has been discussing the transformation of life into art, trying to delineate the steps by which the actual becomes the representative. As he concludes, "No such process is effectively possible, we must hold, as the imputed act of transplanting; an act essentially not mechanical, but thinkable rather--so far as thinkable at all--in chemical, almost mystical terms."<sup>55</sup> What occurs in "the crucible of [the artist's] imagination,"<sup>56</sup> being mystical, is by definition undefinable, not only by critical observers but by the artist himself, who is "the late genial medium, the good, the wonderful company" the art kept before

<sup>54</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 226.

<sup>55</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 230.

<sup>56</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 230.

its "new and richer saturation,"<sup>57</sup> its translation from the mind into the medium of art. As Hugh Vereker's secret is "undiscovered, not to say undiscoverable,"<sup>58</sup> so is the "rare alchemy" by which "a thing of fact" becomes "a thing of truth."<sup>59</sup> Thus, a discussion of the relation between life and art can never be simple and concrete but must always be ambiguous because there are no simple and concrete terms with which it may be discussed.

In the case of "The Lesson of the Master," the ambiguity builds layer by layer: first there is the artist St. George speaking to the artist Paul Overt, whose inner consciousness we see through the consciousness of a third artist, the narrator, who is a production of the fourth artist, Henry James. If those four analyzers of an undefinable subject are not enough, there is the fifth consciousness of the reader, whose own understanding of the story is influenced by the perceptions, both real and artistic, he has received before reading the story. What we have just admitted to is that any definitive reading of this story, as seems true of most of James's work, especially that dealing with "the madness of art," is false the moment it claims to be definitive. Shall we cease and go no further? To do so implies there is value

<sup>57</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 230.

<sup>58</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 228.

<sup>59</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 231.

only in absolutes, in reaching goals, whereas James's fiction and criticism suggest that the value of life is in the process of the expanding mind, "the growth of his whole operative consciousness and . . . [its] own tendency to multiply."<sup>60</sup> As irony suggests "the possible other case" and the implications continue to multiply in the mind of the reader, the art continues to grow, not toward a single absolute, but spreading outward to relate with other perceptions of both art and life. The attempt to define an undefinable quality may lead us to no absolute answers, but at least we may become aware of the complexity of the question; and awareness, the cultivation of consciousness, is the unreachable goal to which James dedicated all his life and his art. As experience and knowledge are the most clearly discernible goals of life, we can do no less than try to comprehend the incomprehensible; for "the critical spirit at all afraid of so slight a misadventure as a waste of curiosity is . . . deplorably false to its nature."<sup>61</sup> As anyone finds who becomes embroiled in James's ambiguities, his curiosity is rarely, if ever, wasted; if full illumination escapes us, yet the glimmers of light that come to us from his art are enough to enable us to see more clearly the

<sup>60</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> James, Critical Prefaces, p. 227.

life around us. Though we may be incapable of transforming our awareness into art, as James has done, we can transform his art into an increased awareness of that from which art is derived, life.

### III. Discussion of the Thesis

The first question to be settled about "The Lesson of the Master" is whether there is a question at all since, as we have seen, many critics, some of them of enviable quality, simply accept complete correspondence between the lesson of Henry St. George and that of Henry James; the words of the artistically deteriorated but mundanely successful character express the opinions of the artistically masterful but popularly failing author. St. George's second marriage simply confirms the validity of his lesson. He has chosen transient happiness and sexual fulfillment over the greater demands and perfections of art; he has truly ceased to count. Paul Overt, being young and naive, is not capable of accepting or understanding the extent of the rigors placed upon the artist; hence, his feeling of being "sold" by the marriage; but by acting on faith and renouncing Marien Fancourt for art he has produced superior work and will continue to do so, perhaps realizing only at the end of his life the salutary correctness of St. George's lesson, apparent now only to St. George, the narrator, and the perceptive reader.

The difficulty with this reading, beyond the obvious fallacy of assuming identification between author and character, is that it suggests that Henry James should have been designing London Times crossword puzzles instead of writing stories. If the answer is so simple, why is the question so

complex? Why is Paul so stupid and St. George so attractive in comparison? Why St. George's contradictory evaluations of his first wife? No Henry James product is ever superficially simple, but concrete values are apparent in various works. We know Daisy Miller is innocent, Gilbert Osmond a rat, Mme. de Vionnet a person of superior quality. If James wanted to be clear, he was. If he is not clear, we must assume that the issue is not clear. Though over-indulgence in awe is a hazard in dealing with James, as Maxwell Geismar vitriolically knew (Henry James and the Jacobites), reduction of his work to the level of Dick and Jane would seem the greater crime to perpetrate against this most conscientious, careful, and deliberate writer. Though the oversimplifying of the tale may be a reflection of the wish of James's loving readers that he should have been as deliberately correct in the structure of his life as in his books, and that he rightly felt that the life he practiced must necessarily be the ideal life of any great artist; this view is contradicted by the dubiousness with which the Master in the story is painted. A final objection to this myopic view is that it forces identification between Henry James and Paul Overt. If St. George speaks Henry James's mind, then Paul Overt in following the Master's advice represents the result of Henry James's choice: renunciation and dedication.<sup>62</sup> The identification makes us

<sup>62</sup> Segal, p. 109.

uncomfortable as we see Overt as simple, crude, selfish, unbearably gullible, and lacking in literary self-confidence.

Critical preference for this view is in part a result of ignoring the narrator, who is the most obvious choice for the Jamesian point of view, if we must have Henry James in the story. The narrator, a master of subtlety, keeps himself nearly effaced throughout the story, though the last sentence clearly calls attention to the narrator and his perceptions, and indicates that the narrator's judgment is separate from and superior to Paul's: "I may say for him" that Paul would appreciate new quality work from the Master (151), though "Paul literally hoped such an incident wouldn't occur" (151).

As Rimmon has noted, the narrator is largely undramatized,<sup>63</sup> though definitely present. As she suggests, St. George's engagement at the end creates an inversion and encourages re-evaluation of the whole story,<sup>64</sup> as use of a specific narrative voice in the last sentence mandates a re-evaluation of the narrative voice. St. George's engagement forces us to question his and Marian's motives and characters; the emergence of the narrative voice forces us to question Paul, since the narrator's interest lies primarily in the young writer's reflections and actions. The separation

<sup>63</sup> Rimmon, p. 90.

<sup>64</sup> Rimmon, p. 79.



between narrator and narrated consciousness is a familiar James structure visible as early as "Daisy Miller," the narrator's consciousness is clearly not Winterbourne's, and later and more subtly in "The Beast in the Jungle," where the narrator is quietly vicious in his depiction of John Marcher.

The major tone of the narrator's interest is humorous,<sup>65</sup> underscoring the basic comedy of the dénouement: the young artist wondering if he had been tricked out of the way by his mentor so the latter could steal his girl. Critics to their peril often ignore the basic humor of the situation. Poirier notes that "James's comedy is usually on the very surface of the action and the language" but has often been overlooked because "Readers of his books sometimes act as if they are obliged to get beyond everything that is obvious."<sup>66</sup> The surface of this story is comedic, as becomes blatant at the announcement of St. George's engagement to Marian,<sup>67</sup> as eyebrow-lifting a revelation to the reader as to Paul. As a typical Jamesian reversal,<sup>68</sup> this inverts the initial lessons of the Master, though, also typically Jamesian, the reversal

<sup>65</sup> Markow-Totevy, p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Poirier, pp. 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> Rimmon, p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> John P. O'Neill, Workable Design: Action and Situation in the Fiction of Henry James (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1973), pp. 8-9.

is by no means unequivocal.

The presentation of the central issue, whether an artist is "'a man all the same'" (139) or "'a mere disfranchised monk'" (140), is made comedic by its distillation to the level of questioning whether an artist should marry. The extremely complex question of artistic dedication is reduced to a simple black/white choice for the artist: to "marry and cheapen his art--and be a success--or choose a celibate course, and produce masterpieces."<sup>69</sup> In the terms of the story, no married artist can produce masterpieces, and celibate ones will necessarily do so, an absurdity which perhaps represents, as Geismar postulates, that James "was smiling at his own 'religion of art,' which his modern disciples, like poor Paul Overt, take so literally."<sup>70</sup>

Henry St. George never specifically tells Paul he may not marry, only that the artist does so "'at his peril--he does so at his cost'" (135). Rightly or wrongly, St. George believes that marriage and concomitant social responsibilities have contributed to his artistic deterioration, though apparently he was already married at the time of the production of his masterpiece, Shadowmere. His belief naturally colors his advice,

<sup>69</sup> Leon Edel, Henry James: The Middle Years: 1882-1895, Vol. III (New York: J. B. Lippencott Co., 1962), pp. 239-40.

<sup>70</sup> Geismar, p. 114.

apparently sincere, to strive for "'the greatest thing'" (135), a potential bias Paul never considers until the end when the Master does not follow his own advice and remarries.<sup>71</sup> In fact, St. George says many things which Paul completely misses, such as his exhortation to the young writer not to leave England: "'Hang abroad! Stay at home and do things here--do subjects we can measure'" (116). Peter Barry believes that Overt "misinterprets St. George's advice against indolence, (against taking the easy way out, as being against marriage,"<sup>72</sup> a misinterpretation forgiven by the reader, who shares it until he examines St. George with the skepticism engendered by the dénouement. Kraft says that James is "painfully conscious of the necessity of keeping a balance as a writer between the demands of art--its duties and disciplines--and the experiences of life."<sup>73</sup> Neither St. George nor Paul strikes any kind of balance when we know them; St. George has immersed himself in society and Paul has had little contact with it, having spent his young manhood in service to an invalid mother. The balance must be struck by the reader in weighing the opposites and taking the positive potentials of each. As Markow-Totsev believes, the serious consideration of the struggle between art life is presented "with deliberately exaggerated approaches and

<sup>71</sup> Edel, pp. 239-40.

<sup>72</sup> Barry, p. 389.

<sup>73</sup> Kraft, p. 70.

illustrations" which are not "objective and conclusive," but rather "far-fetched, anomalous opinions" explored by James.<sup>74</sup>

The exaggerations of St. George, himself a comic figure, are partly responsible for the reduction of a serious question to absurdity. St. George is aware of and honest about his "'passing away'" (114), his sinking "'in such dishonour'" (117), but the more he enthusiastically elaborates on his own artistic failures, the higher become Paul's admiration for and trust of the Master's advice, until the young man concludes that though "St. George's own performance had been infirm, . . . as an adviser he would be infallible" (132). Paul fails to consider that the reason for the Master's "infirm" performance may be that he is an infirm artist, not necessarily because he got married, an event that occurred ten years before the artistic decline Paul has noted in the past decade.<sup>75</sup> Instead, Paul sits at St. George's feet, listening to the Master's tone "that seemed . . . the very rustle of the laurel" (113), "feeling partly like a happy little boy when the schoolmaster is gay, and partly like some pilgrim who might have consulted a world-famous oracle" (132). He accepts the charlatan's "quo vadis?" with the same immediacy as the saint for whom he is named received the vision on the road to Damascus, though this Paul's road is "a wide band of crimson cloth, as straight

<sup>74</sup> Markow-Totevy, p. 101.

<sup>75</sup> Barry, p. 388.

as a garden path" (130), down which the Master is perhaps leading "his disciple" (148). After all, Paul, like Marian, has been away from England and sophisticated society. He tells the Master, "'I haven't lived in the world--in your world'" (116), a recognition which should make him wary of what he finds here.

Paul does recognize many of the false appearances St. George projects, though he is only astute enough to perceive those so obvious that St. George admits them. The exterior picture of St. George is his social exterior. Named for the patron saint of England, his popularity attests to the fact that England accepts him as its spokesman and defender; as he tells Paul, "'You must do England--there's such a lot of it'" (116). He projects an image of everything most proper and correct. He has a house in the country; his wife is the epitome of social graciousness; his parties glitter. Those about him perceive him as an artist, treating and respecting him as such; yet, by his own admission, he has purchased social success by turning to false gods, by becoming "a successful charlatan" (134). Paul knows of St. George's decline and perceives St. George's "measured mask" (104), his social simper, and his "tendency to do the superficial thing" (112), as all the while he thoroughly enjoys his role as "the celebrated story teller" (119) in the company of the socially elite and artistically Philistine. Paul also notes that "it was the essence" of

St. George's manner "to conjure away false positions" (110), to make superficial acquaintance seem "the immediate familiarity of a confrere" (113).

All of these shams Overt recognizes, though, should he have missed any, St. George conveniently admits to them. The more subtle falsities Overt's naiveté or underdeveloped artistic sense fails to pierce, though he notes them. When meeting the Master for their first talk, Overt observes him as coming "with a fine face--his graver one" (112), suggesting again the assumed mask, but the young artist accepts St. George's words as truth; apparently he believes the Master won't posture for him! Ironic touches undercut the trustworthiness of St. George's lessons. We notice the narrator's careful inclusion of the word "picture" in describing St. George's demonstration of his appreciation of Paul's book, which suggests that the demonstration is not the reality, as perhaps the title of St. George's great work, Shadowmere, suggests that its creator is a mere shadow of an artist.

The most glaring example of St. George's superficiality that Overt misses is the reaction to Ginistrella. In his first encounter with the book's author, St. George pretends to have read it, until Overt indicates he knows better. Driven by Miss Fancourt, St. George finally begins to read a book we know to have attracted considerable attention, but at which he has never looked. After fifteen minutes' reading, he is

prepared to make a judgment, claiming, "I know all about you" (113); yet even then his reasons for calling the book remarkable and distinguished are "'it's in the air, it's in the papers, it's everywhere'" (113), all this contradicting his later advice to forget the appeal to the multitude and concentrate on the two or three who know. The Master's critical acumen is curious: his praise of the book is based on Marian's making him feel "'as if I had read your novel'" (117), though she admits that until recently she "'never heard of a picture--never a book, except bad ones'" (106). Paul Overt's main reaction to this, however, is to be "touched as he had scarce ever been by the picture of such a demonstration in his favor" (117) when St. George declares he will read the book, which he should have done long before. Paul shows equal naiveté in the matter of Marian Fancourt, about whom St. George declared, "'She's not for me'" (118). Paul is envious of both of them on their trip to the park after viewing the exhibit in black and white, the antithesis of the situation in which Paul finds himself. He is more surprised when, after being told by Marian that St. George is keeping away from her "'because it wasn't fair to you'" (112), he sees the Master's coach pull up at her door on his exit, though Paul feels himself to be "caught in the act of spying" (127) and, from the dearth of any comment by the narrator, apparently is not suspicious of the Master's attentions.

Though St. George is a comedic figure, Paul is even more so, as the tone of the narration makes clear. In the beginning of the story, the narrator's and Paul's perspectives are congruent; they view the company at Summersoft with amused detachment. As soon as St. George appears, looking "better behind than any foreign man of letters . . . a successful stockbroker" (102), Paul loses his objectivity and we hear the narrator's voice clearly separate from Paul's for the first time. Though he accepted Mrs. St. George's beauty and high fashion (he knew that the wife of a writer "was far from presenting herself in a single type" [95]), St. George's clothes "were disconcerting to Paul Overt" (102), who apparently expected a great writer to be frumpy or unkempt. The narrator gently mentions to us that Paul "forgot for the moment that the head of the profession was not a bit better dressed than himself" (102).

Paul is even more absurd when he places himself in the position of vying for the favors of both Marian and St. George. Paul is shocked to learn that St. George has confessed his failings to Miss Fancourt, "the first comer" (107); Paul confesses to Marian, "'you excite my envy'" (108). Even before being introduced to "the great man" (109), Paul achieves a moment of triumph at finding that St. George has not told Marian of Mrs. St. George's burning of the book: "'Then he doesn't tell you everything!' Paul had guessed that she pretty much supposed he did" (109). He experiences "an



indefinite envy . . . a feeling addressed alike, strangely enough, to each of the occupants of the hansom" as St. George and Marian drive off "'to look at types'" (123). Upon hearing of the engagement, he is equally disconcerted at Marian's happiness ("it was almost stupid" [148]) and the Master's: "he was almost banal, almost smug" (148).

The narrator puns with us at Paul's expense during moments of the young writer's greatest bewildered perplexity. When St. George tells Paul at the engagement party that he has stopped writing, Paul wonders whether Marian's fortune has provided St. George with enough financial security that he can "cease to work ungratefully an exhausted vein" (150), upon which the narrator puns: St. George "standing there in the ripeness of his successful manhood . . . didn't suggest that any of his veins were exhausted" (150). When Paul leaves the party, immediately after, he is described as "hugging his wrong" (151), pettishly neglecting to say good-bye to his hostess. In this last paragraph, the narrator voices the question of Paul's strength, so assuredly assumed by St. George and so tenuously by Paul, which would be asked by the reader "if his interest has followed the perplexed young man so far" (151); obviously it has, but the interest is not piqued so much by the rather silly "perplexed young man" as by the intriguing display of motive and counter-motive, evidence and contra-evidence, assumption and insight that the narrator has detailed for us.

Marian too is comically exaggerated. Her conversation abounds in exclamations: "'everything else [but art] is so clumsy!'" (106); "'Ah, but he respects you!'" (124); "'Ah perfection, perfection--how one ought to go in for it! I wish I could!'" (125), perfection being apparently something one takes up, like tennis. Even St. George notices "'she enlarges everything she touches. Above all she exaggerates'" (118). She speaks "ardently" with "an air of earnestness" (107); she can be "all sweet wonder" (108) or "all intensity" (124). Her admission that "'It's so interesting to meet so many celebrated people'" (106) suggests she has "more than a touch of the superficial pleasure derived from socializing with celebrities."<sup>76</sup>

The story is not farce, however; the other side of the narrator's humor is his compassion for the people involved. The issue of the call to artistic dedication and self-denial versus the lure of social success is a serious one. St. George, as well as being comic, is also pitiful. He has declined from great promise and he knows it; his awareness of Paul's talent produces his "seemingly gratuitous confession,"<sup>77</sup> though very humanly he puts more culpability on external pressure than on his own weakness.

<sup>76</sup> Rimmon, p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> Rimmon, p. 87.

For all his comic quality, Paul remains sympathetic to us. He is saved from our scorn because his misapprehensions spring from an essentially positive cause, his sympathy for and understanding of "the poor peccable man" (107), whose eagerness in confessing his failings "to the first comer" (107), as Paul thinks of Marian, and to the young writer suggests guilty awareness; by confessing his deterioration himself, he turns his hearers' pity and derision to sympathy and admiration. When Paul hears that St. George has told Marian "'he didn't esteem'" his own books (107), Paul is sure the Master's failings represent "some tragic intellectual secret" (107), the reasons for which "could only be cruel ones, such as would make him dearer to those who already were fond of him" (107-08).

St. George has sold out and he knows it. Being human, he prefers to view himself as a tragic hero, not as a lazy charlatan. His possible hesitation at meeting Paul at Marian's after the engagement suggests his awareness that, for all his harping to Paul, he, at any rate, prefers "personal happiness" to "'The sense of having done the best'" (135), though he enthusiastically takes responsibility for the young man's artistic development: "'I shall be the making of you'" (150). The very humanness of St. George, which captures the reader's interest, evokes the same response from Paul and is the most apparent reason for Marian's desire to wed the Master. In addition, though the well-trained

James reader may note the peculiarities of Paul and St. George during a first reading, he, like Paul, is lured into acceptance of St. George's peccadilloes until the reversal at the end and therefore has to hold himself as much as Paul to account for naiveté.

Marian may be humorous to us, but she is, by the same evidences, what she appears to be, the embodiment of "young purity and richness . . . the perfection of a fine type" (104); her naiveté is both comic and a basic part of her attraction. She is "an immature girl" (107), particularly so having been out of England,<sup>78</sup> which contributes to the freshness of her "critical intelligence. . . . She said things that startled him and that evidently came to her directly; they weren't picked-up phrases" (125). She may say things "at one moment too extravagant to be real" but at the same time "too intelligent to be false" (126). She is exaggerated, but descriptions of her as being "all" of one thing or another preclude hypocrisy.

If the production of Paul's new book at the end had been due solely to his gullible acceptance of St. George's advice, the story would be ridiculous, but the decision instead is Paul's own<sup>79</sup> and is based on artistic consideration: "on the point of rushing back to England," Paul catches "a glimpse of

<sup>78</sup> Barry, p. 386.

<sup>79</sup> Barry, p. 389.

certain pages he hadn't looked at for months," which strike him as so full of "high promise" that he knows he should "pursue his present trial to the end" (143). As Wright notes, "Overt comes to discover something in his working at his own art that makes no sacrifice of his renouncing worldly things or indeed of his doing without Miss Fancourt."<sup>80</sup> The man Paul Overt may be gullible and naive, but the artist Paul Overt is, as St. George perceives, "'very strong indeed'" (132) and apparently must work until "had had given all that was in him" (144). His artistic consciousness has, in fact, "dedicated him to intellectual . . . passion" (151) and has done so without St. George's elaborate exhortations, though at the end Paul still worries that he has been "'sold'" by "the mocking fiend" (151) into a false position. He is a better artist than he himself is aware, as an examination of the narrator's portrayal of Paul's consciousness demonstrates.

As the narrator details Paul's consciousness almost exclusively, his rare evaluative comments, such as his reminder that Paul's exterior looks as much like that of "a successful stockbroker" as St. George's, demand notice. The compassionate side of the narrator's ironic detachment is evident in his comment on the conversation between Marian and Paul on pursuing perfection: "It must be said in extenuation of this eccentricity that they were interested in the business. Their

<sup>80</sup> Wright, p. 92.

tone had truth and their emotion beauty; they weren't posturing for each other or for someone else" (125), a possible contrast to the conversation of St. George. Throughout the rest of the story, the narrator unobtrusively signals points where Paul's perception may be equivocal by focusing our attention on the fact that "Paul noticed," "Paul observed," or "Paul perceived," as opposed to what another consciousness might make of the same thing. Had James wished us to see exclusively through Paul's eyes, a first-person narrator would have achieved this effect more efficiently. The existence of the narrator, on the other hand, causes us to view the story from a greater distance; the reticence of the narrator forces us to make our own judgments; the commentary in the narration reminds us to keep our own judgments under scrutiny.

As the narrator restricts himself to his own and Paul's consciousnesses, consciousness becomes the subject of the story. We see "the drama of consciousness"<sup>81</sup> from whom we are separated as it works to make sense of perceived impressions. This drama, by its very nature, is as inconclusive as the true measure of St. George's motives; everything we know, have known, or will come to know is contributory to our consciousness. No matter how much we may try to control, analyze, understand its vehicles, we are condemned to

<sup>81</sup> Charles R. Anderson, Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1977), p. 7.

uncertainty because our consciousness is both the thing being viewed and the viewer, a situation structured into this story by the presence of the narrator. Even when dealing with someone else's consciousness, no matter what the amount of intimate talk and feeling shared, we cannot "know" that consciousness. Here, as elsewhere, James attempted to come as close as possible to knowing consciousness by relating the process of consciousness, as opposed to the reality, as in stream-of-consciousness. Surely not even Henry James thought in those complex, convoluted phrases and structures. The story is not an attempt at presenting the reality of thought by which our inner selves function, but a breaking down of the process, putting into words the successive steps, doubts, hesitations, confusions with which we think and of which we are often unaware. Fadiman notes that James "had an almost intuitive perception of the unconscious and the part it plays in conditioning behavior,"<sup>82</sup> as we can perceive in studying the motives behind St. George's advice and its effect--or lack of it--on Paul's behavior. The narrator's presence allows us to see what otherwise we could not: Paul's and St. George's unconscious motivations. Andreas describes James's conception of life as "an accumulation of consciousness and as a continually

<sup>82</sup> Clifton Fadiman, "Introduction," The Short Stories of Henry James (New York: The Modern Library, 1945), p. xv.

accelerating power to use one's consciousness,"<sup>83</sup> which suggests the reasons for the use of present tense in the end of the story: Paul's consciousness has not ceased growing, though he is limited by his subjectivity from understanding what has occurred. The continuing growth of consciousness must occur in the reader as he, from a more objective stance, seeks to understand what he has been shown by the narrator and through him by James.

Putt claims that the problem of the story lies in the plot,<sup>84</sup> but we know who goes where and says what. Rather, the central issue of the ambiguity is "the choice of motives";<sup>85</sup> as Beach noted long ago, "The stories of Henry James are records of seeing rather than doing."<sup>86</sup> As Paul attempts to decipher the motives of the Master, Marian, and Mrs. St. George, the reader is drawn into a similar position with the addition of watching Paul watching himself watch others. To estimate a motive requires an estimation of the character, and in James character is a subtle chameleon, having always basically the same shape but disconcerting color variations. Reality fluctuates from moment to moment, and in this story as in so much other James we are given moments in time, each

<sup>83</sup> Andreas, p. 11.

<sup>84</sup> Putt, p. 219.

<sup>85</sup> Rimmon, p. 94.

<sup>86</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, The Method of Henry James (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1918), p. 56.



one contingent upon the previous moments but unpredictably divergent from them. The nature of observable human phenomena demands constant shifts of perceptions, as an analysis of Paul's view of Mrs. St. George will demonstrate, but consciousness--our ability to evaluate and to know we are doing so--after it goes to the trouble of drawing inferences, wants them to be correct and therefore static even though it knows that people may be ambivalent as well as ambiguous, which adds further layers of inconclusive suggestion.

The story is just what it seems to be--a puzzle with several alternate, contradictory solutions, as the staircase of Summersoft descends "from a great height in two arms with a circular sweep of the most charming effect" (95)--two different ways to arrive at the same point. In other words, it is an accurate depiction of reality from the vantage point of a persona, the narrator, perfectly aware of the situation and of both the pathos and absurdity of it. As seems to be the only satisfactory view of "The Turn of the Screw," the lesson of the story is precisely the coexistence of mutually opposite possibilities, though at the end of the story it is "too soon to say" whether "the perplexed young man" (151) will fully understand and accept this. The individual consciousness, even (or perhaps especially) an artistic one, must act, as Paul does in leaving for Europe to write his novel or as St. George does in proposing to Marian, but decisions to act are based on the weighing of alternate possibilities and

settling on the ones that seem most positive or productive, not ones necessarily correct. The great controversies that fly about much of James's work suggest one of two things about him: either he was not a very good artist and only contrived at creating obscure, verbose conundra, or he was a very good artist and willfully presented ambiguity because that's what he saw operant in reality.

Much of James's work reflects this awareness of the complexity of reality, the difficulty of deciding what is right and wrong, what is truth and fiction. As early as The American, James presents the conflict between two equally valid and viable attitudes: on one side, the ancient aristocratic tradition of the Bellegardes; on the other the rootless, democratic exuberance of Christopher Newman. Neither side is entirely good or bad, but characters from each position must deal with characters from the other. Mme. de Bellegarde and Christopher Newman wish to achieve the same object, the union of tradition with wealth, but each individual consciousness, limited by its personal experience, is incapable of perceiving reality as the other sees it. The tragedy of the novel is not the failure of love between Newman and Claire de Cintré but the inability of two distinct sets of ideas either to merge or to complement each other or, ultimately, even to recognize each other's validity. Morton Zabel points out James's fascination for the difference between "a given appearance and a taken

meaning"<sup>87</sup>; whereas Mme. de Bellegarde believes she is manifesting a certain, to her, logical and consistent appearance, the meaning that appearance takes to Newman is, though also logical and consistent, different from her projection.

In terms of "The Lesson of the Master," the given appearance of Mrs. St. George, Marian, and St. George may or may not be the same as the conclusions drawn by Paul. Charles Anderson says that characters in James's work arrive at "real relationships" with one another only after "one character understands some associated object which he assumes is symbolic of another character . . .--the inherent ambivalence of the symbol being a chief complicating factor."<sup>88</sup> St. George's study, for example, is something Paul uses to substantiate his judgment of Mrs. St. George and his understanding of the Master's message. It is "a large high room--a room without windows . . . a place of exhibition," with "a tall desk, of great extent, at which the person using it could write only in the erect posture of a clerk in a counting-house" (130). Noticing the rug, "a wide plain band of crimson cloth, as straight as a garden path and almost as long," Paul immediately pictures St. George pacing "to and fro during vexed hours--hours, that is, of admirable composition" (130).

<sup>87</sup> Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Introduction," The Portable Henry James (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), pp. 19-20.

<sup>88</sup> Anderson, p. 4.

To Paul, despite the counting-house desk, the room seems ideal for a place to write: "'Lord, what good things I should do if I had such a charming place as this to do them in!' . . . The outer world, the world of accident and ugliness, was so successfully excluded, and within the rich protecting square, beneath the patronizing sky, the dream-figures, the summoned company could hold their particular revel" (132). Indeed by going to Europe Paul chooses seclusion in which to write. St. George, however, describes the room otherwise: "'Isn't it a good big cage for going round and round? My wife invented it and she locks me up every morning'" (131). By the end of their conversation, Paul comes to agree with St. George: the room is a prison in which the poor Master has been locked by a demanding wife so he can make money to send her children to Sandhurst, though the Master himself admits that it was he who led the "'mercenary muse'" to "'the altar of literature'" (133). Not only does Paul eliminate his own spontaneous evaluation of the room by accepting the Master's, but he then proceeds to believe he has understood the Master by understanding his room. Again, as with Mrs. St. George, Paul notices contradictory evidence, but, being human, he feels he must come to one "right" answer, whereas no one answer is acceptable. Indubitably St. George feels caged by his room, knowing that the work he produces there will be less than satisfactory; indubitably Mrs. St. George intended the room to be the most conducive atmosphere for her husband's work; indubitably she

and St. George have different perceptions of what that work is and how it is to be accomplished. If, as Andreas asserts, in James "the supreme value for consciousness" is "a constant, unremitting, and sympathetic consideration for the feelings of others,"<sup>89</sup> consideration for others does not guarantee correct perception of their feelings. Mrs. St. George cares for her husband and he for her, as we can see by his declarations at her death, but both characters, like Paul, cannot take the step from consideration to understanding of each other.

Paul's consciousness, the real subject of the story, is essentially observative and analytical, as the narrator demonstrates in the opening scene of the story. The first sentence places us within Paul's mind as he measures observation against what he has been told: "He had been told the ladies were at church, but this was corrected by what he saw from the top of the steps" (95). Paul notes details and attempts to reach valid conclusions based on his own observations. He stands at the top of the stairs apart from the group, viewing the scene and its inhabitants as an "admirable picture" (95), a typical objective artistic stance for him; as the narrator tells us, he always liked "to take at once a general perceptive possession of a new scene" (95). Being "slightly nervous," he takes "an independent line" (96) across the lawn of Summersoft,

<sup>89</sup> Andreas, p. 7.

feeling "a fine English awkwardness" (96) in his lack of "a certain social boldness" (96). The narrator makes it clear from the outset that Paul's mind is naturally observant and speculative, that he is not perfectly at ease with people, and that he feels comfort in a stillness that "was too perfect to be modern" (96), enjoying a stroll down "a cheerful, upholstered avenue into the other century" (96). Paul prefers the stability of the completed past to the infinite possibility of the future. His comfort with the past is also indicated by the narrator's comments on Paul's perceptions of Marian: "Modern she was indeed, and made Paul Overt, who loved old colour, the golden glaze of time, think with some alarm of the muddled palette of the future" (126).

After he joins the company, "his first attention" (97) is given to speculations about St. George. Since one of the gentlemen present is "too young" and one "scarcely looked clever enough" (97) to be "the great misguided novelist" (97), Paul concludes he is not among them, particularly as the young writer "had a vague sense" that were St. George present "he would have given him a sign of recognition or of friendliness . . . would know something about Ginistrella" (98). When St. George appears, he evinces no interest in or knowledge of the presence of the young writer of whom he surely would have heard in his walks with Miss Fancourt. In fact, when introduced by Marian, St. George makes no sign of recognition; on the contrary, Paul notes that St. George's amiability is

"part of his rich outfit" but does not proceed from personal knowledge of the work of "a rising young scribbler" (110). Again, we note the acute and apparently correct perception on Paul's part; the narrator specifically tells us he has "the sort of divination that belonged to his talent" (110).

The ability to discern a reality does not, however, guarantee an ability to evaluate correctly the nature of the phenomenon. Always within Paul, because of the acuteness of his observation and his speculative turn of mind, is a conflict of interpretation, an awareness of the fluidity of reality, its "muddled palette." The awareness is most uncomfortable and, like all other human beings, Paul attempts to fix reality around him, a trait we can see in the subtle fluctuations of his viewpoint on Mrs. St. George.

His first observations of Mrs. St. George are a "mystification" (98); ". . . the important little woman in the aggressively Parisian dress" does not seem to Paul the appropriate "alter ego" (98) of a writer. She looks instead like "the wife of a gentleman who 'kept' books rather than wrote them" (99). He is impressed with her wit; though at first he "suspected her of a tendency to figure people as larger than life" (99), he comes to realize she possesses a "sharply mutinous" (99) attitude toward the high society with whom she cohabits. Hearing of the burnt book, however, immediately moves Paul back to a negative view of her as he assumes the burnt book "would have been one of her husband's

finest things" (100).<sup>90</sup> His negative opinion is reinforced as the story proceeds by St. George's comments that his wife does not allow him to smoke or drink and that she has constructed "'a good big cage'" (131), in which she "locks" her husband every morning. But contact with the woman herself, as opposed to her exterior and her husband's comments, shakes Paul's perception of her as "the Dragon" (109) to this St. George. Walking with Mrs. St. George, while her husband and Marlen are "quite out of sight" (110), he finds he gets on with her "better than he expected" (111), noting again how "alert" and "accommodating" she is. He finds himself with "a glimmering of the answer" as to how "she could be held to have been the making of her husband" (111), though the narrator carefully refrains from defining that glimmering or of explaining what makes "this perception . . . provisional" (111).

After his long talk with St. George in the Master's cage, Paul settles for himself his view of Mrs. St. George, a view that corresponds to St. George's warnings concerning marriage: "'One's wife interferes'" (135). The obvious conclusion reached by Paul, and the reader at this point, is that Mrs. St. George, consciously or otherwise, has forced her husband to lead "'the clumsy conventional expensive materialized vulgarized brutalized life of London'" (137) in order

<sup>90</sup> Barry, p. 388.



to make enough money to send his children to Sandhurst. This conclusion should be as questionable to Paul as to the reader. From the beginning of his acquaintance with her, as Peter Barry has noted, Paul "is never completely happy with his adverse judgment of her character, and never finds sufficient support for it."<sup>91</sup> St. George himself admits at the beginning of the conversation that his wife is "'a woman of distinguished qualities, to whom my obligations are immense'" (135). Had she not taken the trouble to invite Paul to dinner, it is unlikely the Master would have thought to do so. She manages his social life completely, a life that, though he claims that it has "'taken away . . . the power'" (137) to write, he seems to enjoy: "Paul noted how little the author of Shadowmere minded, as he phrased it to himself, when addressed as a celebrated story teller" (119). Twice in the preceding sentence the narrator has taken care to separate himself from Paul; in the second instance, the implication is that someone else on observing St. George would have put the same observations in different phrases, presumably dropping the understatement: St. George enjoyed being addressed "as a celebrated story teller."

However, the Master's talk, whose dominant theme seems to be the pitfall of marriage, overwhelms Paul, and, likeable woman as she may be, he categorizes her as the catalyst for St. George's deterioration. Hence his "bewilderment" (143)

<sup>91</sup> Barry, p. 387.

upon receipt of St. George's letter after her death acknowledging the Master's debt to her: "'She carried on our life with the greatest art, the rarest devotion, and I was free, as few men can have been, to drive my pen, to shut myself up with my trade. This was a rare service--the highest she could have rendered me'" (143). Paul's mind immediately pursues the question of St. George's motives: "If Mrs. St. George was an irreparable loss, then her husband's inspired advice had been a bad joke and renunciation was a mistake?" (143). He does not question, even at this point, the reality of Mrs. St. George: was she an irreparable loss or the Dragon? By studying imagery, dialogue, and action, we can come to a reasonable estimation of her character, as we can with Marian and St. George, bearing always in mind that as far as Paul, or St. George for that matter, is concerned, what Mrs. St. George really is is of little consequence in comparison to what he thinks she is; it is how he perceives her, not the ultimate validity of his perception, that will influence his actions.

He is in the same situation with Marian Fencourt, another interesting enigma about whom we may come to some conclusions. As noted, like the other characters, she is comically exaggerated both by her frequently hyperbolic speech and the reactions she produces in her suitors. She is also very much like her predecessor: both women are beautiful in face and figure; both are at ease in the social milieu and know how to function as efficient, charming hostesses. Though Paul, like

St. George, apparently, has difficulty understanding Mrs. St. George, Marian does not. In her conversation with Paul at her home, she reveals her understanding of Mrs. St. George, though it is Paul who brings the Master's wife into consideration. Marian denies that St. George "has a mystifying little way of alluding" to his wife, at least to her: "That wouldn't be right, would it?" (124). She does admit that St. George said of his wife "that she didn't care for perfection," which is, according to Paul, "a great crime in an artist's wife," though Marian's response is, "Yes, poor thing." Her sympathy for and acceptance of Mrs. St. George are explained when she says, "Women are so hampered--so condemned! Yet it's a kind of dishonour if you don't, when you want to do something, isn't it?" (125). She has explained to Paul the position in which women find themselves, a position which, in all fairness to him, St. George perceives, though he puts it much less sympathetically than Marian: according to him, women "think they understand, they think they sympathize" with an artist's work, but "Their idea is that you shall do a great lot and get a great lot of money. Their great nobleness and virtue, their exemplary conscientiousness as British females, is in keeping you up to that" (136); "How can they take part [in artistic sacrifice] ? They're the idol and the altar and the flame!" (138). Paul tells St. George that Marian, unlike most women, "has a passion for the real thing, for good work--for everything you and

I care for most,'" but St. George responds, "'She has it indeed, but she'd have a still greater passion for her children-- and very proper too. She'd insist on everything's being made comfortable, advantageous, propitious for them'" (139).

The comparison between the two women is underscored by their shared imagery, such as the color red. Mrs. St. George wears a red dress and puts a red carpet in her husband's study. Marian has red hair and she lives in a "bright red sociable talkative room" (126). Red seems to suggest life, growth, and change. Summersoft, whose stillness is "too perfect to be modern" is "pink rather than red" (96), having faded from the original vitality of its youth. Aging General Fancourt has "a pink smiling face" (96). When Paul returns to London after his sojourn on the Continent, he finds in Picadilly, the Fancourt neighborhood, "three or four big red houses where there had been low black ones" (144). When the General tells Paul of the impending wedding, Paul turns "very red" (146). Even during the dinner at Summersoft, the political discussion concerns Conservatism and its opposition, "those of another political colour"(103), red.

The two women also share associations with flowers. Paul and Marian sit on a flowered sofa for their first talk, and her sitting room is pervaded by an "almost intense odor of flowers" (126), as in Mrs. St. George's rooms "the odor of flowers" lingers after a dinner party (130). Both women are as alive and natural as their flowers. Though the perfect

hostess, glorying in name-dropping, Mrs. St. George is "sharply mutinous" (99) toward the stuffy representatives of la monde. Marian's "real success" is "to live, to bloom" (104). St. George remarks, "'You ought always to believe such a girl as that--always, always'" (114). The women are bright in their clothing, their manner, and their minds; they are active and full of vitality and enthusiasm. Mrs. St. George pushes herself beyond her physical limitations in order to be a part of the social world, and Marian is "not afraid to gush," does not care to remember "that she must be proud" (125).

In contrast to the natural bloom of Marian, St. George and Paul are considered "'hothouse plants'" (119) leading artificial lives for art. Though St. George is mistaken for a hothouse flower by General Fancourt, the Master denies it: "'I've lived the life of the world, with my wife and my progeny, the clumsy conventional expensive materialized vulgarized brutalized life of London'" (137). Paul is more the hothouse flower, living and writing away from England and then selecting the greenhouse of the Continent for further production.

There are two sides to the hothouse flower: it may be of rare beauty, but living away from the intensity of social life can breed great naiveté as well as great art. Marian Fancourt has lived in the hothouse of Asia, full of myriad examples of life and richness, where she nevertheless "'never heard of a picture'" (106). Peter Barry maintains that "the originality of her thinking . . . is, to a large extent, the product of her

cultural situation."<sup>92</sup> Her ideas on art seem to Paul "at one moment too extravagant to be real" and the next "too intelligent to be false. They were both high and lame . . ." (126). Overt is struck not only "with her critical intelligence and with something large and bold in the movement of her mind" (125), but also with her naiveté.

For all her artistic naiveté, Marian is very "modern": "She was on the footing of an independent personage . . . Modern she was indeed, and made Paul Overt, who loved old color . . . think with some alarm of the muddled palette of the future" (126). Though he sees her at first as "an immature girl" (107), he soon finds her "the perfection of a fine type" (104). St. George declares her "'an artistic intelligence really of the first order'" (118), and both men would like "'to represent'" her; "'there's nothing like life!'" comments the Master.

The narrator is typically reticent in his evaluation of her.<sup>93</sup> As with Mrs. St. George and her husband, the narrator says of Marian, "she appeared to imply that real success was to resemble" her (104), separating his observation a step from Paul's. In an explicit comment on her and Paul, he tells us that during their conversation on perfection, "they weren't posturing for each other or someone else" (125). Miss Fancourt

<sup>92</sup> Barry, p. 386.

<sup>93</sup> Barry, p. 386; Rimmon, p. 93.

doesn't posture; she is what she appears to be, but Overt has difficulty perceiving what that is. He is given the clues but misses the solution.

Overt does recognize some weaknesses in Marian's perfection in her perception of art and her own artistic attempts, which are naive for all their being intelligent. Yet Overt in his own naiveté wishes her to be something more than naturally human. He feels betrayed when, after a virtually unexplained absence of two years, having seen him scarce half a dozen times and being given no declarations or assurances of his feelings, she decides to marry someone else. Furthermore, he knows her great admiration for St. George. "'He understands--understands everything'" (108), she says. "'He sees everything; he has so many comparisons and images, and they're always exactly right'" (125). When she agrees to marry the Master, however, Overt experiences "a strange irritation in his complicated artistic soul and a sort of disinterested disappointment. She was so happy it was almost stupid--a disproof of the extraordinary intelligence he had formerly found in her. Didn't she know how bad St. George could be, hadn't she recognized the awful thinness--?" (148). We must ask why she should when heretofore the supposedly budding genius of Overt could not. In addition, he now calls Marian "stupid" for her happiness in marrying a man she loves and admires, the same personage Paul has been enthusiastically listening to up to this point. Overt is ridiculous and betrays his own naiveté

and crudity when he leaves her gathering without saying good-bye. Overt condemns Marian for behaving precisely as she said she would. He condemns her for her naturalness, her *jolie de vivre*, and her freedom of action and thought, which are the very qualities he most admired in her. Once again he attempts to create order and stability out of the confused impressions received by his consciousness and once again is left with no absolute certainties.

Why does the narrator tell us this story? His narration is presented conventionally in the past tense until the ending, which is in the present. Evidently the narrator knows the conclusion from the start and narrates the story from no great distance in time from the events. He is careful to tell us that even he cannot know for sure what will occur beyond the end of the story. It is possible that "St. George may produce good work, Paul may not."<sup>94</sup> The narrator admits "it's too soon to say" (151), though his detachment indicates he is not concerned over the outcome either way. He is no slouch of an artist himself; the story proceeds to the twist of the ending in a logical, consistent manner, preparing the reader to accept the conclusion while in no way mitigating our surprise at it. In retrospect, St. George's engagement to Marian is the most logical step the older artist could take; yet the narrator

<sup>94</sup> Barry, p. 389.



has so carefully enmeshed us in Paul's consciousness that we react with him in confusion at the dénouement, though our perceptions at the same time are larger than Paul's.

The narrator has established a personal, if understated, relationship with us. Paul is "Our friend" (96), "Our young man" (97), and "our hero" (141). The amused detachment of the narrator puts us at ease; he chats with us as equals while luring us into acceptance of Paul's perceptions at the same time. He is urbane and confident, at ease in the social milieu of St. George's life, but equally perceptive of the anxieties, doubts, and enthusiasms of a young writer struggling between his desire to achieve prominence in his chosen profession and his "dread of being grossly proud" (98). The narrator understands and portrays with sympathy the younger artist's enthusiastic and indiscriminating ardor for the older artist, whose words "made a sharp impression on [Paul], like almost all spoken words from the same source" (141); he sees both the comedy and the pathos of the situation for both men. The narrator, we may conclude, knows Paul so well because he, too, has shared the struggle and evidently surmounted it. He treats Paul's youth with envy and sympathy, knowing that Marian's eyes "would have half-broken his heart if he hadn't been so young" (105). He has faced the decision Paul must face between the demands of life and art; the quality of his narration suggests he opted for the latter, while his compassion for both Paul and St. George indicates his understanding of

the difficulty of that decision.

Though he chooses to delineate Paul's consciousness, his picture of St. George is uniformly attractive. St. George may be a posturing phony, but he postures magnificently, in full awareness of himself, and the narrator admires St. George's witty charm and verbal competence, both evident in the narrator himself. Perhaps the narrator feels more at ease in dealing with the younger, underdeveloped, naive consciousness of Paul than with the experienced and subtle consciousness of "the great misguided artist," who would be more of an equal match for the narrator's ironic, if compassionate, dissection. In Paul's case, the narrator's compassion is extended both to the young man's situation and to the young man, for the narrator is clearly superior in his knowledge and understanding to the young artist. In St. George's case, the narrator's sympathy is extended only to the novelist's situation, his compromise and failure, not to his character, which doesn't need compassion because it is so successful.

Though the narrator's personal decision may have been the opposite of St. George's, the two are more similar in character to each other than either is to Paul. As St. George, for his own reasons, enjoys playing with Paul's mind, so does the narrator. The narrator's depiction of Marian exhibits the same appreciation for her beauty and freshness that St. George demonstrates. She may not be the ideal woman for an artist to marry to further his work, but she is a delightful sample of

womanhood that any normal male would desire to attract and entertain, and the narrator thoroughly enjoys St. George's triumph in attaining her. The bitterness in the end lies completely in Paul; the narrator enjoys his discomfiture--and ours--as his studied sarcasm indicates. Though St. George speaks of his old age and "'the moral'" (151) of his artistic failure while radiating blooming health and happiness, the narrator notes that "standing there in the ripeness of his successful manhood, [St. George] didn't suggest that any of his veins were exhausted" (150), a most un-Jamesian suggestive remark. St. George may have failed as an artist, but he has succeeded admirably as a man and may not therefore be treated with the same condescension as "the perplexed young man" (151). Neither the narrator nor St. George ever loses his composure, his control of the situation and the people involved, his safe detachment derived from intellectual observation. This coolness contrasts greatly to Paul, who at the end rudely leaves the reception without taking leave of his hostess and wanders home in the confusion of darkness, that of the night and of his mixed reactions.

At the conclusion, the narrator completely separates himself from Paul's consciousness when he says he knows that Paul "would really be the very first to appreciate" (151) new work from St. George, though Paul's only feeling is fear that St. George will still publish. The narrator's final comment is therefore totally his own: "perhaps . . . the Master was

essentially right and . . . nature had dedicated [Paul] to intellectual, not to personal passion" (151). In two ways, by "perhaps" and "essentially," the narrator makes plain the irony and resultant ambiguity of his closing phrase: the Master was only "perhaps" right and was right only "essentially"; we may question whether the Master was right, whether it was nature or the Master that dedicated Paul, whether Paul becomes "dedicated" at all, whether he is dedicated to "intellectual" passion, and whether there is a difference between intellectual and personal passion, a complexity of unresolvable "whethers" with which the narrator taunts the reader. He knows, and forces us to recognize, the total absence of one clear absolute thing which can be called "truth." Given any set of incontrovertible facts, the motives, causes, and effects that result in and from those facts will always be inconclusive, for the human consciousness, the real subject of the story, is always so, and any pretensions to the opposite are wrong. If any one in the story has the right to draw absolute conclusions, it is the narrator; yet, superior as he is, he doesn't and can't. We may arrive at logical, consistent evaluations, but we may never rest in complete assurance that we are right. This is the lesson Paul must learn and that the narrator knows and demonstrates to us through the vehicle of Paul's developing consciousness.

#### IV. Conclusion

At the end of the story, Paul is wandering in the complexities of his own consciousness, Marian and St. George seem about to live happily ever after, and the reader is wondering what it was all about. The narrator has led us through a maze of subtle images and impressions, shown them stimulating the developing consciousness of a young artist, and demonstrated that reality is a fluid and ambiguous substance. We have seen the narrator's delicate drawing of Paul's contradictory evaluations of Mrs. St. George and Marian Fancourt and his inability to pierce St. George's Master-gone-wrong mask. The question is, what is the lesson of the real Master, Henry James?

From the view of the question of artistic commitment raised by the story, the lesson is essentially what St. George says it is, but for different reasons. It is not the accoutrements of society that make or break the artist; it is the artist himself. The artist must not allow society to interfere with his own artistic development. St. George roughly admits this by saying that he has turned to "the worship of false gods!" (115), but he then beclouds the issue by bringing in his family and his social successes for their share of the burden. The artist must maintain his integrity; he must go his own way; and above all he must not believe all he sees on the surface. James's lesson to an artist is, yes, dedicate yourself to art,

but do so in spite of, not because of, St. George's confused advice; do so because that is what you must do. The artist must learn for himself what he does have to sacrifice and what he does not; certainly he need not necessarily become a disfranchised monk. The artist's job is to intensify life, and he cannot do so unless he knows life intimately. Certainly he must keep himself in the position of an observer of life, but there must be life around him to observe. St. George has a great deal of life around him; we are told again and again of the perfections of his observations of people, of "types." The only cause, therefore, of his lack of superior production is his own failing, his own inner weakness.

Does Overt learn a lesson from the Master? His new book is found to be "really magnificent" (151) by the St. Georges who fostered it, and if we trust their judgment the Master's advice was sound. Paul realizes that he has been duped, but he places culpability on the wrong parties; it is his own naiveté, his "hothouse flower" outlook, that has caused him to misread and continue to misread reality. He is still afraid of the possible production of another masterpiece by St. George, which is at least improbable if not impossible, not to mention irrelevant. This fear of Overt's causes us to fear that he has not truly learned his lesson: he has not learned to become the objective observer he needs to be in order to gain true artistic maturity, such as that displayed by the narrator, who allows the characters to move, to act, to be on their

own. He describes them, watches, them, and amuses himself with them. He does not impose limits on them but allows them to delineate their own characters. Finally, though possessed of a definite character, though displaying understanding and compassion for them, he does not judge them; his commentary is suggestive but the final judgments, if any are possible, are left to the reader.

But for those of us who are not artists, the Master has two other lessons. One is the fluid and amorphous nature of reality as it is perceived and evaluated in human consciousness. In her discussion of James's ambiguity, Rimmon defines ambiguity "to cover only the relation obtaining between mutual exclusives"<sup>95</sup>: St. George is either honest or dishonest; Mrs. St. George is either a help or a hindrance; Marian would either be good for or destructive of Paul's work. Rimmon's limitation, however, is not consistent with the effect of the story. Each time one reads the story, the characters and situations stand in a slightly different light and new glimmers of understanding show themselves, resulting from the analytic thoughts about the story the reader has pursued and from the reader's juxtaposition of the ideas of the story with his own external reality. Subsequent glimmers do not blot out previous ones, though they may be contradictory to the former. Rather, the new perceptions overlies the previous, so that the result is

<sup>95</sup> Rimmon, xi.

not so much change of viewpoint as expansion of it. In the story, as in reality, motives, characters, and reactions are not either black or white, much as we may wish them to be for our own security. The effect is not grayness, however, but a rich tapestry woven of contradictory colors. From a distance, the story might appear gray, but when viewed closely the individual threads can be discerned, though so closely interwoven that none may be removed without changing the fabric of the whole.

The other lesson is that because one's perception of reality determines his actions and attitudes, how one perceives reality is a moral question of unsurmountable difficulty. The way an individual consciousness views itself, its environment, and the characters that inhabit it will result in love or hatred, trust or suspicion, honesty or lie, good or bad. The relative dimensions of our consciousnesses create a correlative responsibility for the moral consequences of consciousness. The "supreme value for consciousness" is "a constant, unremitting, and sympathetic consideration for the feelings of others,"<sup>96</sup> a value Paul Overt has not realized. We can never be sure of the rightness or wrongness of our actions because we are unable to know completely another's consciousness, but we can be aware of that consciousness and strive to deal with it with as much sympathy as possible within our limits.

<sup>96</sup> Andreas, p. 7.



D. W. Jefferson states that moral "lessons" are not what James is interested in<sup>97</sup>; none of the characters, including the narrator, can be judged as good or evil. The outstanding characteristic shared by all the characters is their humanity. Mrs. St. George is human in her desire to construct her life and her family's as comfortably as possible; Marian is human in her desire to wed the charming and witty St. George, who is very human in his desire to mitigate his failures at the same time as he profits from them. Paul Overt is human in his desire to achieve artistic success, artistic integrity, and personal happiness. The narrator is human in his delight in the foibles of his characters as he tells the story.

When we view the story as a whole, the superficial distinction between life and art, as suggested by St. George and perceived by Paul Overt, disappears, for the story itself puts the two in their true relation, which is perhaps best stated by Marian Fencourt: "'What's art but an intense life--if it be real?'" (106). In one sense, all art is fake; the story portrays invented characters saying invented things in invented settings. But on a deeper level, the invented characters are completely real, both because we see in them reflections of the reality we know and because, once we have read the story, they become part of our reality. The "'intense life'" of the

<sup>97</sup> D. W. Jefferson, Henry James and the Modern Reader (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 22.

story becomes completely real as it enters our lives and influences our perceptions of and reactions to our fellow beings. When we reach the level of perceiving that art is life, our lives can then partake of the conscious awareness of art. "Some people are more alive than others, and it is in the power of human beings to stimulate or to benumb not only other people's sense of life but also their own."<sup>98</sup> By creating a static, structured segment of life in a piece of art, Henry James has certainly stimulated our sense of life to the end that we may experience life in the same manner as we did the story, living in complete awareness of its fluidity, its frustrating ambiguity, its transience, and its supernal beauty.

<sup>98</sup> Andreas, p. 2.

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## VI. Vita

Judith Eisenhart Smullen was born August 24, 1949, in Oneonta, New York, to Judith Russell and Charles R. Eisenhart. She graduated from Glens Falls High School, Glens Falls, New York, in June of 1967. She matriculated from Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 1971, magna cum laude, with a B.A. in English. Her honors included Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Tau Delta, Alpha Psi Omega, Lambda Epsilon Delta, and Who's Who. She was active in several campus organizations, particularly dramatic productions.

After graduation, she joined the staff of Libert High School, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as a teacher of English, where she has remained for the past nine years. During this time, she has taught the Sophomore Honors English program and has developed and teaches the Junior Honors English program. She has advised the Drama Club and directed their Shakespearean productions. She has also served as class adviser and as adviser to the Hoop Girls. She has served as representative of the Bethlehem Education Association and is a member of the Meet and Discuss Committee.

Her hobbies and activities include membership in the choir of the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, and the Maulie Maguires Women's Rugby Football Club. In addition, she enjoys reading, all kinds of music, and cats. She is married to David E. Smullen with whom she resides in Bethlehem.