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# What Maisie Knew by Henry James: a technical analysis

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WHAT MAISIE KNEW BY HENRY JAMES: A TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

Susan Ilfeld Adleman

ABSTRACT

It is the purpose of this study of Henry James's novel What Maisie Knew (1897) to evaluate the evidence leading to a reliable answer to the question that James poses in the title: namely, whether, by the end of the novel, Maisie has retained her innocent character or has become corrupted by the behavior of the adults who comprise her entire world. I base this study on three technical elements of the novel: structure, imagery, and point of view.

Based on the evidence to follow, I conclude that no definitive appraisal of her character can be made and furthermore, that this situation is brought about by a deliberate ambiguity on the part of the author. This ambiguity is manifested not only in the situations in which James places Maisie but also in his handling of the three elements mentioned above, not the least important of which is James's use of a narrator, or friend of the reader, who provides an additional dimension to the story which the reader must evaluate.

The effect of the novel, then, is really to keep the reader in doubt about Maisie to the very end--a thoroughly provocative experience.

WHAT MAISIE KNEW BY HENRY JAMES:

A TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

by

Susan Ilfeld Adleman

A Thesis

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of Lehigh University

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## ABSTRACT

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## I

### Introduction

Since the publication in 1897 of Henry James's novel What Maisie Knew, scholars and critics have turned their attention to what is ultimately the most important aspect of the work: namely, as that most intriguing of titles leads one to speculate on, exactly what it is that Maisie has, by the close of the novel, learned about herself and her world, and how she uses that knowledge to meet the situation in which she finally finds herself. Since the title leaves the question of Maisie's innocence or corruption open, as does in my opinion the novel itself, there is much ground for debate. Consistently, published opinions concerning Maisie's character as it emerges at the end of the novel cover a wide spectrum from snow white to coal black, as well as every conceivable shade in between.

In general, those critics providing the most inflexible interpretations of Maisie's character have had, in order to prove their theses, to introduce elements into the story that are incompatible with it, whereas those who hold to a middle ground have come closest to the essential substance of the novel. No one contests that, as the story opens, Maisie's mind is that of an innocent six-year-old girl and that the general movement of the novel is towards the development of that mind as it is influenced by the events

it perceives. The point of disagreement, of course, lies with the point in her development at which the novel ends: How much has Maisie learned? How emotionally mature has she become? How calculating? How selfish? How pure? How innocent? Ultimately, just what has happened to Maisie in the course of the novel?

The whole problem facing careful readers lies in the skill with which James relates events seen through Maisie's consciousness while depending at the same time on the maturity of the reader to understand what Maisie merely sees. In fact, the greater understanding on the reader's part required to "see through" Maisie's actions and reactions must also be extended to the governess, Mrs. Wix, whose role it is to supply a more mature dimension to Maisie's adolescent perceptions. Even in the person of Mrs. Wix, however, James has not let the reader off easily. One must not take her observations and evaluations at face value, in particular those concerning her own motives in wishing to take charge of Maisie and her reasons for suggesting a ménage à trois for herself, her charge, and Sir Claude.

It is the point of view that James employs in reporting events as seen through Maisie's eyes and describing them in her simple vocabulary while, at the same time, depending on the perception and maturity of the more objective, more mature and experienced reader to sort out the real facts for himself, that poses the difficulty and must, then, supply

the answer to the problem at hand. James has depended on difference in verbal concepts to achieve the delicate balance between what Maisie knows and what the reader understands. As James writes in his Preface to the New York Edition of What Maisie Knew, published in 1908,

Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary. Amusing, therefore, as it might at the first blush have seemed to restrict myself in this case to the terms as well as to the experience, it became at once plain that such an attempt would fail. Maisie's terms accordingly play their part--since her simpler conclusions quite depend on them; but our own commentary constantly attends and amplifies. This is it that on occasion, doubtless, seems to represent us as going so "behind" the facts of her spectacle as to exaggerate the activity of her relation to them. The difference here is but of a shade: it is her relation, her activity of spirit, that determines all our own concern--we simply take advantage of these things better than she herself. Only, even though it is her interest that mainly makes matters interesting for us, we inevitably

note this in figures that are not yet at her command and that are nevertheless required whenever those aspects about her and those parts of her experience that she understands darken off into others that she rather tormentedly misses.<sup>1</sup>

Since James has taken such painstaking care in his use of Maisie's consciousness as the vantage point from which he relates the events of the story, it seems an inescapable conclusion that one must, in considering the problem of Maisie's character as it has developed by the end of the novel, take into careful consideration what Maisie's concepts of the terms James has chosen for her can be in the light of the situations and experiences she has been exposed to in the seven years of her life the novel spans. To ignore this most important aspect of the work would be to accuse the author of inconsistency and carelessness. Consistency demands that, though Maisie uses language familiar to her through her association exclusively with adults, she understands these terms only insofar as her age, circumstances, and meager education permit. For her, as yet, the concept--the total adult meaning of terms she uses to describe events and to express her feelings (terms by which many critics have tried to prove that Maisie was corrupted)--is circumscribed by the limits of her short, neglected existence.

Consistent with James's expectation that the reader will understand a good deal more than Maisie does about the events



of her world is his expectation that the reader will understand as well the difference between Maisie's concept of the terms and phrases she uses and his own.

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the evidence for Maisie's corruption or innocence by studying her phraseology in the light of her experience. It is my opinion that only in this way may a valid evaluation be made of just what has happened to Maisie in the course of the novel.

A logical starting point is an examination of the wide range of published opinion by some of those scholars whose views are diametrically opposed yet at the same time substantially documented. It is interesting to analyze the evidence upon which these critics have based their interpretations, particularly those who seem the most absolute in their judgments concerning Maisie's corruption or innocence--interesting because James's deliberate subtlety, it seems to me, precludes any such dogmatism.

I shall proceed with a discussion based on the structure of the novel as it concerns Maisie's emergence from a helplessly passive child upon whom people and events act to a more mature young girl whose own will and character have, by the end of the novel, developed to the point where she is able to act independently by making an important choice based on her own evolved sense of herself.

The following section will be a comparison between

Maisie's limited comprehension of the implications of her own phraseology that are plausible for a girl of her age and experience with the perceptions of the reader, from whom James naturally expects a vastly more mature and worldly understanding. As mentioned earlier, this must be the yardstick by which the matter of Maisie's innocence or corruption can ultimately be measured.

At the conclusion of the novel, Maisie has neither remained completely innocent nor become completely corrupted, but rather has emerged as an individual, surely not untouched by the atmosphere and influences of her environment yet with a burgeoning sense of perspective. Her native intelligence and perception, as well as her capacity for loving, have enabled her to maintain a sense of loyalty and compassion through the vicissitudes of her life. Her "understanding" of the adult world in which she lives has become translucent but not yet transparent. Though she is not aware of the full impact of the behavior of the adults around her, she has begun to make a kind of order for herself out of what was at the beginning of the novel an appalling emotional chaos. Indeed her most strenuous efforts have been spent in trying to find reasons for what was happening to her. When she was younger her efforts to make sense out of these events were motivated by an unconscious desire to put those around her in a flattering light. Later, however, in the process of growing up, she begins to see people and events in their



proper perspective, thus making her own order--an important step in the process of maturing.

## II

### A Survey of Critical Opinion

The question of Maisie's ultimate corruption or innocence has elicited every conceivable type of theory, and after examining them, one cannot help agreeing with Muriel Shine that ". . . some of the critical pronouncements on What Maisie Knew have been surprising. The novel, and more specifically its heroine, has occasioned such a variety of explications that one is often tempted to analyze the critics rather than the character."<sup>1</sup>

Tempting as this analysis might be, especially in connection with those critics who seem to have stepped outside the bounds of credibility, I have, in the interests of relevancy and brevity, classified what I consider to be the most responsible opinions into three general groups: those who believe that Maisie remains uncorrupted at the end of the novel; those who believe that she has become corrupted; and those who believe that the degree of Maisie's innocence or corruption cannot really be determined with any certainty. It is interesting to note that of the thirty critics that seem to me worthy of study, twenty-one subscribe to the first theory. It is interesting also to note that these twenty-one opinions, some of which, like Pelham Edgar's<sup>2</sup>, date back to 1927, include many contemporary critical opinions published in the late nineteen-sixties. This is an

important point since one realistically may assume that contemporary critics might disagree with their earlier counterparts, who were much less apt to go "below the surface" of a fictional work and search out enigmatic psychological implications. Though the kind of substantiating evidence offered by earlier and later critics varies, the conclusions are generally the same. In each of the other two categories, available opinions spanned the nineteen-fifties to mid-sixties.

In comparing What Maisie Knew and The Turn of the Screw in terms of appearance and reality, Marius Bewley states unequivocally that "Maisie's innocence remains uncontaminated throughout." He writes further: "What Maisie Knew presents us with a world of horror, but the essence of that horror consists in the way we are able to isolate the grotesqueness of moral evil as it caricatures and distorts human action and motive--to isolate it through the innocent eyes of a little girl whose vision is not sufficiently dulled by conventional experience to absorb the singularity of the irregular world in which she lives."<sup>3</sup> Fifteen years later, F. R. Leavis took issue with Bewley on just what the essence of the novel is, although he agreed about Maisie's innocence.

Ward S. Worden discusses the differences between the cut and uncut versions of Maisie, in which he brings forth an important piece of evidence concerning Maisie's character--that of the image of the gilded Virgin atop the cathedral in

Boulogne (an image used as often by those wishing to prove Maisie's corruption as by those wishing to prove her innocence): ". . . the image is present and referred to in the outdoor scenes in which Mrs. Wix and Maisie carry on their debates. Maisie herself brings it into her last appeal to Sir Claude. In these positions it seems to emphasize the unworldly quality of Maisie's purity and knowledge, and the sacrifice that she, unlike all the adults, finds the strength to make."<sup>4</sup>

James W. Gargano bases his belief in Maisie's innocence primarily on James's Preface: ". . . Maisie must 'for the satisfaction of the mind' be 'saved.'"

. . . . .  
 "That Maisie's exposure to infection does not lead to paralysis, stasis, or corruption is apparent if the novel's basically simple focus, by no means simply achieved by the artist, is recognized . . . ."

. . . . .  
 "Maisie wrests from the urgency of each of her predicaments a moral vision or a moral imperative."

. . . . .  
 "In asking no less than heroism from him [Sir Claude], she becomes herself heroic. . . . No wonder James says that she experienced 'something deeper than a moral sense.'"<sup>5</sup>

In the Notes to Chapter Three of his study Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy, Joseph Wiesenfarth provides an

interesting analysis of some of the critical "battles" that have been waged concerning Maisie's character, and inserts his own comment: "Thus, to make Maisie out, at the end of the novel, 'as mature as Mrs. Beale,' as Cargill [referred to below] does, seems to me to run in the face of James's announced intention [referring to James's Preface], and even worse to destroy much of the novel's meaning and tone, which depend so largely on Maisie's becoming the opposite of what Mrs. Beale, Sir Claude and the Faranges stand for. There is good reason, then, to see the process of Maisie's maturity in a larger context than the one that sex alone provides for."<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, F. R. Leavis criticizes some of Marius Bewley's opinions of the novel. While Leavis agrees that Maisie "represents a positive concept of goodness . . . ," he disagrees with Bewley (who feels that Maisie deals primarily with the subject of evil) by asserting that "the tone and mode of What Maisie Knew-- this is what one has to insist on--are those of an extraordinarily high-spirited comedy. The comedy doesn't exclude pathos, that is true; . . . ." He defines his special use of comedy as he applies it in this instance by saying, "What we are given is comedy: where adulterous relations are concerned, the comedy of 'history repeating itself.'" . . . "In its central aspect, it is the comedy of a child's innocence."<sup>7</sup>

Joseph A. Hynes, in "The Middle Way of Miss Farange,"



refers to Maisie's course of action rather than to the matter of her innocence or lack of it. Mr. Hynes, however, is quite clear on the latter point: "Whatever Maisie knows, she has no knowledge of this faculty [Mrs. Wix's version of the 'moral sense'] so unjustly taken for granted; and her ignorance of this faculty, or at least of what Mrs. Wix in her well-intentioned fundamentalist way means by this faculty and the conduct to be controlled by it, is a sure sign of her retained childhood and innocence."<sup>8</sup>

Tony Tanner claims also that Maisie remains uncorrupted: ". . . there is a definite pathos in her innocence which, because of her situation, is 'an innocence saturated with knowledge and so directed to diplomacy.' Yet she is unspoiled by knowledge, and none of the surrounding badness rubs off on her."<sup>9</sup>

S. Gorley Putt agrees with F. R. Leavis's evaluation of what has happened to Maisie at the end of the novel, and takes exception to Cargill's views. Putt, along with others, feels that the answer to the question lies in James's Preface.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Leon Edel makes an original observation concerning Maisie's innocence:

Maisie is a careful presentation of the Henry James of the late autobiography, A Small Boy and Others: she possesses his curiosity, she is engaged in a systematic study of her elders, she searches determinedly for her identity amid her absent and

estranged parents and governesses. . . . Maisie is not 'real,' her precocity partakes of James's boyish precocity. James endowed her with his own resistance to "the assaults of experience" by having "simply to wonder," and so preserve the integrity of her years. He gives her his own "undestroyed freshness." Her "vivacity of intelligence" and her "small vibrations" are those of a story-teller in the making. She might have been "rather coarsened, blurred, sterilised, by ignorance and pain." Art saves her and protects her innocence, as it had saved Henry; art and the ability he acquired to "convert, convert, convert"; raw experience was always convertible into the stuff of poetry. . . . In his late preface he describes the "exquisite interest" he found in his study of this little girl, for in reality she is a study of himself; unwittingly he has treated her as a kind of psychological "case history." . . . Little Maisie among her variegated parents is but another version of the slightly older Henry among variegated governesses.<sup>11</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum of opinion also can be found impressive evidence supporting the theory of Maisie's ultimate corruption. Harris W. Wilson claims that "the theme of What Maisie Knew is, I submit, the violation of innocence;

in particular, the corruption of a child, to add the final turn of the screw, by her own parents." He writes more explicitly: "What Maisie saw was Sir Claude's sexual promiscuity, 'his weakness,' and the secret she discovered in Boulogne was that to win him for herself and Mrs. Wix, she must do battle with her stepmother in terms of that weakness. Her greatest asset opposed to Mrs. Beale's lush worldliness is her virginity, and that she is prepared to offer."<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the best-known criticism of the novel to be written by a scholar supporting the theory of Maisie's ultimate corruption is to be found in Oscar Cargill's The Novels of Henry James, in which he devotes eighteen pages to What Maisie Knew. He has done an excellent job of weaving together most of the important existing criticism on the subject of Maisie's development, but he definitely sides with those scholars who believe that Maisie loses her innocence: "It is to her [Maisie's] cynical sophistication, with its strange base in innocence, that James indubitably refers in his Preface, when he writes of the end of the book as 'the death of her childhood.' Endowed with quick perceptions, so that, in the beginning, she understood 'much more than any little girl, however patient, has perhaps ever understood before,' she is as mature as Mrs. Beale when she quits her stepmother." It is difficult to understand Cargill's assurance in stating what James "indubitably" was



referring to in his Preface when he mentioned the death of Maisie's childhood. Furthermore, since Cargill does cite the Preface as corroboration of his own claim, how can he ignore other passages in the Preface which definitely would disprove it? I refer to such passages as the following:

For the satisfaction of the mind, the small expanding consciousness would have to be saved . . . (7);

. . . . .

. . . my interesting small mortal would thus be . . . really keeping the torch of virtue alive in an air tending infinitely to smother it; really, in short, making confusion worse confounded by drawing some stray fragrance of an ideal across the scent of selfishness, by sowing on barren strands, through the mere fact of presence, the seed of the moral life (8);

. . . . .

. . . she has the wonderful importance of shedding a light far beyond any reach of her comprehension; of tending to poorer persons and things, by the mere fact of their being involved with her and by the special scale she creates for them, a precious element of dignity. (11-12)

Cargill feels other evidence proving Maisie's ultimate corruption includes the manner in which James has used the

image of the gold Virgin. He is one of those critics who feel that, since Maisie said she would wait for Sir Claude on the bench "where you can see the gold Virgin," she was, in effect, advertising her virginity.<sup>13</sup>

In a discussion of the Jamesian heroine, Naomi Lebowitz touches briefly but categorically on the subject of what becomes of Maisie. She writes that "the moral sense which flourishes so prematurely in Maisie interfuses her sense of true relationship. (The corruption in terms of her own desire for manipulation at the end of the novel is a regular part of the growth process in the Jamesian heroine, though it is not always so explicitly sketched.)"<sup>14</sup>

John C. McCloskey states unequivocally that "the sum of what Maisie knows is . . . the cumulative experience of her life which marks her indelibly at last as a Farange. She has achieved a self-awareness which is essentially a selfishness and a hardness. What she knows, at the end, is what she wants." He ends his article with the following statement: "And so the process of Maisie's knowledge is an ironic one. It culminates in the ascendance of her ego, untrained, unrestrained, ill-formed, and ethically illiterate, an ego that will satisfy itself even at the cost of what it regards as everything."<sup>15</sup> Though the article makes an effective case, this final statement is somewhat ambiguous, since an ego, by definition a mediating factor between one's primitive drives and the demands of society, cannot "satisfy itself even at

the cost of what it regards as everything" because it is guided and acts in accordance with "what it regards as everything." This ambiguity would not exist had McCloskey used in place of ego the term id, that part of the psyche that is dominated by the pleasure principle and impulsive wishing.

In the final category, in which I have placed the opinions of those critics who believe that Maisie's innocence or lack of it cannot really be established with any degree of certainty, can be found several excellent articles, four of which I have selected to review briefly. In an article describing her method of teaching What Maisie Knew to freshman English students, Adele Brebner explains her approach to the novel: "The question they were to ask themselves was 'What does Maisie know?' It seemed a legitimate teaching device to leave them to find out later that James's most cherished aim and brilliant accomplishment was to make that question unanswerable."<sup>16</sup>

Two articles by Edward Wasiolek are valuable. In the first article published, the author observes that "Maisie is neither 'pure' nor 'corrupt.' Neither explanation does justice to James's sensitive reflection in his works of the subtle mutations of character and of complex interaction of person and situation. If we must use terms like 'pure' and 'corrupt,' Maisie is at the end of the novel in a very special sense both; and at every point in the novel she is

subtly distinct in moral coloration."<sup>17</sup> A few months later, in the second article titled "Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' and Jamesian Fictional Imperatives," Wasiolek elaborates on the points made in his earlier one:

Maisie is one kind of person at the beginning of the novel, another kind at the end, and something subtly distinct in all the dramatic situations that intervene. The dependence of the meaning of her character on changing dramatic situations explains, I believe, the sharply divergent interpretations of her that have been published. She is neither a case of childhood purity triumphing over a corrupt environment nor a victim of her environment, passively submitting to the corrupt moral air she breathes. The first alternative is frankly unrealistic for James in the disjunction it implies between situation and character; the second is too coarse in its formulation of the change. The real trouble lies in the attempts to formulate too definitively the essence of Maisie's character.

Maisie is simply not finished.<sup>18</sup>

Sister Corona Sharp has published an excellent work, The "Confidante" in Henry James: Evolution and Moral Value of a Fictive Character (1963), in which, of course, she dwells mainly on the character of Mrs. Wix in her discussion of What Maisie Knew. However, she makes the point that Maisie,

spurred on by Mrs. Wix to think of Mrs. Beale as a rival, offers herself to Sir Claude as a third rival (the second being Mrs. Wix, whom Sister Corona Sharp sees as being "as much a potential corrupter of the child as anyone else"). However, as the author points out that "whether she [Maisie] loves Sir Claude only as a daughter or as a potential lover is not entirely clear. This ambiguity resembles some of the other unsolved mysteries in Jamesian novels . . . . Nonetheless, the exclusiveness of Maisie's attachment to Sir Claude proves its seriousness; and her deliberate bargaining with him, as well as her awareness of his weakness, show her own maturity."<sup>19</sup>

Bruce R. McElderry, Jr., agrees that Maisie sees Mrs. Beale as a rival; however, he does not even hint that Maisie sees her as a sexual rival. His comment on the development of Maisie's character is succinct: "What did Maisie know? James's failure to give a clear answer to this question is, paradoxically, the essential success of the novel. For Maisie, a child exposed to a torrent of adult experience, would 'know' much more than she would understand."<sup>20</sup>

Sallie Sears points out that, though the story is told from the vantage point of Maisie's consciousness, she is not the narrator. She observes that "the narrator's attitude (though he comments directly very seldom and even then his comments may be at variance with other inferable stances he has taken) toward the major characters and their sexual



vagaries is worldly, amused, sophisticated, and totally unshocked: quite a different stance from that suggested by the language in James's Preface." The material of the story, thus refracted through the media of more than one consciousness, allows the reader to encounter opposing and unadjudicated views of the characters only "as possible ways of understanding and judging what has happened. But only possible ways: they never leave the realm of potentiality. They become hypothetical models. The fact that they are not resolved means there is always something open-ended about them: [and in connection with Mrs. Wix's and Sir Claude's opposing views on what has become of Maisie's "moral sense"] either might be valid. Conversely, either might not be valid. The technique thus both raises the possibility of and calls into question the validity of both points of view." Miss Sears points out that it is quite impossible to determine any final attitude to take toward Maisie, though she does, in a footnoted resumé of the novel, write that "it is not to be moral that Maisie wants in the end but to live alone with Sir Claude."<sup>21</sup>

As may be observed, I have chosen to present in all three categories the views of those critics who base their opinions of Maisie on evidence to be found in the novel itself, as well as in James's Preface, rather than to present the opinions of other critics who go beyond the text to substantiate their theories. The only exception I have made

is Leon Edel, whose knowledge of James is so extensive and whose observations on the novel are so interesting and original that I felt compelled to include his comments.

From the foregoing, one may conclude that the scope of opinion concerning Maisie's character as it has developed by the end of the novel is extensive. Since, as noted earlier, it is my opinion that the question of what Maisie has become must be left open, I must count myself among those in the third group mentioned above for reasons I will endeavor to explain in the following chapters.

### III

#### Structure

In order to come to any valid conclusion concerning characterization when dealing with as complex an author as James, one must make a close analysis of technical aspects of a work, particularly so in one such as Maisie, in which structure, imagery, and point of view play extremely important roles. In What Maisie Knew, these elements seem to some to be more noteworthy than the story itself. For example, in criticizing the repetitive structure of the novel, Maxwell Geismar observes that the "Jamesian duplication [of new parents with accompanying new conflicts] . . . reduces the central feeling of the play-novel almost to the level of a stage farce rather than a serious or tragic chronicle."<sup>1</sup> Joseph Warren Beach criticizes James's use of point of view as simply a tour de force and claims that "we have adequately rendered in Maisie neither a story nor [in contrast with Edel] a serious subjective experience."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever subjective judgment one makes of the merits or defects in James's use of these elements, one must examine them objectively in order to arrive at any conclusion regarding Maisie's character as realized at the close of the novel.

As a prelude to an examination of James's use of structure, imagery, and point of view, I include a brief resumé of the plot. The novel spans the seven years of



Maisie's life from six to thirteen. She is the child of Ida and Beale Farange, who are divorced, and between whom she divides her time. Both make Maisie the unwitting messenger of their bitterness towards each other. The only reason each takes her is that each believes the other wants her. She becomes less welcome when she realizes gradually the purpose for which she is being used and chooses to remain silent. Beale and Ida take lovers, Miss Overmore (one of Maisie's governesses) and Sir Claude respectively, whom they wed. Maisie becomes the unintentional catalyst in bringing the stepparents together and they subsequently have an affair. Beale takes a mistress, the Countess, and Ida has a series of affairs with several men. Mrs. Wix (Maisie's governess with the longest tenure) tries to exert her "moral" influence on Maisie so that the girl will not be contaminated by the adult behavior around her. Both Mrs. Wix, who falls in love with Sir Claude, and Maisie want to live with him, but he will not give up his lover, Mrs. Beale. At the end, Maisie chooses to go off with Mrs. Wix to live in London.

There are two major points to be considered concerning structure: first, the basic framework of the novel; and second, the conclusions, if any, this framework suggests concerning the nature of Maisie's final appeal to Sir Claude and her ultimate decision to go off with Mrs. Wix. Regarding the first point there is little disagreement except in the sense mentioned above, namely that some critics object to

what they consider the utter lack of subtlety in the too-perfect symmetry of the plot line, while other critics find the symmetry acceptable as a tool James has used deliberately and effectively to prepare the reader to accept Maisie's decision as an organic outgrowth of her previous experiences. In the case of the second point, however, critics disagree vehemently about the motivation of Maisie's appeal to Sir Claude. Some use the structural symmetry to support their contention that she, like those around her, is corrupted, and that she suggests that they go away together because she has become so accustomed to similar sexually motivated pairings-off that she is simply following suit. Others who believe in Maisie's innocence see her desire to live with Sir Claude as, once again, conforming to the pattern of people living in pairs, but they claim that she has been unaware of the sexual nature of these alliances, just as she is completely unaware of any sexual desire of her own for Sir Claude, loving him only as a daughter.

In regard to the symmetrical plot pattern in which the changeable pairing-off of adults is obvious to the reader, and eventually to Maisie, she stands apart as an observer. As James writes, ". . . the sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child's main support, the long habit, from the first, of seeing herself in discussion and finding in the fury of it--she had had a glimpse of the game of football--a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave

her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass" (95-96). Only at the very end of the novel does she assume the role of one of a pair. At this point the novel, so symmetrically designed, must be concluded.

It is interesting that James does make one exception regarding Maisie as observer in the very briefly sketched relationship between her and her doll, Lisette, in which he presents in microcosm a reflection of Ida's and Maisie's relationship, with Maisie playing the role of Ida, and Lisette, that of the untutored child. This strangely neglected aspect of the novel is a tribute to James's keen insight into the workings of a child's mind, borne out by the fact that many years after Maisie was written, it became a standard technique for psychiatrists to watch unobserved a child at play with dolls representing members of the child's family, in order to ascertain the child's otherwise hidden feelings.

Evidence of the technique of the pairing-off of the adults would make a neat diagram. Ida and Beale, Maisie's natural parents, comprise the first pair. They divorce and form successive pairs: Beale marries Mrs. Beale (née Miss Overmore), and Ida marries Sir Claude. The next pair is formed with the alliance between Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale, this time without benefit of marriage. Meanwhile Maisie

observes Beale's relationship with the Countess, and her mother's spasmodic friendships with one man after another-- each considered by Maisie to be a pair, and each more short-lived than the one before. At one point, Maisie inquires of Mrs. Wix why they and Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude shouldn't all live together by suggesting, "Why shouldn't we be four?" Mrs. Wix replies, "Four improprieties, do you mean? Because two of us happen to be decent people!" (214). Though the objection to this arrangement given by Mrs. Wix is based ostensibly on moral grounds, one cannot escape James's insistence on the dual nature of relationships. When at the end Maisie asks Sir Claude to give up Mrs. Beale and come to live with her, she is attempting to emulate the pattern of pairing-off. When he refuses, she "pairs off" with Mrs. Wix, a person whom heretofore she had described as "nobody" (241), meaning that Maisie had not considered her to be half of any pair.

The final association between Mrs. Wix and Maisie represents the only exception to the male-female pairing in the novel. Since James leads the reader to understand that Maisie's moral sense and intelligence are far superior to Mrs. Wix's, one can assume either that Maisie felt a **sense of responsibility** towards her governess and went with her for that reason, or that the instinct to live with another person was so strong that she felt impelled to go--Mrs. Wix being the only person available to pair off with. The only other



possibility open to her was to live with Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude, but this would have meant an unprecedented and unacceptable triangular arrangement. At the close of the novel, everyone is neatly settled with someone else, albeit, one feels, temporarily.

In considering structure alone, it would be difficult to make any determination about Maisie's corruption or innocence except in the sense, as we have seen above, that Maisie must end up paired off with someone. But this does not solve the question of the motivation behind her appeal to Sir Claude, her first choice of someone with whom to live, before her decision to go off with Mrs. Wix, a much less desirable arrangement from her point of view. In any case, in true Jamesian fashion, the author does not make any choice open to Maisie a simple one. Had Sir Claude accepted Maisie's suggestion that they live together, one can reasonably assume that Maisie, despite her delight at being with him, would have tremendous guilt feelings at deserting Mrs. Wix, for whose welfare she has been continuously concerned and for whose care Maisie has been truly appreciative. As to the actual outcome of the novel, one is aware of how much Maisie will miss not being with Sir Claude, even had James not included at the very end the pointed episode in which Maisie looks back to see if Sir Claude is standing on the balcony to wave goodbye, only to find he is not.

In a paragraph early in the novel, James describes

Maisie in the process of trying to sort out the relationships around her in terms of what "side" each person is on. The structure and shape of this beautifully written passage foreshadow the structure of the entire novel:

If it had become now, for that matter, a question of sides, there was at least a certain amount of evidence as to where they all were. Maisie of course, in such a delicate position, was on nobody's; but Sir Claude had all the air of being on hers. If, therefore, Mrs. Wix was on Sir Claude's, her ladyship on Mr. Perriam's and Mr. Perriam presumably on her ladyship's, this left only Mrs. Beale and Mr. Farange to account for. Mrs. Beale clearly was, like Sir Claude, on Maisie's, and papa, it was to be supposed, on Mrs. Beale's. Here indeed was a slight ambiguity, as papa's being on Mrs. Beale's didn't somehow seem to place him quite on his daughter's. It sounded, as this young lady thought it over, very much like puss-in-the-corner, and she could only wonder if the distribution of parties would lead to a rushing to and fro and a changing of places. She was in the presence, she felt, of restless change: wasn't it restless enough that her mother and her stepfather should already be on different sides? That was the great thing that had

domestically happened. (87)

As has been illustrated, James seems insistent on presenting the plot sequence of the novel in very concrete, sometimes arithmetical terms. At the end, when Sir Claude asks Maisie whether she will come to live with him and Mrs. Beale, but without Mrs. Wix, Maisie asks for time in which to weigh the matter. Maisie thinks to herself that "her choice, as her friend [Sir Claude] had called it, was there before her like an impossible sum on a slate, a sum that in spite of her plea for consideration she simply got off from doing while she walked about with him. She must see Mrs. Wix before she could do her sum . . ." (264). To describe this most significant moral and emotional decision by means of such a tangible image illustrates the skill with which James has employed imagery to underscore the structure of the novel.

#### IV

#### Imagery

To discuss images and symbols in James is to discuss the essence of his writing, particularly in regard to his later works. His perception of the inner nature of human beings and of their interrelationships was so keen that he could never be satisfied with a flat, straightforward recounting of facts. Thus imagery was the natural means by which he could express exactly what he felt, giving to his empathic characters a lyrical quality in the broadest sense and an incisive sharpness to his unsympathetic ones.

Maisie contains certain recurring images, and scholars have noted the comparison between Maisie's life and "a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors" at which she "had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock . . ." (41), and James's reference to the fact that "her little world was phantasmagoric--strange shadows dancing on a sheet . . . as if the whole performance had been given for her--a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre" (23), both foreshadowing images. On several occasions, James presents Maisie in a situation in which, as he writes, it is as though she were flattening her nose against a pane of glass in order to "see" or understand what was going on inside. Another recurrent and important image is that of Mrs. Wix's glasses being referred to as her "straighteners,"



implying, of course, a moral as well as a visual correction. Yet, generally speaking, there are fewer images than in most of his other later works. Perhaps James felt that the unusually symmetrical plot obviated the necessity of using more.

However, the image of the golden Virgin in the novel, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, has particular bearing on the subject of Maisie's character. It is necessary, therefore, that the contexts in which it appears be examined carefully.

The image itself is referred to some seven times throughout the entire work, with its initial mention occurring approximately a third of the way through the novel. At this point Maisie's role as innocent child living among corrupt adults has been established. She and Sir Claude have taken shelter from the rain in the National Gallery and are sitting in a room in which paintings of religious subjects are exhibited. James writes that "Maisie sat beside him [Sir Claude] staring rather sightlessly at a roomful of pictures which he had mystified her much by speaking of with a bored sigh as a 'silly superstition.' They represented, with patches of gold and cataracts of purple, with stiff saints and angular angels, with ugly Madonnas and uglier babies, strange prayers and prostrations; so that she at first took his words for a protest against devotional idolatry--all the more that he had of late often come with

her and with Mrs. Wix to morning church, a place of worship of Mrs. Wix's own choosing, where there was nothing of that sort; . . . "(99). This passage appears to represent an effort on the author's part to begin to draw Maisie's and Sir Claude's worlds together. Maisie stares at the pictures "rather sightlessly," because of Sir Claude's bored reference to them as a "silly superstition." The representations of the familiar religious subjects are unorthodox, just as Maisie's world is. She is mystified by the style of presentation, just as she is mystified by her imposed life-style. At the same time, it is made clear that Sir Claude has accompanied her and Mrs. Wix to a conventional place of worship of Mrs. Wix's choosing. He tries in this way, as in many others, to become an orthodox father-figure for Maisie. The mention of "stiff saints" and "angular angels," "ugly Madonnas and uglier babies" foreshadows a world in which "saints" (a possible reference to Maisie's and Mrs. Wix's esteem of Sir Claude) are highly uncomfortable in the roles in which they are cast, and the relationship between mothers and children, ugly. One can conjecture as to the significance of the connection between the phrase "strange prostrations" and adulterous relationships. This interpretation can be borne out by the passage that follows, in which Sir Claude tells Maisie he has an arrangement with her mother (his wife) that each allows the other to do what he or she wishes without interference. Maisie asks what that

means, and Sir Claude refuses to tell her, making a joke out of it. Obviously Maisie does not understand the implications of this arrangement. But James writes that "she gazed at a gaunt Madonna [*italics mine*] ; after which she broke into a slow smile. 'Well, I don't care, so long as you let her'" (100).

The other references to the image of the Virgin occur within the last third of the novel--a point at which the focus sharpens on the question of Maisie's character. Maisie and Mrs. Wix are waiting in Boulogne for the return of Sir Claude, who has gone back to England to see the newly "freed" Mrs. Beale. Maisie is engaged in introducing Mrs. Wix to the sights of Boulogne that she had already seen with Sir Claude. Maisie is aware of Mrs. Wix's intellectual and imaginative limitations and finds in this, as James writes, a satisfaction "that only added one more to the variety of kinds of insight that she felt it her own present mission to show" (211). Here, as throughout the novel, James uses one of his favorite plot devices in which he reverses the roles of student and teacher. Maisie becomes Mrs. Wix's guide as "they sat together on the old grey bastion; they looked down on the little new town which seemed to them quite as old, and across at the great dome and the high gilt Virgin of the church that, as they gathered, was famous and that pleased them by its unlikeness to any place in which they had worshipped" (211). This is an interesting passage because

it occurs at a point in time in which Maisie and Mrs. Wix are awaiting the return of Sir Claude and, with it, the decision concerning their future. They sit on a bastion, a term often used figuratively to describe a strong defense against an alien force. They look down upon a little new town which, as James interposes, "seemed to them quite as old," (italics mine) indicating that both guide and guided might be misguided, as they might be also about the Virgin that "as they gathered [here James again introduces the element of doubtful authenticity] was famous and that pleased them by its unlikeness to any place in which they had worshipped." The introduction of the element of pleasing unfamiliarity seems to foreshadow a new life situation for them, and the fact that this unfamiliarity pleases them seems to be reinforced a few sentences later when James writes that "they went back to the rampart [again an allusion to a defending or protecting element] on the second morning--the spot on which they appeared to have come farthest in the journey that was to separate them from everything objectionable in the past: . . ." (212). But the foreshadowing of a future without Sir Claude is unmistakably clear in James's persistence in the use of such terms as bastions and ramparts, and the element of doubt which he transmits to the reader by using such inconclusive phrases as appears to, seemed to, as they gathered--all designed to make the reader understand that both teacher and pupil are about to be disappointed.



To underscore this point, James uses the following simile: "Their intensified clutch of the future throbbed like a clock ticking seconds; but this was a timepiece that inevitably, as well, at the best, rang occasionally a portentous hour. Oh there were several of these, and two or three of the worst on the old city-wall where everything else so made for peace" (212-213). One assumes that the gilt Virgin that pleases them so much made for peace, but the ominous undertone of this whole passage makes even the use of the image of the Virgin ambiguous.

The next mention of the Virgin is equally unclear. Maisie becomes more and more aware that the longer Sir Claude stays away with Mrs. Beale, the more apt he is to be doing whatever it is that "papa called mamma and mamma called papa a low sneak for doing or not doing" (213). As these thoughts go through her mind, she watches the great golden Madonna--a traditional figure of strength and innocence, yet one that James has already presented in an ambiguous light.

Just before Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude put in their appearance at Boulogne, and when Mrs. Wix's and Maisie's spirits are at lowest ebb, they decide against the distraction of plunging into the sea "with semi-nude bathers," and go instead up the hill, where "they gazed once more at their gilded Virgin; they sank once more upon their battered bench; they felt once more their distance from the Regent's Park" (224). James appears to polarize the choice between



the semi-nude bathers and the Virgin as an analogue to the polarization of their "normal" lives in England involving Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale and the atmosphere on the old rampart. It is as though each visit to the latter place is a mute appeal for help and guidance and hope, an appeal which, as has already been discussed, is to be denied. While the two are viewing the Virgin for the last time together, their affairs take a turn for the worse with the introduction by Mrs. Wix of the element of Maisie's supposed jealousy of Mrs. Beale, casting the girl into the role of rival for Sir Claude. This is totally a figment of Mrs. Wix's, as the narrator tells us, but the reader feels the damage to Maisie made by the suggestion has been done. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude arrive.

In respect to a determination regarding Maisie's character, the last mention of the Virgin is the one that critics have argued over most. But once again James has refused to clarify the issue. As Sir Claude and Maisie walk together trying to settle the matter of her future, she tells him she will give up Mrs. Wix if he will give up Mrs. Beale. Maisie tells him that she will wait for him at the old rampart. "'The old rampart?' 'I'll sit on that old bench where you see the gold Virgin.' 'The gold Virgin?' he vaguely echoed. But it brought his eyes back to her as if after an instant he could see her sitting there alone" (269). As I have mentioned in Chapter Two, Ward.S. Worden believes

that James has used the image here in an attempt to emphasize the unworldly quality of Maisie's purity and knowledge, while Oscar Cargill feels that Maisie at this point is as mature as Mrs. Beale and that James uses the image of the Virgin as evidence that Maisie is offering Sir Claude her virginity. However, it is my opinion, as I have tried to illustrate above, that since all other allusions to this image have been so purposefully ambiguous, it is impossible to determine what Maisie has become based simply on James' use of the gilded Virgin, here or elsewhere.

The closest approximation concerning her character must be based on language alone, and even this evidence, as will be seen, is a study in ambiguities.

## V

### Point of View

Insofar as evidence proving one theory or another about Maisie's character is concerned, I have tried to demonstrate that in considering the structure and imagery of the novel, the reader has been able to come up with little that is convincing. What is left to consider is an examination of James's point of view, in regard not only to Maisie's consciousness but also to the presence of a narrator whose comments provide an additional dimension.

Since James chooses Maisie's consciousness as the vantage point from which to unfold the plot, and since this consciousness belongs to a child living in an exclusively adult world, it is plain that the author has set up a conflict with which the reader must come to terms. This in itself is the most important, as well as most perplexing, aspect of the novel. James sustains the suspense concerning what Maisie knew up to the very end of the narrative by telling the story from Maisie's consciousness while, as mentioned previously, depending on the reader's greater sophistication and experience to evaluate more realistically than she the complex nature of certain situations.

For example, the reader understands from the outset that Maisie regards the ever-changing parental figures in her life, and her role in relation to them, as acceptable, since

James has introduced into the story no friends or even acquaintances of her own age with whose home life she can compare her own. The only basis she has for expecting any permanency in her life is a negative one--that is, she hears one parent angrily accusing the other of abandoning her. Thus she understands that abandonment of a child is not the norm in parent-child relationships. However she learns this in theory only, not through practical experience. Despite this, the instinct of belonging to and being loyal to one's parents is exhibited in Maisie, as illustrated at one point in her sincere desire, despite Ida's repeated rejection of her, that the Captain love her mother and "do it always" (131). This same instinct accounts also for her sustained concern for Mrs. Wix, a mother figure, and, despite some critical comments to the contrary, it accounts in some part for her desire to be with Sir Claude.

In addition to the challenge the reader faces in trying to strike a balance between Maisie's consciousness and his own more mature vision, James complicates the situation further by injecting remarks by a narrator (sometimes referred to by critics as the friend of the reader) that serve to add still another dimension to a given circumstance. In many instances, then, the reader must contend with three evaluations of a specific situation: Maisie's, the narrator's, and his own. The question is, which is the most reliable, and what evidence must be taken into

consideration, and from what source, in order to arrive at the answer? Or is a reliable answer possible? Or even desirable?

One must keep in mind that the comments of the narrator do not necessarily come from the author, but rather, in a sense, from another character who, standing at the reader's shoulder, gives him occasionally a friendly directional nudge. One might ask, why is he there at all? Either he is a device used by James to keep the reader on the straight interpretational path, or, as Adele Brebner writes, he helps James to achieve his most cherished aim--to make the question of what Maisie knew unanswerable.

It is equally important, therefore, to examine the narrator's comments as well as Maisie's, in order to attempt an interpretation of her character as it finally evolves, and this is the plan to be followed in this chapter. But one brief comment regarding sources should first be made. It appears that about as far as one can go in answering that which James has deliberately, I believe, made unanswerable, is to reduce the matter to an equation: Maisie's consciousness, modified by the narrator's comments where available, must result in the reader's interpretation. This means, of course, that in conformity with existing critical criteria, interpretational passages in James's Preface and other such data (for example, that which appears in the Notebooks) must be excluded in considering the point at hand.



James begins in a manner highly unorthodox in a novel by presenting five pages of expository material before the beginning of Chapter One. The manner in which this exposition is presented seems to belong more to the dramatic genre, wherein it is customary to provide the audience with background information, usually through conversation between secondary characters, before the major characters ever appear on stage.

The secondary character in this instance is the narrator, who, with total omniscience, provides the reader with his version of what has happened prior to the events of Chapter One. Not only does he inform the reader of the outcome of the divorce proceedings--the awarding of Maisie to each parent alternately for six months of the year--but also he gives a description and quite a subjective evaluation of Ida and Beale. In explaining the court's action in first awarding Maisie to Beale exclusively, the narrator says: "The father, who, though bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance of this triumph, appointed to keep her [Maisie] : it was not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots" (15). The reader has already begun to be indoctrinated with the narrator's distaste for the Faranges, although he has not been enlightened as to the nature of

what caused Beale (figuratively speaking, of course) to be "bespattered from head to foot," nor what Ida's "immensely remarked complexion" is supposed to reveal about her character. Nevertheless, the reader's attitude toward the pair has already begun to be formed.

The reader next learns that Beale has squandered his wife's money and that this turn of events makes Ida less angry because his inability to pay her back "compelled Mr. Farange perceptibly to lower his crest" (15). Because of his inability to return her money, he makes the compromise of letting Ida have Maisie for half of each year. The narrator makes clear that all these arrangements are made very public in a manner less than discreet. He then proceeds to compare the disposition of Maisie to the judgment of Solomon: "She was divided in two and the portions tossed impartially to the disputants. . . . This was odd justice in the eyes of those who still blinked in the fierce light projected from the tribunal--a light in which neither parent figured in the least as a happy example to youth and innocence" (18). Here, in even stronger terms, the narrator pronounces his judgment upon the parents. When a distant relative of Ida's offers to take Maisie--"the bone of contention," as the narrator describes her--Ida refuses on the grounds that the only way she can get back at Beale is by continuous abuse of him in front of the little girl. As the narrator blatantly says, "They had wanted her not for any good they could do her, but

for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other" (19).

The narrator ends the introductory pages with physical descriptions of Ida and Beale, the physical attributes having, in his opinion, their roots in character. He finds, for example, as a flaw in Ida's beauty, "a length and reach of arm conducive perhaps to her having so often beaten her ex-husband at billiards, a game in which she showed a superiority largely accountable, as she maintained, for the resentment finding expression in his physical violence. . . . Notwithstanding some very long lines everything about her that might have been large and that in many women profited by the licence was, with a single exception, admired and cited for its smallness. The exception was her eyes, which might have been of mere regulation size, but which overstepped the modesty of nature; . . ." (20). The narrator spends less time on his description of Beale, although he manages to convey Beale's hypocritical character in just a few lines: "Beale Farange had natural decorations, a kind of costume in his vast fair beard, burnished like a gold breast-plate, and in the eternal glitter of the teeth that his long moustache had been trained not to hide and that gave him in every possible situation, the look of the joy of life" (21).

Not once in these prefatory pages is Maisie's consciousness at issue. It is the narrator alone who provides the

reader with a set of attitudes, an already-established viewpoint about Ida and Beale, which proves to be valid. But what of his evaluation of Maisie? He calls her "the bone of contention," which she is during the divorce trial. So far, no-one can take issue with the narrator's evaluation of her sensitive situation. When the lady who offers to take her calls her a "poor little monkey," the narrator confirms this evaluation of Maisie's position by adding that these words were "an epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's childhood" (19). At this point, the reader must begin to question the narrator's judgment, especially when he predicts Maisie's future. He says, "There were persons horrified to think what those in charge of [her little unspotted soul] would combine to try to make of it: no one could conceive in advance that they would be able to make nothing ill" (19). This passage can be read in two ways: first, that no one, with the exception of the narrator who could, could know in advance that she would remain innocent; and second, that no one, not even the narrator, could predict the future. Thus the equivocal nature of the narrator's role has begun to manifest itself.

That ambiguity is to be the keynote from Chapter One on is made clear on the very first page, in which the narrator tells the reader that "it was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any



little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before" (23). The tense structure, the correlatives, the repetition of the phrase "at first," as well as the qualifying "perhaps," leave the reader with little idea of what to expect--deliberately so, as shall be borne out in subsequent examples.

At the beginning, the narrator foreshadows his ambiguous role by commenting that "nothing could have been more touching at first than her failure to suspect the ordeal that awaited her little unspotted soul" (19). The phrase "at first" is enigmatic--is the reader to find her situation less touching later on when he learns that, during the most critical scene in the novel in which Maisie forces Sir Claude to choose between herself and Mrs. Beale, the reader is told that "what helped the child was that she knew what she wanted. All her learning and learning had made her at last learn that; . . ." (275)? The connotation of the latter passage is that she has acquired some rather worldly wisdom, but just what it is that she wanted is a subject neatly avoided by the narrator.

When Maisie accompanies Mrs. Beale to the Exhibition and the two discover Beale there with his new friend, the Countess, the narrator explains that "Maisie could only have a sense of something that in a mature mind would be called the way history repeats itself" (142). The narrator's evaluation of Maisie's mind as being less than mature is



apparent; yet eight pages later, in the scene in which Beale renounces his daughter, the narrator, with characteristic equivocation, states that "what there was no effective record of indeed was the small strange pathos on the child's part of an innocence so saturated with knowledge [italics mine] and so directed to diplomacy" (150). In addition, the narrator interprets "the composure with which her face was presented" as, in his opinion, the reflection of "the long road she had travelled" (156).

At the point in the novel in which Maisie is about to set out to Folkestone with Sir Claude in preparation for a trip to France, the narrator comments that "Maisie had known all along a great deal, but never so much as she was to know from this moment on. . . . It was granted her at this time to arrive at divinations so ample that I shall have no room for the goal if I attempt to trace the stages; . . ." (164). The reader obviously is being jollied along by the narrator, who is in a playful mood. But in case the reader overlook the playfulness, the narrator becomes even less subtle when, in a discussion Maisie has with Sir Claude in Boulogne in which she reiterates her oft-repeated comment, "'I know,'" the friend of the reader interpolates, "What she knew, what she could know is by this time no secret to us: . . ." (188). Surely at this point it must be clear that the reader is never intended to know anything definite, since the difference between what Maisie could know and what she does know is

never stated in the novel.

In a final, equally successful effort at obfuscation, the narrator "explains" Maisie's situation to the reader in the following manner: "What it comes to perhaps [another equivocation] for ourselves is that, disinherited and denuded as we have seen her, there still lingered in her life an echo of parental influence--she was still reminiscent of one of the sacred lessons of home. It was the only one she retained [is the reader being thrown a clue to her character?], but luckily she retained it with force. She enjoyed in a word an ineffaceable view of the fact that there were things [unnamed, of course] pappa called mamma and mamma called pappa a low sneak for doing or for not doing" (213). The reader can guess to what the narrator refers, but can Maisie? Alas, one will never know.

It is obvious that the reader is to get little help from the narrator in arriving at a definite conclusion concerning Maisie's character, and that the "friend of the reader" is, unfortunately, less than a friend. Furthermore, an examination of Maisie's own phraseology leads up the same blind alley. The reader must take into account certain symbolic plot devices as we shall see presently, such as the games provided to Maisie by Sir Claude that she never found out how to play (although neither did Mrs. Wix), and the French that Sir Claude spoke so brilliantly and that was so much admired by Maisie, though she didn't understand what he

was saying. These elements do seem to prod the reader towards an acceptance of Maisie's innocent character. But there is much else that would make the reader uncertain.

A great deal is made, of course, of the word love and the phrases being in love and making love. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Wix informs Maisie that Ida "was passionately in love" (67), and shortly thereafter, Maisie (whom the narrator describes as being "profound"), asks Mrs. Wix, "'And you, my dear, are you in love with him [Sir Claude] too?'" (71)? When Mrs. Wix avows that she has "'never . . . been so far gone,'" and asks Maisie, "clearly intending a joke," if she loves him too, Maisie answers "'Why, rather'" (72)! This kind of brinksmanship on Mrs. Wix's part produces an effect on the reader of wanting to shake the governess for her stupidity in discussing such matters with a young child, because continued discussions on this subject, of which there are many, must eventually lead to more explicitness.

By the middle of the novel, when Maisie and Sir Claude are in Folkestone, the reader is given the following information: "She had ever of course in her mind fewer names than conceptions, but it was only with this drawback that she now made out her companion's [Sir Claude's] absences to have had for their ground that he was the lover of her stepmother and that the lover of her stepmother could scarce logically pretend to a superior right to look after her. Maisie had by this time embraced the implication of a kind of natural

divergence between lovers and little girls" (165). She has discovered a difference between the two, but "a kind of natural divergence" hardly describes an adult concept of the difference.

At the end of the novel, Maisie and Mrs. Wix wait in Boulogne for the arrival of Sir Claude, and are first joined by Mrs. Beale. As the three dine together, Maisie's thoughts turn to a familiar phrase often used by Mrs. Beale "to express the idea of one's getting what one wanted: one got it--Mrs. Beale always said she at all events always got it or proposed to get it--by 'making love.' She was at present making love, singular as it appeared, to Mrs. Wix, and her young friend's mind had never moved in such freedom as on thus finding itself face to face with the question of what she wanted to get" (235). The double entendre here, if not obvious enough, is made even more pointed by the insertion of the comment, "singular as it appeared," which can come from no-one but the narrator. That Maisie obviously does not understand what "making love" means is underscored when later on she says to Mrs. Wix, "'Why, she [Mrs. Beale] has been making love to you. Has she won you over?'" (240), and, once again, when she explains to Sir Claude what has taken place in his absence between Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale. She says of the latter, "'She made love to her'" (255).

Not missing another opportunity to emphasize the differences in verbal concepts between Maisie and the reader,



James writes that Maisie hears a song sung in French about "amour." James writes that "Maisie knew what 'amour' meant too, and wondered if Mrs. Wix did: . . ." (223). Is the reader to assume that Maisie knew what the translation of the word meant and wondered if Mrs. Wix also knew the English equivalent? Or is he to assume that Maisie knows, or think she knows, what romantic love is all about?

Several other terms used by James are completely ambiguous when considered in the light of Maisie's consciousness and that of the reader. For example, the word affairs is assumed by Maisie to refer to Sir Claude's business matters. Knowing Sir Claude's natural inclinations toward the opposite sex, the reader regards the term in quite another light. The same can be said of the phrase to be compromised. In each case, the reader has reason to think in terms of the sexual connotation, whereas he has no evidence to believe that Maisie does.

In addition to the title, perhaps the most important and confusing semantic element concerns the often-recurring concept of the moral sense. The whole novel is based on differences in morality--what appears acceptable and what does not; what is acceptable and what is not. Each major character has a different concept of what having a moral sense means. However the major conflict centers around what Hynes has called Mrs. Wix's "fundamentalist view" of it, and Maisie's--that is, of course, if she has one at all. And



thus the reader comes full circle, back to the unanswerable question.

## VI

### Conclusion

The object of this study has been to examine the possibility of arriving at a reliable evaluation of Maisie's character as it has developed by the end of What Maisie Knew through an analysis of the three technical aspects of the novel most germane to the problem--structure, imagery, and point of view. In regard to the latter element, it has been necessary to consider not only material emanating from Maisie's consciousness--the vantage point from which James writes the novel--but also the comments of the narrator, beginning with the prefatory pages (in which, with total omniscience, he relates what has happened before the beginning of Chapter One) and continuing with his comments interpolated throughout the entire novel.

After careful consideration of the elements mentioned above, my conclusion is that it is impossible for the reader unequivocally to state that Maisie has either remained innocent or become corrupt. Further, it seems clear that James has doomed the reader to uncertainty through ambiguity of plot, in which the child, Maisie, moves in a totally adult world; the ambiguity of language, in which Maisie's concept of words used by adults is bounded by her lack of experience; and the ambiguity of conflicting concepts among Maisie, the narrator, and the reader.

To claim that she has not been at all affected by what she has seen and heard in the seven years of her life spanned by the novel would be completely unrealistic and the result of careless reading. By the same token, to say that she has become corrupt (and, taking a leaf from James's book, there can be as many definitions of that word as there are persons asked to define it) is equally incredible. As Wasiolek so aptly puts it, Maisie simply is "not finished."

According to James, "The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it--this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience. . . ." I submit that Maisie, at the age of thirteen, has not yet attained this high estate.

## NOTES

### Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>Henry James, What Maisie Knew (Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 10-11. All subsequent references to the novel and to James's Preface are taken from the above source and will be noted parenthetically within the text.

### Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Muriel G. Shine, The Fictional Children of Henry James (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1969), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>Pelham Edgar, Henry James: Man and Author (Boston, 1927).

<sup>3</sup>Marius Bewley, The Complex Fate: Hawthorne, Henry James and Some Other American Writers (London, 1952), p. 97, 111.

<sup>4</sup>Ward S. Worden, "A Cut Version of What Maisie Knew," American Literature, XXIV (January 1953), 504.

<sup>5</sup>James W. Gargano, "What Maisie Knew: The Evolution of a 'Moral Sense,'" Nineteenth Century Fiction, XVI (June 1961), 34, 36, 40, 45, 45.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Wiesenfarth, Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy (New York, N. Y., 1963), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup>F. R. Leavis, Anna Karenina and Other Essays (New York, N. Y., 1967), p. 125, 119, 123, 123.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph A. Hynes, "The Middle Way of Miss Farange: A Study of James's Maisie," Journal of English Literary History, XXXII (1965), 544.

<sup>9</sup>Tony Tanner, The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature (New York, N. Y., 1965), p. 279.

<sup>10</sup>S. Gorley Putt, Henry James: A Reader's Guide (Ithaca, N. Y., 1966), pp. 247-252.

<sup>11</sup>Leon Edel, Henry James: 1895-1901 The Treacherous Years, IV (Philadelphia and New York, 1969), 262-263.

<sup>12</sup>Harris W. Wilson, "What Did Maisie Know?," College English, XVII (February 1956), 279, 281.

<sup>13</sup>Oscar Cargill, The Novels of Henry James (New York, N. Y., 1961), p. 257, 258.

<sup>14</sup>Naomi Lebowitz, The Imagination of Loving: Henry James's Legacy to the Novel (Detroit, Michigan, 1965), pp. 65-66.

<sup>15</sup>John C. McCloskey, "What Maisie Knows: A Study of Childhood and Adolescence," American Literature, XXXVI (January 1965), 512.

<sup>16</sup>Adele Brebner, "How to Know Maisie," College English, XVII (February 1956), 283.



<sup>17</sup>Edward Wasiolek, "Maisie: Pure or Corrupt?," College English, XXII (December 1960), 167.

<sup>18</sup>Edward Wasiolek, "Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' and Jamesian Fictional Imperatives," Modern Fiction Studies, VI (Winter 1960-1961), 316.

<sup>19</sup>Sister M. Corona Sharp, The "Confidante" in Henry James: Evolution and Moral Value of a Fictive Character (South Bend, Indiana, 1963), p. 143, 145-146.

<sup>20</sup>Bruce R. McElderry, Jr., Henry James, Twayne's U. S. Authors Series, No. 79 (New York, N. Y., 1965), p. 108.

<sup>21</sup>Sallie Sears, The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James (Ithaca, N. Y., 1968), pp. 28-29, 32-33, 25.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>Maxwell Geismar, Henry James and the Jacobites (Boston, 1963), p. 154. Since Mr. Geismar's anti-Jacobism is notorious, obviously his critical strictures should be discounted accordingly.

<sup>2</sup>Cargill, p. 254.

## Chapter VI

<sup>1</sup>Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3rd ed. (New York, 1951), p. 659.

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