

Conclusion

Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell
you of what he has *been* conscious.
Thereby I shall express to you at once
his boundless freedom and his 'moral'
reference. ¹

In this thesis James's depiction of women has been the focus of attention and in the novels selected for study his women characters move from a position of relative stasis toward one of active involvement in the process of social change: from being 'lost' to 'finding' themselves - a condition that necessitates reorientation and offers the possibility of self-discovery. In passing from a condition of passivity that necessarily includes the practice of covert manipulation, women in James's novels become visibly more assertive. By depicting the evolution of consciousness that generates such behaviour the author implicitly questions whether in fact women are progressing or degenerating, while his treatment of characters appears to reflect the ambivalence that was generally felt by his contemporaries toward female emancipation. ² Certainly, however, James sees the need for women to empower themselves and to *adapt* if they are to survive the effects of a changing social reality. In his novels *entrapment* can (and does) result from ignorance or lack of worldly experience - as the plight of Catherine Sloper and Isabel Archer reveals; while misunderstanding of the self and the social reality also serves to undermine the intentions of Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant.

Accordingly the development of individual awareness (or consciousness) becomes fundamental to the preservation and enhancement of personal autonomy and thus *Knowledge* (especially self-knowledge) is perceived by James as *empowering*. Hence a new outspokenness begins

¹ James, Henry. 'Preface to "The Portrait of a Lady"', in *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 46-47.

² Foster, Shirley. *op.cit.*, p. 10. The author notes how: 'throughout the female pronouncements of the period there is a note of ambivalence, a tension between a desire to challenge and change attitudes and a reluctance to disturb the status quo.'

to manifest itself within the Jamesian heroine and, in the characters of Maisie Farange and Nanda Brookenham, signs of social and individual evolution become apparent. Maisie intuitively understands that :

As she was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? she was distinctly on the road to know Everything.³

Consciousness of the social reality and of personal inclinations is gradually conferring a new autonomy of thought and action upon women and thus Nanda Brookenham is able to assert :
 “Girls understand now. It has got to be faced.”⁴

In the novels of Henry James the question of woman’s emancipation is paralleled by the question of whether, in fact, men are able to face the reality of woman’s emergence into the public arena. Not surprisingly, Jamesian males resist change, and they generally espouse the ‘ideal’, or at least, the ‘conventional’ woman in preference to the assertive ‘new’ type. Moreover, the author himself has also expressed a personal predilection for woman in the conventional guise of cultural preserver.⁵ Alfred Habegger notes James’s negative response to a perceived ‘slackness’ in the modern, emancipated woman whereby, in his essay on the speech and manners of American women the author demurs :

“Don’t let us have women like that
 in the name of our homes, of our children,
 of our future, of our national honour,
 don’t let us have women like that!”⁶

³ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 188.

⁴ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 302.

⁵ Habegger, Alfred. *Henry James and the “Woman Business”*, New York, 1989, pp. 236-238, and Wardley, Lynn. ‘Woman’s Voice, Democracy’s Body, and *The Bostonians*’, pp. 641-644.

⁶ Habegger, Alfred. *op.cit.*, p. 235.

James's admiration of 'traditional' womanhood, existing within the sphere of the home, may also be glimpsed in the praise he bestows upon his mother's conduct and way of life:

She was our life, she was the house, she
was the keystone of the arch. She held us
all together, and without her we are scattered
reeds. She was patience, she was wisdom,
she was exquisite maternity.... It was the
perfect mother's life - the life of a perfect wife.⁷

The author's ambivalence toward female emancipation is reflected in the fate of his assertive women characters who generally end up as scapegoats. With few exceptions⁸ non-conformity is not rewarded; rather it is punished by isolation or banishment - a practice that effectively silences dissent. Despite this evident ambivalence Jamesian women *do* evolve from passivity, becoming in the process less 'doll-like', and adopting in consequence a new sophistication that is indicative of increased self-esteem and confidence. Hence childlike 'innocence' (so flattering to male vanity and pretensions) is visibly dissolving before the onset of new maturity - a condition that is embodied finally in Kate Croy and Maggie Verver. Increasingly in James's later novels women characters are depicted as abandoning their pedestals and this process necessarily entails the demystification of an enigma.⁹

Within the predatory world that he depicts loss of innocence is perceived as necessary for survival; however, knowledge of the social reality also implies knowledge of human duplicity. In *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate Croy demands of Densher that, 'having tasted of the tree'¹⁰ he must also assist her to eat, and the fear that (given the chance) women would succumb (as

⁷ James, Henry. Quoted in Trilling, Lionel. Introduction. *The Bostonians*, p. xiv.

⁸ Exceptions such as Mona Brigstock or Mrs. Beale are not intended to inspire emulation but rather, the reverse.

⁹ Figs, Eva. *op.cit.*, p. 142. The author observes: 'The more strongly patriarchal a society, the more there will be a tendency for a mystique of womanhood, for women to be regarded as something of an enigma.'

¹⁰ James, Henry. *The Wings of the Dove*, p. 72.

readily as men) to the lure of materialist self-interest led many to oppose their desired emergence into the wider dimensions of public life.¹¹ The dissolution of traditional standards within late nineteenth century society caused conservatives to fear a corresponding decline in ‘civilized values.’¹² However, by the turn of the century, the question of what it *was* exactly that constituted ‘civilized values’ had become precisely the issue of debate. Traditional standards invariably upheld patriarchal authority, while capitalist strategies of expediency further endorsed male control and class rivalry. Increasingly, however, ‘traditional values’ were perceived *not* as absolute decrees but rather as ideologies designed for a purpose - the specificity of which was the suppression of ‘inferiors’ - a body that included women and the lower classes.¹³ Inevitably therefore the struggle between the sexes (and between classes) that had manifested itself by the turn of the century was an expression of the need to *restructure* an inappropriate social system.¹⁴ The issue at hand being the need to *civilize power itself*¹⁵ by ensuring that it was shared more equally among individuals.

As an artist confronting the problems presented by changing social conditions James’s own approach is essentially conservative and humanistic. In the short-short “Crapy Cornelia” (1909) the Jamesian narrator proclaims: “...in his day the best manners had been the best kindness.”¹⁶ The author generally sees manners as indicative of morals and accordingly he seeks to preserve ‘fine distinctions’ - distinctions that invariably embrace relations between the sexes and between classes. In contrast, a political reformer such as John Stuart Mill saw, more

¹¹ Webb, Beatrice. *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, 1892-1905*. Ed. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie. op.cit., p. 53. ‘If women are to *compete with men*, to struggle to become wealth producers and energetic citizens ... then I believe they will *harden and narrow themselves*.’ (My italics.)

¹² Willey, Basil. ‘Origins and Development of the Idea of Progress’, in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, p. 42.

¹³ Langland, Elizabeth. ‘Nobody’s Angels : Domestic Ideology and Middle Class Women in the Victorian Novel’, *PMLA*, Vol. 107, No. 2, March, 1992, pp. 290-303. The author argues that by complying with middle class strategies of class containment bourgeois women effectively colluded in the power structures that oppressed them.

¹⁴ Bedarida, Francois. op.cit., p. 107. The author notes the perceived need for restructuring the social system toward *economic order* rather than *individual morality*.

¹⁵ Crossman, R.H.S. ‘Continuity and Contrast’, in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, p. 445.

¹⁶ James, Henry. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, Vol. 12, (1903-1910). Ed. Leon Edel, London, 1964, p. 348.

practically, that women could no longer, realistically, afford to rely for protection upon the patronage of 'chivalrous' men.¹⁷ Instead they needed *equal rights* founded upon social justice - conditions that were ultimately to be embodied in women's political enfranchisement.¹⁸

As a moralist James is concerned with a perceived tendency within human nature toward rapaciousness. The desire for self-gratification appears to him as a bottomless abyss, the reality of which is masked only by an overlay of polished surfaces.¹⁹ *Materialism versus Idealism* within society is therefore a matter of major concern for the author. S. Gorley Putt maintains that James's increasing dislike of social manifestations is paralleled by his 'developing regard for the individual conscience, the unique human sensibility.'²⁰ As an author, James's interest lies in observing how individuals integrate personal need (ego) with an awareness of the needs of others (altruism). He values the *quality* of human experience which is ultimately determined by an individual's awareness of beauty - a condition that largely depends upon the retention of an imaginative sensibility.²¹

In the works selected for study in this thesis almost all of James's heroines *fail* to achieve the realization of their desires, and it is only Miriam Rooth who emerges as a conspicuously 'successful' figure.²² Why this is so may perhaps be explained by Leon Edel's belief that the

¹⁷ Mill, John Stuart. 'The Subjection of Women', op.cit., p. 329.

¹⁸ Carpenter, Edward. *Love's Coming of Age*, Manchester, 1896, p. 63. Carpenter expresses the need for social change when he expounds: 'Too long have women acted the part of mere appendages to the male, suppressing their own individuality and fostering his self-conceit. In order for them to have souls of their own they must free themselves, and greatly by their own efforts. They must learn to fight.'

¹⁹ Edel, Leon. *Henry James: The Master, 1901-1916*, p. 502. Edel maintains that, for James, 'terror' lay beneath the mask of manners - a condition that necessitated the suppression of 'primitive' urges.

²⁰ Putt, S. Gorley. *The Fiction of Henry James: A Reader's Guide*, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 213.

²¹ James, Henry. 'Preface to "The Princess Casamassima"', in *The Art of the Novel*, p. 62. '...being finely aware - as Hamlet and Lear, say, are finely aware - *makes* absolutely the intensity of their adventure We care, our curiosity and our sympathy care, comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the coarse, and the blind.'

²² Nevertheless, in his 'Preface' to the work James asserts that the actress had: '...no fear of not being able to satisfy him (Nick Dormer) even to the point of 'chucking' for him, if need be, that artistic identity of her own which she had begun to build up.' *The Art of the Novel*, p. 93.

human dilemma was resolved for James only by the artist - a being who is presumably able to transcend material reality. In *The Conquest of London*, Edel suggests :

The happy meeting-ground of puritan and pagan could be precisely the ground of art. An artist could be pagan in spirit and remain a puritan in fact. He could thus permissibly enjoy the pleasures of his senses and aspire to greatness without fear of strange punishment. ²³

As an artist, Miriam Rooth contrives to transcend conventional limitations and she evades the perceived mediocrity of bourgeois society through the power of a creative imagination. Her increasing awareness and corresponding self-confidence becomes therefore a tangible expression of what one character in the novel defines as 'success' :

"To be what one *may* be, really and efficaciously ... to feel it and understand it, to accept it, adopt it, embrace it, - that's conduct, that's life." ²⁴

In growing 'progressively disenchanted' ²⁵ with 'modern' society ²⁶ James focuses increasingly in his novels upon the need to preserve individual integrity. ²⁷ *Consciousness* therefore becomes the predominant requirement and thus the sentient being, possessing 'the power to be richly aware and finely responsible' ²⁸ emerges as one who offers hope for the continuance within society of humane values. Alwyn Berland maintains that James's

²³ Edel, Leon. *Henry James: The Conquest of London, 1870-1883*, p. 106.

²⁴ James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 308.

²⁵ Putt, S. Gorley, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

²⁶ James, Henry. In an essay on Turgenev James writes: 'Life is, in fact, a battle ... Evil is insolent and strong; beauty enchanting but rare; goodness very apt to be weak; folly very apt to be defiant; wickedness to carry the day; imbeciles to be in great places, people of sense in small, and mankind generally, unhappy.' Quoted in Edel, Leon. *Henry James: The Conquest of London, 1870-1883*, p. 168.

²⁷ James, Henry. 'Preface to "The Princess Casamassima"', in *The Art of the Novel*. p. 66. 'What a man thinks and what he feels are the history and the character of what he does.'

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

'conception of culture was idealized, (and) abstracted from the social facts'.²⁹ Nevertheless the author's belief that a materialist self-interest dominated the collective sensibility of Western society caused him to champion the 'finer vibrations' of his 'intense *perceivers*',³⁰ emphasizing thereby the need to preserve those less tangible assets that pertain to a disinterested appreciation of ethics and aesthetics. Accordingly, in the novels of Henry James *Idealism* is an essential antidote to encroaching Materialism and, in the final analysis, the consciousness of his heroines (and heroes) reflects the consciousness (and thus the values) of the man himself. In *The Art of the Novel* James writes :

The spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of *the watcher* - without, in other words, the *consciousness of the artist*.³¹

As an artist James's own identification with freedom as a necessary condition makes him sympathetic towards women's desire for independence³² even as, simultaneously, fear of the imagined 'terrible women of the future'³³ prompts him to employ caution. Balanced between the desire to encourage women's emancipation and a corresponding desire to resist its emergence, James's fundamental ambivalence is reflected in the fate of his characters.

The struggle of Jamesian women to emerge from 'the cage' and to acquire knowledge of the self and the social reality which is grounded in personal experience inevitably effects metamorphosis. While James understands there can be no return to a former state of

²⁹ Berland, Alwyn. op.cit., p. 156.

³⁰ James, Henry. 'Preface to "The Princess Casamassima"', in *The Art of the Novel*. p. 71.

³¹ James, Henry. 'Preface to "The Portrait of a Lady"', in *The Art of the Novel*. p. 46. (My italics).

³² Habegger, Alfred. op.cit., p. 233. The author believes that: '...the wild card in James's conservative approach to women was a deep identification with them'.

³³ James, Henry. *The Ivory Tower*, New Jersey, 1976, p. 266.

innocence,³⁴ he nevertheless exhibits a nostalgic attachment toward a conventional ideal of womanhood that is characteristic of his generation, class and gender.

In 1896 Edward Carpenter articulated a growing awareness among avant-garde individuals pertaining to the condition of women in society :

If we would have a living thing, we must give that thing some degree of liberty - even though liberty bring with it risk. If we would debar all liberty and all risk, then we can have only the mummy and dead husk of the thing.³⁵

Despite his existing reservations upon the subject of woman's emancipation, James's highly developed sense of justice, together with his essential humanity would, inevitably, compel him to endorse Carpenter's sentiments - both as an artist, and also as a man.

The nineteenth century proved to be a period of transition for middle class women in Western society which saw their gradual emergence from the home into the wider dimensions of the public arena. In the novels selected for study in this thesis the *condition of women* and the *development of consciousness* has been the intended focus of attention, while the treatment of women provided by Henry James illuminates a struggle for power between the sexes that remains ongoing, the reactions to which continue to provoke confrontation and controversy within the twentieth century.

³⁴ Edel Leon. *Henry James: The Treacherous Years, 1895-1900*, p. 242. Edel maintains that James feared a 'corrupt society corrupts its young'. Nevertheless, he was also convinced 'that sentience and 'awareness', carefully cultivated, constitute a greater safeguard than ignorance.'

³⁵ Carpenter, Edward, *op.cit.*, pp. 89-90.

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