

Chapter Four :

MORAL REASSESSMENT

“She has got what every woman, young or old, wants ... She has got a man of her own.”

“Well, but if he’s the wrong one?” *

What Maisie Knew (1897)

The Awkward Age (1899)

* *The Awkward Age*, p. 402.

In *The Spoils of Poynton* Mona Brigstock is depicted as a woman who demands personal satisfaction and who is therefore willing to bypass culturally created assumptions that promote women as self-sacrificing angels - the moral superiors of men. In his subsequent novels, *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Awkward Age* (1899), Henry James creates other women characters whose self-assertive attitudes reflect the changing conditions of contemporary women within late nineteenth century English society. This new type of female was perceived by many as a subversive influence whose existence threatened to overturn traditional values and whose evolution was felt to reflect a steady decline in the moral standards of the nation. The ideal of womanhood cherished by mid-century bourgeois Victorians began its gradual dissolution with the perceived need for economic reform. Writing in the 1860s Bessie Rayner Parkes maintained that social upheaval and emigration generated conditions which 'threw numbers of women on their own resources. Then began the cry for equal advantages, equal education.'¹ Furthermore she asserts :

...except for the material need which exerted a constant pressure over a large and educated class, the 'women's movement'... could never have become in England a subject of popular comment and, to a certain extent, of popular sympathy.²

Women's push for economic security resulted in changes to the social system and caused them to question the values of the existing status quo. In 1857 The Divorce Act provided an opportunity to dissolve the marriage-tie, while the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882³ accorded married women legal possession of personal property. Fundamental changes

¹ Parkes, Bessie Rayner. *Essays on Woman's Work*, 1865. Quoted in Crow, Duncan. *The Victorian Woman*, London, 1971, p. 148.

² Ibid.

³ Murray, Janet H. *op.cit.*, p. 118.

within the legal system were accompanied by other, equally significant developments in society. Women's need for economic autonomy led to demands for employment opportunities and equality of education, and resulted in the gradual formation of public day schools for girls,⁴ while training for the professions of medicine, nursing and teaching became available overtime at institutions of higher learning.⁵ The loosening of family ties that began with women's emergence from the sphere of the home generated a new sense of freedom that was accompanied by increased self-esteem which, in turn, effected a change of perception within the consciousness of women.

Compounding the individual efforts of women, wider changes within the social structure occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century which were linked to the economy of the nation. The eighties and nineties were characterized paradoxically by prosperity and social restlessness,⁶ while the 'Great Depression', which began in the mid-seventies, lasted until trade revived in 1889.⁷ During this time social and political agitation promoted the rise of socialism⁸ and amidst the general clamour of oppressed individuals woman's voice was added to the cry for social reform. In the latter part of the century British Imperialism accelerated its expansion along with its overseas trade.⁹ New sources of wealth accrued from foreign entrepreneurial ventures and these, together with the fortunes of urban industrialists and city businessmen, resulted in 'an injection of "new wealth" into the system'.¹⁰ Wealth increasingly conferred social acceptability and the *nouveaux riches* were thus able to integrate within the various 'circles' that comprised the body of a fashionable elite. Accordingly, by the 1880s rigid moral standards adhered to at mid-century had undergone a process of transition, becoming more flexible thereby, with an emphasis increasingly placed upon appearances.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 226-227.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 311-314.

⁶ Shannon, Richard. *The Crisis of Imperialism 1865-1915*, Frogmore, St Albans, 1976, p. 208.

⁷ Crow, Duncan. *op.cit.*, pp. 271 and p. 312.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 311-312.

⁹ Cobban, Alfred. 'The Idea of Empire', in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, pp. 326-327.

¹⁰ Davidoff, Leonore. *op.cit.*, p. 59.

Responding to changing social conditions, middle class women became more visible and vocal. The 1870s saw the growing popularity of exercise, while in the late 1880s the appearance of the bicycle significantly enlarged the physical horizons of woman's sphere, contributing thereby to her sense of freedom.¹¹ Additionally, as Leonore Davidoff points out :

In all social life... there was beginning to be provision for respectable women to meet in public places outside their own homes. Cafes, the growth of tea rooms, the use of buses, even the provision for public lavatories for women, were as important in freeing middle class women from strict social ritual as the slow erosion of chaperonage.¹²

As new freedoms enlarged the sphere of women, the loss of worldly innocence made possible a new state of maturity based upon the acceptance of personal responsibility. The *conscience* of the individual began to replace the 'Womanly Woman' conventions of false modesty. Debates over the Contagious Diseases Act, which had raged continuously since the 1860s, lasted until the repeal of the Act in 1886,¹³ and these debates were instrumental in opening up sexuality as a topic for general discussion. The declining birth rate -which appears to have commenced sometime in the 1870s¹⁴ - resulted in women having additional time for themselves, a factor which may also have contributed toward their increasing absence from the home. By the nineties, despite the efforts of the eugenics movement, which doggedly championed the cause of motherhood,¹⁵ modern women were refusing to become mere 'breeding-machines'¹⁶ and

¹¹ Crow, Duncan. *op.cit.*, p. 330.

¹² Davidoff, Leonore. *op.cit.*, p. 67.

¹³ Murray, Janet H. *op.cit.*, pp.424-427.

¹⁴ Crow, Duncan. *op.cit.*, p. 274.

¹⁵ Weeks, Jeffrey. *op.cit.*, pp. 128-136.

¹⁶ 'Saturday Review', 1895 reports: 'the only woman who was willing "to be regarded as a mere breeding machine" was the one who lacked "the wit to adopt any other role."' Quoted in Crow, Duncan, *op.cit.*, p. 289.

the institution of marriage itself was felt to be in decline with people marrying later in life, or in many cases, refusing to marry at all. Indeed, as Elaine Showalter notes:

By the 1890s... the system of patriarchy was under attack not only by women, but also by an *avant-garde* of male artists, sexual radicals, and intellectuals, who challenged its class structures and roles, its system of inheritance and primogeniture, its compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, and its cultural authority.¹⁷

The push for social change in many directions made the nineties manifest itself as a period of intense self-consciousness, while for many the idea of 'modernity' became associated with 'disorder, despair and anarchy'.¹⁸ The gradual erosion of religious conviction coincided with the relaxation of moral standards, and for many conservatives it seemed that a *laissez-faire* philosophy had infiltrated human relationships, introducing a new rapacity which threatened to overthrow ethical values.¹⁹ The disintegration of old 'certainties' created confusion and hostility, and it seemed to some that 'modern' woman was acting in a degenerative manner by refusing to uphold traditional values.

Despite fundamental improvements within the social system, the condition of women in the 1890s remained unequal. Accordingly marriage still presented itself to most as the obvious solution to financial difficulties. However, in order to contract such an alliance women were obliged to conform - or seemingly conform - with the expectations of men. In her autobiography Beatrice Webb (nee Potter) records the sentiments expressed to her by Professor

¹⁷ Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*, New York, 1990, p.11.

¹⁸ Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane. 'The Name and Nature of Modernism', in *Modernism 1890-1930*, p. 41.

¹⁹ Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*, Cambridge, 1950, pp. 51-52. The author sees wealth as threatening to undermine the spiritual well-being of the nation.

Alfred Marshall in 1889, whose views appear to reflect the convictions of many male contemporaries :

Miss Potter sees what the women suffrage people do not see; that if women attempt to equal men and be independent of their guidance and control, the strong woman will be ignored and the weak woman simply starve ... *Contrast* is the only basis of marriage, and if that is destroyed we shall not think it worth our while to shackle ourselves in life with a companion whom we must support and must consider. ²⁰

While unmarried women were confronted with intimidating pressures and urged to abandon efforts toward individual expansion, married women also faced dilemmas. On the one hand they desired to experiment with newly acquired 'freedoms', but conversely social opinion, although somewhat more relaxed, still maintained its emphasis upon the observance of appearances. ²¹ In this way, old moral standards continued to influence the behaviour of many women, whose desire for freedom was impeded by fear of censure and public exposure. Suppression increasingly found release in artifice - through the subterfuge of manners - and accordingly, human relations within the fashionable world became both more complex and more predatory.

Learning to discern 'reality' within a highly sophisticated society meant that individuals needed to recognize and discard false ideologies that no longer reflected their experience of 'modern' life. In the novels *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* Henry James depicts the struggle of individuals at the end of the century to accommodate change, identify meaning, and to renew thereby patterns of behaviour that might validate human relations. New freedoms

²⁰ Webb, Beatrice. *My Apprenticeship*, p. 372.

²¹ 'Fortnightly Review' (December 1885). This article provides an example of society's attitude toward non-conformity: 'What it resents, anathematizes, and punishes is not the commission but the detection of the fault. It connives at the sin; it shrieks at the scandal.' Quoted in Trudgill, Eric. *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, London, 1976, p. 200.

necessarily evoked new dangers and innovative free-thinking might also incorporate anti-social, anarchic elements that could prove detrimental to social harmony. Accordingly, the rapid change occurring at the *fin de siecle* seemed to invite a reassessment of morality, and in his novels of the period James endeavours to address this subject.

Youth provides the focus of his attention, against whose simplicity the artificiality of a sophisticated society is thrown into sharp relief. Amidst what he perceives to be a decadent age, James champions youth as the embodiment of hope, and thus the unfolding consciousness of a child, and the clear, unwavering gaze of adolescence are brought to bear upon the confusions of contemporary agitation. Changing social conditions inevitably stimulate change in the consciousness of individuals and thus within society as a whole. At the *fin de siecle* there appeared to be, for the first time, a chance for women to take control of their lives and become in consequence 'real' people rather than stereotypical dolls - but in order for them to do so they needed the co-operation of their male 'protectors.'

Reflecting the conditions of contemporary society, women in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* are depicted as undergoing a process of transition; moving away from conventional forms of behaviour toward a new condition that permits self-assertion. 'Modernity' presents opportunities for change, offering new possibilities of choice, while the *particular* choices made by women reflects the consciousness of the individual and also that of society as a whole. James depicts individuals within 1890s society as increasingly preoccupied with artifice. Sophistication characterizes the manners of social groups wherein 'appearance' generally cloaks reality, while beauty itself may serve to mask a paucity of spirit. The desires of avarice and lust motivate many, while the craving for 'sensation' suggests an underlying current of frustration existing within the social body.

In *What Maisie Knew* the dissolution of family ties is immediately evident when the novel opens with the divorce of Ida and Beale Farange, both of whom are guilty of adulterous

liaisons. The character of Ida Farange is consistent with the change in women's perception of themselves in the 1890s wherein the feted maternal image of mid-century popularity no longer presented itself as an appealing icon for modern womanhood. As early as 1868 Eliza Lynn Linton had berated women for resisting their maternal duty, deploring : 'the unnatural feeling against maternity existing among fashionable women (which) is one of the worst mental signs of their state.'²² Conversely, in *What Maisie Knew*, Ida's second husband, Sir Claude, sees himself as a 'family man', and he laments the fact that there are no corresponding 'family women': "None of them want any children - hanged if they do!"²³ Ida, in particular, he confides : "Won't hear of them - simply. But she can't help the one she *has* got ... She must make the best of her ... If only for the look of the thing."²⁴

Instead of children, fashionable women in these novels want excitement and pleasure; they also seek admirers and they crave adulation, sensation and conquests. By the 1890s the dichotomy between virgin/whore was losing its sharpness of definition as society women resorted to the devices of the *demi-monde* in their efforts to create equally dazzling effects.²⁵ Ida Farange's low necklines evoke her pre-occupation with sexuality, while her painted face and dyed hair visibly demonstrates her desire to assert physical ascendancy over rivals. For Ida Farange, motherhood is an irksome burden: between her daughter and herself no bond of affection exists, while the child cannot imagine Ida as a 'mother' at all. James depicts one of their brief and predictably abrasive encounters thus :

...on her mother's breast ... amid a wilderness
of trinkets, she (Maisie) felt as if she had suddenly
been thrust, with a smash of glass, into a jeweller's
shop-front, but only to be as suddenly ejected with

²² Linton, Eliza Lynn. 'The Fashionable Woman', 1868. Quoted in Crow, Duncan. *op.cit.*, p. 274.

²³ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, London, 1922, p. 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Linton, Eliza Lynn. 'The Girl of the Period', 1868. 'It is envy of the pleasures, and indifference to the sins, of these women of the *demi-monde* which is doing such infinite mischief to the modern girl'. Quoted in Murray, Janet H. *op.cit.*, p. 44.

a push.²⁶

Disharmony between mother and child is also evident in *The Awkward Age* wherein Mrs. Brookenham tries to ignore the existence of her adolescent daughter whose presence is a constant reminder that she is herself no longer young. At forty-one, Mrs. 'Brooks' elegant mannerisms include affectations of the infantile, and she is noted for 'the childlike innocence with which her voice could invest the hardest teachings of life.'²⁷ Like Ida Farange, Mrs. Brook is essentially unfulfilled. Accordingly she wants to "live a little even yet"²⁸ and she is therefore reluctant to divest herself of the power to enchant the elegant coterie that constitutes her reason for existence. Although her daughter may have figuratively 'stepped onto the stage'²⁹ her mother is unwilling to surrender a captive audience to any potential successor.

In these novels women are depicted as fundamentally dissatisfied and consequently they want 'more.' Duncan Crow elaborates upon a 'type' increasingly prevalent in the 1880s :

... the "society girl", whom one might also call "the chum". She was described in 1885 as knowing everything, reading everything "from French novels to the evening papers" ... She had a blase look and a free tongue and liked playing billiards ... She adopted masculine taste in slang as well as cigarettes and gilets.³⁰

Although this type was 'superseded' toward the end of the 1880s her exhibitionist tendencies were incorporated within new forms of female expression, as a magazine of a slightly later date reveals:

The modern girl who speaks in a loud and strident voice, sticks her arms akimbo, is

²⁶ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 131.

²⁷ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, London, 1922, p. 256.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁰ Crow, Duncan. *op.cit.*, pp. 331-332.

rich in slang and goes in for women's rights,
yet has a waist of eighteen inches and wears a
hat that would make up into two, with a small
barrowload of flowers piled upon it in front.³¹

In *What Maisie Knew*, James depicts Ida Farange as a restless exhibitionist who is always in motion. Maisie's rare glimpses of her mother are generally the result of 'triumphal entries' into the nursery, made in passing on her way out of the house. Piqued by the unco-operativeness of Sir Claude, Ida has no qualms in starting alone for Paris, just as earlier she had 'fled to the Continent'³² in order to frustrate the wishes of Beale Farange. The restless, frenetic activity encapsulated in Ida finds its echo in the behavioural patterns of characters depicted in *The Awkward Age*. Nanda Brookenham is a young woman who is always 'on the go' according to her mother, who portrays 'the modern daughter' as a creature driven by perpetual motion :

"I do all I can to enter into her life, but you can't get into a railway train while it's on the rush ... I try to get her to sit with me, and she does so a little, because she's kind. But before I know it she leaves me again."³³

Ironically, however, Mrs. Brook welcomes the removal of offspring from the vicinity of her drawing room, and she actively encourages their absenteeism. Mrs. Brook's position is the most difficult of James's characters in this novel because she is 'awkwardly' situated in time. Inhibited by the conventional morality of her youth, she is nevertheless attracted to the 'freedoms' of modernity. Impatient of restraint, she is yet vulnerable to public opinion, and her condition is therefore, essentially, one of frustration. Half-inclined to relinquish her pedestal, she has in fact evolved a distinctive style of her own that combines youthful romanticism with acerbic wit. She prides herself on her ability to see things clearly : "I don't think I'm quite a

³¹ Crow, Duncan. *op.cit.*, p. 332.

³² James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 37.

³³ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, pp. 144-145.

monster, but I don't pretend to be a saint”³⁴ but there are aspects of her existence upon which she is loath to focus, fearing to encounter suppressed emotions that might overturn her world of elegant superficiality.

In both *The Awkward Age* and *What Maisie Knew* new freedoms become possible, but changing conditions also produce anxieties within individuals, while confusion and concealment are aspects of everyday existence. Money is a major pre-occupation for everyone in these novels, and for women, economic inequality continues to present problems. In *What Maisie Knew* the financial position of Ida Farange is well known to her associates. Having ‘run through everything’³⁵ divorce leaves Ida insolvent, with ‘nothing but her carriage and her paralysed uncle.’³⁶ In due course, a second marriage takes place, this time to Sir Claude; a gentleman, somewhat younger than herself, whose assistance has proved ‘invaluable’ in getting Ida to Florence and ‘in making (her) ... comfortable there for the winter.’³⁷ On her return to England, however, Ida’s second marriage proves equally disastrous, and she resorts to a series of lovers in an effort to bolster sagging confidence and to address simultaneously, her need of financial assistance. Accordingly, Mr. Perriam, a businessman ‘from the city’ is swiftly succeeded by ‘the Captain’, while rumour attributes ‘Lord Eric’ and the ‘Count’ to the list of ‘numerous others’ who constitute Ida’s multifarious protectors. In an age of surfaces, the ‘question of money’ pervades the social consciousness, and as Maisie quickly realizes, the preservation of appearances is an expensive business: ‘It was somehow in the nature of plans to be expensive and in the nature of the expensive to be impossible. To be “involved” was the essence of everybody’s affairs.’³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁵ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 8.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 124.

In *What Maisie Knew* Miss Overmore is initially employed as Maisie's governess because she is a 'lady' despite her poverty; the child of 'rather nice people',³⁹ and unfortunate in the fact that 'there are seven sisters at home.'⁴⁰ Miss Overmore must accordingly look about her for means of support and she is quick to ingratiate herself with Beale Farange, invading his home under the pretext of devotion to his daughter, but remaining after the child's departure to become his mistress. Miss Overmore risks her reputation by remaining thus with Beale, but reliance upon her considerable beauty ensures that she is adequately compensated when marriage validates her position and promotes her socially by conferring upon her the title of 'Mrs. Beale.' Legal status effects new assurance, producing a changed manner in this woman who, no longer a humble governess, was '.. now on a footing that dispensed with all theories and was inconsistent with all servitude.'⁴¹

Improved social standing is reflected in the elegance of Mrs. Beale's attire, and by the protestations of her husband that she is "'a worse expense than ever.'"⁴² Lack of money, however, becomes a bone of contention between this couple which contributes to the increasing contempt displayed by Mrs. Beale toward the idiosyncrasies of her husband. For this woman, the newly acquired 'freedom' of marriage serves to inspire a voracious appetite for experience which leads her to perceive Beale as a mere stepping-stone along the road to the attainment of more gratifying satisfactions.

In *What Maisie Knew* the desire for money is a coercive force that induces characters to behave unethically, reducing their existence to a battle of wits; a perpetual struggle to preserve social status in a ruthless, competitive world. The question of money is also a cause of concern for members of the fashionable society depicted in *The Awkward Age* wherein economic vulnerability gives rise to stratagems of calculation and deceit. The need to preserve

³⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴² Ibid., p. 52.

appearances places pressure upon Mrs. Brook, for whom management of a family of four requires careful consideration. Conversely her friend, the Duchess, as the widow of an Italian nobleman, is financially secure. Having appropriated 'the spoils of Italy'⁴³ she is additionally fortunate in her new found independence, and accordingly she has 'bloomed in the hot-house of her widowhood.'⁴⁴ A childless woman, the Duchess undertakes the care of her late husband's niece, Aggie, whom she appropriates as her exclusive charge. The role of anxious mother is one that she enjoys, and she contrasts her own 'performance' with that of her friend, Mrs. Brook. Despite affectations of 'exoticism', the Duchess is, in reality, a bourgeois Englishwoman who sees marriage as a practical business arrangement - the means to a definite and profitable end. With this in mind she chooses to rear her niece in the 'aristocratic' European tradition. Careful monitoring of the girl's exposure to society ensures that Aggie is prevented from acquiring knowledge of adult sexuality, a condition which the Duchess believes greatly enhances her market value:

"Men...are not on the look-out for little brides whose usual associates are so up to snuff. It's not their idea that the girls they marry shall already have been pitchforked - by talk and contacts and visits and newspapers and by the way the poor creatures rush about and all the extraordinary things they do - quite into *everything*."⁴⁵

The Duchesses belief in preserving the 'innocence' of young girls coincides with the contemporary opinion of conservative individuals. In the late sixties Eliza Lynn Linton had protested against the increasing freedom of young women, seeing it as detrimental to matrimonial chances. In her eyes, the role of woman was to cater exclusively to the tastes of men. Scorning the freedoms practiced by the *demi-monde* (and imitated by 'respectable' women) she asserted: 'Men can get that whenever they like; (but) when they go into their

⁴³ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

mothers' drawing-rooms, with their sisters and their sisters' friends, they want something of quite a different flavour.'⁴⁶

In *The Awkward Age* Eliza Lynn Linton's notion of a respectable mother's drawing-room has undergone considerable transformation, but her capitulation to male prejudice remains a feature of social interaction that is embodied by James in the character of the Duchess. The widening gap between tradition and modernity becomes the bone of contention for women in this novel, and the Duchess deplores Mrs. Brook's refusal to modify her behaviour in the interests of a marriageable daughter. Unlike 'little Aggie', Nanda is left to her own devices by Mrs. Brook, whose social supremacy is threatened by the presence of her child. Commenting upon changing relationships within the family structure, Peter Cominos observes:

The growing disjunction between the family and character opened a new chapter in the late Victorian history of the family. By the early nineties the disjunction created the most profound gap of the nineteenth century between mothers and daughters. The older generation of mothers, Womanly Women, were confronted by a new generation of daughters, the New Women.⁴⁷

In *The Awkward Age* Nanda's future happiness seemingly lies in her ability to contract an advantageous marriage. However, the conversational tone of her mother's drawing-room proves detrimental to the preservation of conventional 'innocence' and, by entering this salon, the girl jeopardises her chances of success. Unlike the Duchess, Mrs. Brook allows her daughter freedom to come and go, and she is aware that the question of 'bringing girls forward or not'⁴⁸ is in fact, 'the question of the future.'⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Linton, Eliza Lynn. 'Saturday Review', 1868. Quoted in Murray, Janet H. op.cit., p. 44.

⁴⁷ Cominos, Peter T. 'Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict', op.cit., p. 172.

⁴⁸ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 171.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Within the society that James depicts immorality is thinly disguised, and while salon initiates derive enjoyment from salacious gossip, they simultaneously maintain an emotional detachment that is offset by its intellectual rapacity. Despite the 'free talk' practised by its members, Nanda's own knowledge of worldly affairs affects the group as highly improper. Traditionally marriageable girls were kept mentally as well as physically innocent - or ignorant - of sexuality. However, the widening basis of woman's 'sphere' generated a new awareness that made traditional practices increasingly incompatible with the experience of 'modern' life. "Girl's understand now. It has got to be faced"⁵⁰ is the essence of Nanda's plea, and her youthful lack of pretence presents itself as a disturbing challenge to those who are loath to exchange convenient double-standards for new forms of honest communication.

In *The Awkward Age* the emergence of a new type of woman is viewed with alarm by the conservative element; while the male ego is reluctant to forgo the hypocritical stance necessitated by an adherence to old conventions. For the majority of men, sexual knowledge in an unmarried girl was confronting, and as one historian notes, traditionally : 'It was innocence of sexual feeling that was believed to keep women pure; the innocent woman had no knowledge of her body and remained childlike.'⁵¹ By the latter part of the century, however, the practice of *imposing* innocence on girls was no longer generally accepted and women were increasingly beginning to assume responsibility for their own moral standards. In 1885 Annie Besant records her experience of 'conventional innocence' before marriage, and she concludes :

...looking back now on all, I deliberately say that no more fatal blunder can be made than to train a girl to womanhood in ignorance of all life's duties and burdens ... That 'perfect innocence' may be very beautiful but it is a

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 302.

⁵¹ Lewis, Jane. *Women in England, 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*, Sussex, 1984, p. 126.

perilous possession, and Eve should have the
knowledge of good and of evil ere she wanders
forth from the paradise of a mother's love. ⁵²

In *The Awkward Age*, Mrs. Brook and the Duchess are contrasted by a younger group of society matrons whose behaviour is more overtly assertive. Lady Fanny and Carrie Donner are married women who are known to have illicit affairs. Nevertheless, Lady Fanny is idolized among her set as 'a great glorious pagan' ⁵³ and members of the salon vicariously relish the details of her stormy passage. Carrie Donner, pretty and painted, endeavours to be 'wild' but, disadvantaged by timidity, she succeeds only in appearing 'extravagant and funny.' ⁵⁴ Her sister, Tishy Grendon, is Nanda's particular friend. A married woman, ostensibly deserted by her husband, Tishy's celebrated 'modernity' appears to reside chiefly in her complete lack of guile. In comparison with the artificial manners and mercurial wit of Mrs. Brook and the Duchess, these 'modern matrons' appear surprisingly simple-minded. Paradoxically, however, it is *absence* of artifice that constitutes their 'modernity', conferring upon them as it does an originality that presents them as specimens of evolving consciousness. These younger women either do not attempt to disguise their feelings and actions, or else they are incapable of doing so. Conversely, Mrs. Brook is emotionally petrified by her efforts to accommodate convention, while the Duchess hides her illicit affairs (unsuccessfully) behind the facade of virtuous 'respectability.'

Despite their refreshing candour, the younger matrons in this novel are all depicted as unhappy in their marriages, and consequently they share an aura of bewildered vulnerability that makes them attractive prey for unscrupulous individuals. Relationships within the society that James depicts reflect the practices of a free-market economy, in which a *laissez-faire* philosophy encourages competition, and survival of the fittest is a thinly disguised reality. The appropriation of individuals for personal gain makes human commerce resemble a jungle

⁵² Besant, Annie. 'Autobiographical Sketches' (1885). Quoted in Murray, Janet H. op.cit., p. 114.

⁵³ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 147.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

wherein people prey upon each other, and where even mothers and daughters may find themselves cast as rivals.

In *The Awkward Age* and *What Maisie Knew* Nanda Brookenham and Maisie Farange are the representatives of youth; characters essentially portrayed as observers, whose simplicity serves to highlight the complicated nature of adult relationships. Mr. Longdon in *The Awkward Age* sees the decline of tradition as betokening degeneration, and consequently he fears that anarchy and dissolution threaten 'civilized' values. In his opinion, society has been slowly discarding its inhibiting 'superstitions' since mid-century, "“throwing them overboard one by one”" ⁵⁵ so that, by the late 1890s, "“the ship sails uncommonly light.”" ⁵⁶ In these novels old values lose currency with a younger generation who increasingly discard traditional forms, disclosing beneath the mask of manners, the drives of appetite that motivate individual action within a materialist society.

In *What Maisie Knew*, Ida Farange and Mrs. Beale are driven to extremes by the demands of appetite and this inner compulsion leads them finally to abandon the observance of conventional appearances. Hypocritical double-standards no longer suffice to oppress the desires of these women, and accordingly Ida's immorality matches that of Beale Farange, while Mrs. Beale engages unashamedly in active pursuit of the 'morally weak' Sir Claude. The 'dreadfully bold' behaviour that successfully transformed Miss Overmore into Mrs. Beale serves to increase the confidence of this woman, sharpening her appetite and honing her instinct for the detection of new prey. In this novel women characters are aggressive and possessive. Mrs. Beale forbids the presence of other women in her home, while sexual jealousy torments Ida Farange and drives her to acts of open hostility. Beneath her defiant exhibitionism, however, Ida's condition is essentially one of vulnerability whereby conjugal bliss too swiftly undergoes transformation and, in 'changing to meet a change', ⁵⁷ Ida's disillusionment with her youthful

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 193-194.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 194.

⁵⁷ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 80.

spouse is evinced. By beginning “to soon with Mrs. Beale,”⁵⁸ Sir Claude initiates the breakdown of this marriage, and Ida’s subsequent ‘acting out’ serves to demonstrate her chagrin.

The struggle for possession of Sir Claude is a hotly contested battle in *What Maisie Knew* and he is presented as a magnetic personality; a ‘shining presence’⁵⁹ whose charming manner is irresistible to women. Like Tony Bream in *The Other House*, Sir Claude’s ‘familiarity’ is a trait that quickly establishes a bond of intimacy with others, and the passion that he inspires makes him vulnerable to feminine pursuit. Even Maisie displays avidity in her desire to appropriate his photograph, but whereas the child instinctively wants to ‘help’ Sir Claude, Mrs. Beale professes, more ruthlessly, her intention to “pick him to the bone!”⁶⁰ Enslaved to his senses, Sir Claude is a malleable figure, who understandably confesses to a fear of women. This fear, however, results from his own inability to relinquish sensual pleasure - the ‘moral weakness’ that provokes his marriage to Ida and his subsequent bondage to Mrs. Beale.

Despite this natural ‘susceptibility’, Mrs. Beale must work hard to overcome Sir Claude’s inherent scruples, which, being those of a ‘gentleman’, include a healthy regard for appearances: “He’s so awfully delicate”⁶¹ she laments. Beside the rapacity of female characters James portrays Sir Claude as fundamentally decent. Endowed with a conscience, his essential humanity is presumably linked to his ‘family feelings’, as are his easy sympathies and spontaneous generosity. Conversely, women characters in *What Maisie Knew* are conspicuously lacking in humanity. Both Ida and Mrs. Beale are unscrupulous, while even Maisie’s governess, Mrs. Wix, consigns the fate of the luckless Susan Ash to the winds: “If she goes wrong on the way it will be simply because she wants to.”⁶² By comparison with the men they seek to exploit, women characters in this novel are portrayed as more devious and

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 279.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 151.

⁶² Ibid., p. 216.

calculating. Maisie instinctively feels ‘most afraid of the ladies’⁶³ - she ‘likes gentlemen best’,⁶⁴ and her preference is ironically shared by other women characters. Similarly, Beale Farange strikes Maisie as somehow ‘less belligerent, less terrible’⁶⁵ than Ida, and by stressing their amorality James places the responsibility for social deterioration primarily upon women. Moral laxity being, traditionally, a male ‘weakness’, it was woman’s duty to regenerate them by providing an example of impeccable conduct. As Jane Lewis observes, the ‘association of criminality in women with deviant sexual behaviour has persisted’⁶⁶ and in *What Maisie Knew* Maisie sees death and destruction as the ultimate consequence of Ida’s self-will: ‘There was literally an instant in which Maisie fully saw - saw madness and desolation, saw ruin and darkness and death.’⁶⁷ Spiritual death presumably will be Ida’s punishment for daring to usurp the male prerogative of licentious behaviour, and James implies that by doing so she is heading for self-destruction. Beside the passionate wilfulness of Ida, Mrs. Beale contrives to present a cool and calculating exterior. Consequently, Mrs. Wix believes she is even ‘more wicked’ than her rival, and like Mona Brigstock in *The Spoils of Poynton*, Mrs. Beale successfully utilizes her sexuality to appropriate the elusive male.

The desire for personal satisfaction and financial security motivates the actions of Ida Farange and Mrs. Beale, causing them to abandon personal integrity and to adopt the principles and practices of the marketplace. Competition and survival of the fittest are realities for both women who are depicted as maddened by passion and driven to extremes by the need to ensure economic survival. Lacking visible means of support, men become the natural prey of these characters, who are compelled to utilize their sexuality as a saleable commodity. Ida’s characteristic hysteria reflects a fundamental insecurity wherein fear of ageing is linked to an awareness that failing physical prowess must inevitably effect deprivation. Conversely, Mrs. Beale is supremely confident of her powers which lie chiefly in her possession of youth and

⁶³ Ibid., p. 36.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

⁶⁶ Lewis, Jane. op.cit., p. 126.

⁶⁷ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 201.

beauty. However, although she triumphantly secures the ‘patronage’ of Sir Claude, his public avowals of eternal loyalty cannot be relied upon entirely, owing to the feckless nature that constitutes the basis of his charm.

While the demands of appetite drive fashionable women in *What Maisie Knew* to abandon conventional decorum in favour of ‘vulgar’ exhibitionism and self-aggrandisement, characters in *The Awkward Age* are also confronted by the experience of sexual passion. Women in this novel are generally more conservative than those portrayed in *What Maisie Knew*, but nevertheless they are similarly disadvantaged by existing double-standards of behaviour in society. As early as 1855 Dr. George Drysdale had written in defence of women’s sexual autonomy, stating: ‘If chastity must continue to be regarded as the highest female virtue; it is impossible to give any woman real liberty.’⁶⁸ Conventional ideologies attempted to desexualize the nature of ‘respectable’ woman and, while resistance was offered, by the late nineteenth century opinions were often conflicting and contradictory. Efforts to effect social reform led feminists to endorse traditional values and accordingly : ‘a majority of feminists and anti-feminists agreed that the physical expression of sexuality was a lower animal passion that should be controlled in civilized society.’⁶⁹ Simultaneously, however, fashionable women increasingly flouted social conventions and as Leonore Davidoff observes :

... some of the inconsistency in applying sanctions to the breaking of conventional rules might be better understood if it is remembered that the rules were being used to protect the social fabric; personal morality was secondary.⁷⁰

In *The Awkward Age*, the Duchess, as an older woman, has absorbed the values of mid-century Victorianism. Consequently she pays lip-service to conventional codes of conduct,

⁶⁸ Drysdale, George. *Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* (1855), in Nead, Lynda. op.cit., p. 21.

⁶⁹ Lewis, Jane. op.cit., p. 132.

⁷⁰ Davidoff, Leonore. op.cit., p. 79.

believing that a correct observance of appearances entitles her to practice private indiscretions. Despite her precautions, however, the sexual liaison between the Duchess and Lord Petherton is well known among her associates, while the relationship itself is but one of a long series of similar adventures. Mr. Longdon sees the Duchess as an intimidating presence, whereby : ‘this large, handsome, practised woman ... walked for him, like some brazen pagan goddess, in a cloud of queer legend.’⁷¹ Untroubled by the pangs of conscience, the Duchess sees nothing hypocritical in her stance. Her behaviour is characteristic of an older generation of worldly women, who, being constrained by moral ideologies, learnt to conform with social expectations while contriving simultaneously to please themselves.

Mrs. Brook’s situation, however, is rather more complicated. Younger than the Duchess, she is yet old enough to have felt the influence of inhibiting moral conventions. Her own mother, Lady Julia, is Mr. Longdon’s ideal of womanly perfection, and this paragon seems to have conferred upon her daughter a lasting sense of inferiority. As Mrs. Brook theatrically explains :

“I know ... that compared with her I’m a poor creeping thing. I mean ... that of course I ache in every limb with the certainty of my dreadful difference. It isn’t as if I *didn’t* know it, don’t you see? ... I’ve helplessly but finally and completely accepted it.”⁷²

Hampered by old conventions and exacting standards of perfection, Mrs. Brook nevertheless exists within an ever-changing society, whose modernity she aspires to embrace :

“I don’t take in everything, but I take in all I can. That’s a great affair in London today, and I often feel as if I were a circus-woman, in pink tights and no particular skirts, riding

⁷¹ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 208.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

half-a-dozen horses at once. We're all in the troupe now, I suppose ... and we must travel with the show." ⁷³

Unlike Lady Fanny, whose 'instinctive nature' she greatly admires, Mrs. Brook's sexuality is restrained by her concern for appearances. Intellectual dalliance necessarily replaces sexual intrigue, and dissatisfaction with her condition only surfaces when Nanda becomes a rival for the affections of Vanderbank. Mrs. Brook's technical 'respectability' is like Nanda's technical 'innocence' - valid but unprofitable within the social system of barter and exchange and accordingly, neither woman is able to secure the satisfaction of her desires.

While women in these novels are increasingly zealous in their response to others, male characters demonstrate reluctance to accept responsibility, or to become committed in their relationships with women. In *The Awkward Age* Vanderbank tells Nanda: "I only want my fun." ⁷⁴ He fears Nanda's conscience - her moral earnestness - and Mrs. Brook judges correctly when she declares him incapable of being straightforward. Within the contemporary society that James's novels reflect, men were marrying much later in life, and in many cases, not at all. Historians identify the rising cost of living as a significant factor that discouraged middle-class males from assuming the financial burdens associated with a family establishment. ⁷⁵ In *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter identifies the alternative structures that existed in nineteenth century English society which lent support to single males: "'Clubland', the network of men's clubs which served all social classes and provided alternatives and substitutes for domestic life." ⁷⁶ These clubs were immensely popular among both single and married men, and in an essay entitled 'Why Men Do Not Marry', (1888) a bachelor explains:

"I am thirty-one years of age. I am a dancing

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 164-165.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 447.

⁷⁵ Banks, J.A. and Olive Banks. op.cit., p. 114.

⁷⁶ Showalter, Elaine. op.cit., p. 11.

and dining man ... I am moderately well-to-do
in my profession and could marry if I chose.
But, on the whole, I prefer to remain single.”⁷⁷

This gentleman maintains that his comfortable lifestyle could only be diminished by marriage and adds : ““I prefer to keep a horse; I prefer a comfortable annual trip to the Continent, or to America; I prefer pictures and china, shilling cigars and first-rate hock.””⁷⁸

In *The Awkward Age* Vanderbank embodies a type of bachelor increasingly prevalent at the turn of the century. He differs considerably from Sir Claude in *What Maisie Knew* who - as a man constantly pursued by infatuated females - accepts his fate by succumbing both to womens' wiles and his own inclinations. Conversely, Vanderbank is cautious and calculating, and he resists emotional involvement with women. Mitchy attributes Van's reluctance to marry to his restricted income : ““He thinks he hasn't the means. He has great ideas of what a fellow must offer a woman.””⁷⁹ But even when he is offered a fortune to marry Nanda, Vanderbank still finds himself unable to comply. Despite his apparent 'modernity', Vanderbank's attitude towards women is conservative. The old-fashioned 'Womanly Woman' is his ideal, and consequently he is intimidated by the emerging independence of modern womanhood.

In both of these novels men don't really want to be better than they are and, as one critic observes, Sir Claude would rather 'be lost with Mrs. Beale ... than "saved" with Mrs. Wix and Maisie.'⁸⁰ While they seek to evade women's new found directness, male characters are nevertheless receptive to female emancipation where it permits of sexual licence, and accordingly Lord Petheron, Mr. Cashmore and Harold Brookenham are eager to embrace the liberated woman. Ironically, exploitation is one result of women's desire for equality. Lady

⁷⁷ In 'Temple Bar'. Quoted in Showalter, Elaine. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 112.

⁸⁰ Gargano, James W. 'What Maisie Knew: the Evolution of a "Moral Sense"', in Tanner, Tony. (ed.) *Henry James: Modern Judgements*, London, 1968, p. 234.

Fanny, Carrie Donner, and 'little Aggie' (after her marriage) all assume they are enjoying modern independence by initiating sexual liaisons. However, by their actions these women also present themselves as easy targets, ripe for consumption by the predatory and opportunistic male.

In James's novels, the behaviour of characters reflects contemporary conditions and provides an example of the lowered social 'tone' which conservatives believed signified the degeneration of human values. The Faranges in *What Maisie Knew* inhabit the 'bohemian fringes'⁸¹ of high society, while Miss Overmore's genteel poverty renders her a social nonentity. By diligently working the system, however, the governess is able to significantly advance her status, and within this novel characters are seen to be moving up and down the social ladder. Ida's 'man from the city', Mr. Perriam, is depicted as an outright vulgarian ; his large diamond ring serving to identify him as the product of flashy commercialism. Exposed for fraudulent business dealings, Mr. Perriam's ambitions are 'smashed' and he is subsequently assigned to the social scrapheap. The American 'Countess' is presented as an eccentric and disreputable figure of doubtful origins, but she nevertheless enjoys the attentions of Beale Farange, who is willing to overlook her imperfections - for a price. Mitchy in *The Awkward Age* is the son of a shoemaker, but his father's millions enable him to escape the stigma normally accorded to working people in English society, and while Lord Petherton ostensibly promotes Mitchy's social integration, this impoverished aristocrat of jaded sensibilities enjoys the role of parasite, benefiting largely from Mitchy's generosity. Changes inevitably result from the absorption of new elements into the fashionable melting-pot, and the ambience of human intercourse necessarily undergoes transformation.

Besides the widening social basis, the influence of foreign culture was another factor that instigated change within the social consciousness.⁸² By the late nineteenth century, the works

⁸¹ Wagner, Vern. 'Henry James: Money and Sex', in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 93, Spring, 1985, p. 216.

⁸² Shannon, Richard. *op.cit.*, pp. 277-279.

of French authors were read in England,⁸³ as were those of Ibsen, while in *The Awkward Age*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* - a novel about adultery - is frequently mentioned by characters. In James's novels women are becoming familiar with 'risque' works of literature hitherto reserved for men, but even so, moral inhibitions frequently deter them from an open acknowledgement of their literary persuasions. By the 1890s hypocritical pretensions were undergoing dissolution, however, and in the character of Nanda Brookenham the unselfconscious modern woman is seen to be evolving. Responsive to the greater liberty permitted women in this period, Nanda walks alone in the streets and regularly undertakes 'social work' among the inhabitants of the workhouse. She possesses a latch-key, and within this 'infectious', vulgar, 'modern' society she comes and goes with alacrity.

Women increasingly show readiness to adapt themselves and to accept thereby new responsibilities for individual action. *Conscience* begins to replace other forms of supervision - a process that is evinced by the demise of the chaperon. In both novels James sees the evolution of meaningful new forms as necessary and inevitable. He also perceives, however, that the figure of the exposed, innocent female constitutes a dilemma whereby vulnerability may render her an 'endangered species' and ruthless exploitation lead to the extinction of a type. In a materialist, consumer society duplicity is often the surest means of survival and James's innocent heroines, Maisie and Nanda, are both confronted by the demands of unscrupulous adults. While Maisie learns - by trial and error - how to survive these attacks, employing the art of concealment, Nanda is ultimately vanquished and swept aside owing to her lack of defences.

In *The Awkward Age* Vanderbank describes London society as being incapable of fostering real friendships :

"I never really have believed in the existence of real friendships in big societies - in great towns and great crowds. It's a plant that takes time and space and air; and London society is

⁸³ Bradbury, Malcolm. 'London 1890-1920', in *Modernism 1890-1930*, pp. 174-175.

a huge 'squash' as we elegantly call it - an elbowing, pushing, perspiring, chattering mob.”⁸⁴

Contrasting Van's apparent complacency with existing superficial conditions, Mr. Longdon demurs. Friendship, loyalty and affection are prized by him and therefore he believes that society cannot afford to abandon its old association with the values of Christianity - with those moral principals that supposedly uphold the practice of common decency and fair play. Morality and immorality are the fundamental issues under discussion in both novels, wherein the need for new forms becomes apparent. Many of the characters that James depicts act confusedly, and consequently, they blunder, dodge and generally prevaricate in their attempts to achieve personal satisfaction. While most characters in *What Maisie Knew* are entirely self-obsessed, many in *The Awkward Age* are haunted by a sense of guilt that finds expression in dissatisfaction with existing conditions. Vanderbank tells Mr. Longdon : ““You see we don't in the least know where we are. We're lost - and you find us.””⁸⁵ Similarly Mrs. Brook expresses the conviction that she - and by inference Woman in general - is doomed to 'vulgarity': ““I some day *must* be : I feel it looming at me out of the awful future as an inevitable fate.””⁸⁶ The formulation of new codes can only be effected through trial and error, and as Walter Isle observes : ‘The age itself is awkward, a period when moral conventions do not correspond to the manners of the society.’⁸⁷ During the final decade of the century, people were increasingly confronted by doctrines that no longer related to their needs and desires. Unable to respect rules founded upon the falsity of double-standards - standards that encouraged hypocrisy, many individuals were ‘acting out’ in an effort to discover for themselves new forms of expression. Mrs. Brook articulates the general state of confusion that afflicts the majority when she declares:

“I've a kind of vision of things, of the wretched miseries in which you all knot

⁸⁴ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 18.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁸⁷ Isle, Walter. *Experiments in Form: Henry James's Novels, 1896-1901*, Cambridge, 1968. p. 201.

yourselves up ... as if, tumbling about together in your heap, you were a litter of blind kittens.”⁸⁸

Confusion and the sense of loss pervades these novels and constitutes the ‘atmosphere’ of the era. Describing the prevailing mood of society around the turn of the century, Richard Shannon observes how the ‘sense of psychological bereavement, of morally isolated individualism, became the fundamental characteristic of modern consciousness.’⁸⁹ New forms were required that would correspond with social needs, but these could only be achieved by subjecting social mores to critical scrutiny wherein a reassessment of morality might take effect and lead to the creation of new and meaningful values. The sense of being ‘lost’ - disillusioned and adrift within a changing world - necessarily imposes a desire to locate values and find directions. While men in these novels generally hold back, fearing the loss of traditional, patriarchal privileges, James’s women characters show willingness to embrace the uncertainties of change.

In *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* the freedom of ‘modern’ women to seek new forms of personal expression is presented as a dangerous undertaking that is nevertheless, both necessary and inevitable. Knowledge of the self and the social reality is essential for survival in a changing world, and women in general in these novels are coming out into the social arena ‘with a bound’. The emancipation of women in nineteenth century English society was an escalating process that, once begun, became impossible to suppress. Commenting upon this phenomenon, Peter Cominos writes :

The Womanly Woman had nothing to lose but her tightly corseted existence, hang-ups, guilt feelings, crucified flesh, innocent mindlessness ...
After the take-off into emancipation there was

⁸⁸ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 144.

⁸⁹ Shannon, Richard. *op.cit.*, p. 272.

hope of her becoming a human being.⁹⁰

The older generation of women characters depicted by James are still influenced to a large extent by concepts surrounding the notion of a 'Womanly Woman'. Conversely, younger heroines such as Maisie Farange and Nanda Brookenham, either possess - or arrive at the possession of - a new level of consciousness. Personal experience enables them to achieve this condition, wherein knowledge of the self becomes possible. In their willingness to face reality, these young heroines demonstrate the increasing determination of individuals to come to terms with changing social conditions.

In 1897 Mona Caird questioned the validity of conventions surrounding relations between the sexes and in concluding her essay she maintained:

It is not marriage *per se*, but the whole social drift with which it is at present co-related, that constitutes the evil. We must look not for destruction, but for rebirth. The essential wrongs on which I have been insisting - being wrongs of thought and sentiment - are destined to give way before a vigorous moral Renaissance, which has already begun.⁹¹

Furthermore, she believed :

There is a whole world yet to explore in the direction of social developments, and it is more than probable that the future holds a discovery in the domain of spirit as great as that of Columbus in the domain of matter.⁹²

⁹⁰ Cominos, Peter T. 'Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict', *op.cit.*, p. 172.

⁹¹ Caird, Mona. *The Morality of Marriage*, London, 1897, p. 110.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Freedom to explore new dimensions wherein honesty and integrity are possible becomes the domain of youth in James's novels of the *fin de siècle*. Moral courage characterizes the actions of Maisie and Nanda, whose clarity of vision vividly contrasts with the general bewilderment of adults. Within what he perceives to be a degenerate society, James presents *youth* as a vital ingredient which offers hope of social rehabilitation through the continued evolution of human consciousness.

For Maisie Farange, the death of childhood illusions occurs when subjective innocence is replaced by knowledge of the larger social reality. Against the ravages wrought by adult sexuality Maisie's youthful innocence presents itself as a stark contrast. While from an early age the child is 'awestruck at the manner in which a lady might be affected through the passion mentioned by Mrs. Wix',⁹³ ignorance of sexuality and of the demands it imposes, prevents her from fully comprehending the actions of her elders. In *What Maisie Knew* the 'small expanding consciousness'⁹⁴ of a child is explored by James, and his heroine evolves from a condition of powerlessness - from being a creature who carried within herself an 'impression of danger and pain',⁹⁵ - to a new level of understanding wherein: 'She knew what she wanted. All her learning and learning had made her at last learn that ... Bewilderment had simply gone, or at any rate was going fast.'⁹⁶

Having observed at close quarters the destructive effects of uncontrollable passion - without fully understanding - Maisie is yet able to discern the oppressive exclusivity of adult relationships. The realization that she has lost Sir Claude to Mrs. Beale forces her to confront and abandon a dream, and in letting go of this attachment she finally becomes 'free' to choose her own fate. By accepting the inevitability of pain and loss Maisie achieves a personal victory

⁹³ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 64.

⁹⁴ James, Henry. 'Preface to "What Maisie Knew"', in *The Art of the Novel*, p. 142.

⁹⁵ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 138.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

that consolidates individual integrity and allows her to move into a new phase, entering thereby a dimension of greater maturity that is characterized by its self-containment.

Knowledge for Maisie brings the realization that she is but one individual among many, existing within a larger and more complex whole, and accordingly, the subjectivity of childhood is complemented and expanded by a new objectivity. For Maisie, fear disappears when she is able to perceive and to accept the reality of her condition and while increasing knowledge affects loss of innocence, it also dispels illusion, allowing thereby the manifestation of consciousness. Knowledge gained from personal experience gives Maisie the power to see her situation with clarity and from this position she is able to *consciously* chose her destiny.

In *What Maisie Knew*, the heroine is characterized as one who possesses ‘an innocence so saturated with knowledge and so directed to diplomacy’⁹⁷ - a condition which James believes constitutes pathos for the girl. Similarly in *The Awkward Age* Nanda Brookenham also possesses knowledge of worldly affairs which includes awareness of sexuality and of adult immoralities. Like Maisie, knowledge of ‘evil’ fails to destroy Nanda’s moral goodness, which is founded upon an adherence to the dictates of conscience. While Maisie is depicted as a free spirit whose moral sense arises from a spontaneous response to affection and generosity, Nanda Brookenham is a more complex figure who comprises a peculiar blend of old-fashioned conventionality with ‘new’ freedoms.

Although she participates actively in ‘modernity’, Nanda simultaneously admires the conservatism of Mr. Longdon and Vanderbank, and her ‘hereditary prejudice’ favours traditional forms. ‘Tragedy’ for Nanda resides in her possession of ‘objectionable’ knowledge, which makes it impossible to emulate the personal style of ‘little Aggie’ whose manner she genuinely admires: “‘Ah, say what you will - it *is* the way we ought to be!’”⁹⁸ Preferring

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁹⁸ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 316.

Aggie's image to her own, Nanda is nevertheless incapable of pretence and she therefore asserts the right to be herself. Society's emphasis upon 'innocence' for unmarried girls has a detrimental effect, however, upon Nanda, undermining her confidence and threatening her sense of self-worth : "...it's I who am the horrible impossible and who have covered everything else with my own impossibility." 99

The pervading sense of guilt that afflicts women in general in these novels profoundly affects Nanda Brookenham, making her regretful of, and apologetic for, her condition of (relative) freedom. Society's preference for 'false innocence' over naturalness and honesty makes Nanda seek to justify herself to others for being 'extraordinary' - a condition that she assures Mr. Longdon is common to girls of her generation : "It isn't really our fault" 100 she insists, but nevertheless she accepts the blame for knowing 'too much', and covers her embarrassment with the sweeping statement : "Everything's different from what it used to be." 101

In *The Awkward Age* only Mitchy is capable of appreciating the value and the potential of the New Woman; a type he embraces without fear :

"... what does stretch before me is the happy prospect of my feeling that I've found in you a friend ... We've worked through the long tunnel of artificial reserves and superstitious mysteries ... You go down to the roots? Good. It's all I ask!" 102

For the majority, however, artificial relationships are preferable - duplicity and pretension adding 'spice' to social intercourse and providing thereby excitement and entertainment. Beside the glamour of exotic pretensions and 'vulgar' display Nanda's plainness of manner

99 Ibid., p. 480.

100 Ibid., p. 482.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid., pp. 461-462.

manifests itself like ‘a cold in (the) head’,¹⁰³ and despite his genuine liking for the girl, Vanderbank is not attracted to Nanda’s ‘modern’ type. Rejected because she is both ‘too good’ and too ‘knowing’ Nanda’s personal victory lies in her ability to see her situation with clarity and to accept rejection without need of reprisal. Nevertheless, while stoicism validates personal integrity, Nanda’s moral triumph is curiously undercut by the sense of victimization that surrounds her ignominious withdrawal from the social arena.

Just as Nanda is ‘too good’ to remain comfortably situated within an ‘infectious’ environment, so too, in *What Maisie Knew*, Sir Claude recognizes the impropriety of retaining Maisie Farange: “‘... we *can’t* work her in. It’s perfectly true - she’s unique ... we’re not good enough - oh no!’”¹⁰⁴ In these novels the ‘new’ young heroine is presented as an anomalous figure amongst the older generation, from whose midst James chooses to remove both Maisie and Nanda. Vanderbank, a conservative by nature, sees modern society as ‘past saving’,¹⁰⁵ and by removing his heroines from its influence the author would appear to be condemning the ‘degenerate’ behaviour of the fashionable world.

James’s response to the contemporary social developments that these novels reflect is equivocal - an attitude that finds expression in the protective stance he assumes towards youthful innocence. Accordingly Nanda Brookenham is removed from her active engagement with modernity and incarcerated within an ivory tower world at Beccles.¹⁰⁶ Conversely, Maisie Farange is permitted to advance into a seemingly more positive future. ‘Advancement’ for Maisie, however, also entails retreat from licentiousness and the rejection of amoral individuals. By disposing of his heroines thus, James may be seen to ‘appropriate’ them in a somewhat

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 448.

¹⁰⁴ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*, p. 319.

¹⁰⁵ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁶ By detaching Nanda from ‘bad’ city influences and placing her in an arcadian world of simplicity and innocence, James’s resolution echoes that of Richard Sheridan’s play: *The School for Scandal*, wherein Lady Teazle receives similar treatment, presumably ‘for her own good’. Both works uphold the values of middle class morality and they seek to preserve puritan (or Christian) ethics.

peremptory, paternalistic manner that suggests an affiliation with the authoritarian practices of tradition. It is 'for their own good' therefore that these precocious adolescents are shielded from further exposure to adult society. Although it is acquired knowledge of the social reality surrounding them that gradually empowers Nanda and Maisie - enabling them to see their situations with clarity - 'too much' knowledge for women is, presumably, detrimental to individual and social well being. In both novels James sees that knowledge is necessary for human understanding and for the continued evolution of consciousness, however, 'knowledgeable women' at the turn of the century represented a threat to existing patriarchal structures and therefore James's ambiguity would seem to reflect contemporary apprehensions. The question of 'bringing girls forward or not' ¹⁰⁷ is, as Mrs. Brook asserts, 'the question of the future' ¹⁰⁸ and James's ambivalence on this matter is revealed in the fate he accords his young heroines.

Asexual passivity surrounded the conventional image of a virtuous woman and, as Mr. Longdon observes : "“In my time women didn't declare their passion.”" ¹⁰⁹ Amongst the general upheaval caused by women's emergence from bondage to traditional ideals of femininity, James's youthful heroines are curiously situated. While Maisie and Nanda are undoubtedly the precocious products of modernity they also manifest many of the qualities revered by conservatives that are characteristic of the mid-century ideal of womanhood. Restraint, modesty, and the ability to renounce personal desires are attributes that manifest themselves in these heroines and serve as a direct contrast to the 'self-interested' motivations of other women characters. *Renunciation*, for James, is invariably presented as the superior form of behaviour because he believes that the ability to let go preserves human dignity, whereas fighting 'tooth and claw' to assert individual supremacy can only prove destructive - unleashing a savagery that will undermine the traditional values of 'civilization.' The validity of these

¹⁰⁷ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

'traditional' values, however, is exactly what constitutes the bone of contention between the sexes, wherein many see a need for re-evaluation of the existing codes of conduct.

In these novels of the *fin de siecle* it becomes increasingly evident that a reassessment of morality is necessary. The struggle of youth to find new forms of expression is depicted in Nanda and Maisie, but their struggle also reflects the struggle of society as a whole - and of women in particular - to reach a new level of maturity. Nanda shows awareness of this fact when she tells Mitchy :

“Aggie’s only trying to find out - ... what sort of a person she is. How can she ever have known? It was carefully, elaborately hidden from her - kept so obscure that she could make nothing out.”¹¹⁰

Aggie’s condition is representative of many women during this period and her unconventional, ‘wild’ behaviour is an outburst that is made in the attempt to discover new and meaningful forms. Consequently, it is Nanda’s conviction that : ““The great thing is to be helpful ... Towards Aggie’s finding herself.”¹¹¹ Within this period of transition it becomes apparent that rigid moral codes must be suspended in favour of commitment to individual responsibility. Intelligence, independence and affection are qualities that - given encouragement - could effect positive change within society, but in order for this to occur men must cease to offer their resistance. Accordingly, as Nanda explains: ““Don’t ‘adore’ a girl, Mr. Mitchy - just help her. That’s more to the purpose.”¹¹²

At the turn of the century the changing attitudes of women took place amidst the turmoil of sexual, political and economic confrontation. By subjecting *fin de siecle* society to scrutiny

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 468.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 469-470.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 124.

James both questions and judges the values of 'modernity' and by doing so he reveals a fundamental ambivalence toward the directions being taken, and apprehension at the growth of new freedoms for women. In these novels, moral muddlement characterizes the actions of many individuals, but amidst the general confusion, James sees the emerging clarity of youth as a factor which offers the chance of social rehabilitation by serving as a model for others to emulate. Knowledge of the self and of the social reality enables Maisie Farange and Nanda Brookenham to acquire clarity of vision. Seeing the reality of their condition, they are able to act consciously and are therefore seemingly 'free' to choose their individual destinies. The moral independence achieved by these characters manifests itself as a new level of consciousness that constitutes a personal victory for both Maisie and Nanda. However, despite their apparent victory, a curious similarity exists between them and other Jamesian heroines from previous novels who - acting in ignorance - were regularly sacrificed upon the altar of delusive ideology. This similarity arises from the fact that - despite their superior understanding - Maisie and Nanda also fail (or are prevented from achieving) the realization of their desires.

The manifestation of consciousness within Nanda and Maisie makes it appear momentarily possible for them to attain real independence, but conversely, only *moral* independence results, and these characters are ultimately subjected to defeat at the hands of 'unscrupulous' adults. Although they remain uncorrupted by acquired knowledge of human duplicity, the author exhibits paternal apprehensions as to the future well being of Nanda and Maisie, and therefore he chooses to protect them - not only from others, but also, presumably, from themselves.¹¹³ Accordingly, Mr. Longdon, avowedly 'old-fashioned and narrow'¹¹⁴ and Mrs. Wix, a moral vigilante, are procured and brought forward as the suitable protectors of youth. The capacity

¹¹³ Lewis, Jane. *op.cit.*, p. 126. The author asserts that, within nineteenth century society, 'the insistence on women's childlike qualities was double-edged, for implicit within it was the notion that women were less completely evolved and more likely to do wrong. They were therefore considered to be in need of protection, whether in respect to their property or their sexuality.'

¹¹⁴ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, p. 30.

for loyalty and affection qualifies these characters for the role of guardian ¹¹⁵ and these attributes will supposedly allow each to administer to the needs of youth. By choosing to unite the fortunes of youth and age in this fashion, James would appear to be suggesting that traditional values might be preserved and reborn in a new form that is relevant to the needs of a modern society.

Within a world grown increasingly ruthless and materialistic James perceives the need to preserve honesty and integrity among individuals even while he acknowledges the necessity of making knowledge available to all. However, conflict arises and contradictions manifest themselves when James attempts to confront the ‘problem’ of innocence versus knowledge (or experience) for women. Consequently, apprehension and a fundamental ambivalence appears to characterize his stance which becomes evident in his treatment of women characters. Thus Maisie and Nanda, despite their moral ‘victories’ are removed from ‘dangerous’ situations, while the issue of sexuality, for them, is avoided owing to Maisie’s extreme youth and to Nanda’s conventional willingness to renounce self-interest. Her ‘civilized’ refusal to fight back places Nanda above ‘vulgarity’ and presumably the suppressed anguish of a ‘caged desire’ ensures her refinement and thus her ‘nobility’ of character.

Withdrawing youth from the pollution of a promiscuous society, James also abandons his older women characters to their unsavoury fates - leaving them locked in battle with the ever-resistant male. Accordingly the plight of the mature female and the problem of adult sexuality is suspended and left unresolved, while only Mrs. Brooks piquant lament serves to signal the usual defeat of her sex :

“We’ve fallen to pieces, and at least I’m not
such a fool as not to have felt it in time. From
the moment one did feel it why should one

¹¹⁵ Although there *is* a difference between Mr. Longdon’s and Mrs. Wix’s understanding, they are both nevertheless symbols of traditional values.

insist on vain forms? If *you* felt it, and were so ready to drop them, my part was what it has always been - to accept the inevitable.”¹¹⁶

Amidst all the fervid striving for autonomy that he depicts - the desire to forge new paths - James's women characters (with the exception of Mrs. Beale) fail to achieve the realization of personal desires and they are subsequently left to continue the ongoing process of individual evolution. Despite the intensity of their resistance, renunciation is *still* presented by James as the most appropriated role for a 'virtuous' woman, and accordingly the reader is left to wonder whether, within the patriarchal society that his novels depict, this condition will ever change.

¹¹⁶ James, Henry. *The Awkward Age*, pp. 388-389.