

## **Introduction**

Henry James was the "largest" literary figure to come out of America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His career was one of the longest and most productive and most influential; he wrote for about five decades. He served as a connecting link between the nineteenth century world and the twentieth century world.

Henry James, the second son of Henry James Senior was born on April 15, 1843 at Washington Place, New York City. At a time when American literature was still young, Henry James crossed from the New World to the old and was able to take his seat at the table of fiction beside George Eliot, Turgenev, Flaubert and Zola. He achieved a status equal to the fellow craftsman whom he joined in Europe.

James's elder brother, William James was also a famous philosopher and psychologist. In fact, the James family was remarkable for its intellectual vitality and this helped him to nurture his literary tastes. When he was six months old, he was taken to England. Henry James was forever on the move, seeking what the world in its variety had to offer, in daily life as well as in ways of thought. He attended schools in New York,

London, Paris and Geneva and then joined the Law school at Harvard in 1862. James received a remarkable cosmopolitan and eclectic education. He was a life long traveler. Thus, as a novelist, he was always seen gathering impressions from the environment, wherever he was located. Another important event which had a profound impact on his artistic mind was the death of his cousin, Minny Temple who died of tuberculosis in March 1870. In one of his letters to William, he told that her image would preside in his intellect with a great serenity and purity.

Henry James was prolific writer and he was devoted to his art. His goals remained always aesthetic. He believed from the first that the artist in fiction is a historian.

Literature for him was the great repository of life. Critics have divided James's long literary career into three phases. The first period is taken as a formative one wherein Henry James is preoccupied with establishing himself as an "originator of international novel and stories". His creative output mainly in the form of novels during the second phase concerns with those themes which are specifically English.

The last phase, however, shows James's perfect hold over the art of fiction. James wrote twenty novels, twelve plays, several volumes of travel and criticism, and a great deal of literary journals. James's critical contribution started appearing in two literary journals "The North American Review" and "The Nation". James's first story, "The Story of a Year" appeared in the March 1865 issue of the "Atlantic Monthly". By 1864, Henry James was living in Boston "and his literary career had quietly begun"<sup>1</sup>. His significant American-European tale "A Passionate Pilgrim" was published in 1871 and it was followed by an early novel of Boston life *Watch and World*, *Roderick Hudson*, the story of an American sculptor's struggle between his art and passions was published in 1875. During 1875-76 Henry James lived in Paris, writing literary and topical letters for the *New York Tribune* and working on his novel *The American* (1876). His novel *The Europeans* was published in 1878. In the same year, he achieved international fame with his story of an American flirt in Rome, "**Daisy Miller**". His novellas *Confidence* (1879) and *Washington Square* (1880) also came out after he had finally settled in Europe. The end of the first phase of his creative career took place in the publication of his masterpiece, *The Portrait of a*

*Lady*. As James records in the *Preface* to *The Portrait of a Lady*, he had conceived of his first masterpiece during a trip to Venice and it came out as a full length novel 1881.

Henry James wrote two novels dealing with social reformers and revolutions, *The Bostonians* (1884-85) and *The Princess of Casamassima* (1885). *The Tragic Muse* (1888-89), a novel dealing with the lives of artists in English society also came out during this period. He returned to the novel writing with *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). *What Masie Knew* (1897), is a novel told through the medium of a little girl's mind. *The Awkward Age* (1899), portrays the agonies of a British society girl. *The Ambassadors* (1903) is a novel that shows the author's genius at its peak. *The Wings of The Dove* (1903) is another of James's masterpieces. *The Golden Bowl* (1904) was his last completed novel.

The present study deals with the problem of human identity in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Bostonians* (1884-85). Henry James is a novelist who frequently focuses upon the lives of unmarried women, sometimes venturing into the unhappiness of his heroines who do marry. In works such as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, *What Masie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*, together with, *The*

*Wings with the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, he presents heroines caught in a web of sexual corruption. They are disturbing novels, examining, in an extremely sensitive way, manipulated and power-obsessed forms of sexual desire. James's novels are unusual and distinctive, but what he has in common with the other late nineteenth century novelists is a sense of disturbing and irrational forces that lie just below the surface of family life.

*Washington Square* began in *Cornhill Magazine* in June and ran through six issues, until November 1880. The text was set from manuscript supplied by James; this manuscript is not known to survive. George du Maurier prepared twelve illustrations to accompany the text, but James was not involved with these illustrations and in general disapproved of any illustrations in his novels. Two sets of proofs were provided by *Cornhill Magazine* and proofread by James, who sent one set back to *Cornhill* and one set to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in New York, where the novel was serialized from July through December of 1880. Harper & Brothers published its first book edition with a few further corrections on December 1, 1880 (although the title page bears the

imprint 1881). This edition reprinted the Du Maurier illustrations from the *Cornhill Magazine*. James supervised the book's publication in England, where it was issued by Macmillan & Co. on January 26, 1881, in two volumes, the second also containing the stories "The Pension Beaurepas" and "A Bundle of Letters." Macmillan & Co. reprinted the novel in August 1881, in one volume, and again in 1889, but James was not involved in the preparation of either of these printings.

### **Criticism, biographies and fictional treatments**

James's work has remained steadily popular with the limited audience of educated readers to whom he spoke during his lifetime, and remained firmly in the British canon, but after his death American critics, such as Van Wyck Brooks, expressed hostility towards James's long expatriation and eventual naturalization as a British citizen.<sup>[36]</sup> Other critics like [E.M. Forster](#) complained about what they saw as James's squeamishness in the treatment of sex and other possibly controversial material, or dismissed his style as difficult and obscure, relying heavily on extremely long sentences and excessively [latinate](#) language.<sup>[37]</sup> [Vernon Parrington](#), composing a

canon of American literature, condemned James for having cut himself off from America. Although these criticisms have by no means abated completely, James is now widely valued for his psychological and moral realism, his masterful creation of character, his low-key but playful humor, and his assured command of the language.

James wrote to William Dean Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in August 1879 to propose publishing his longer novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, in the *Atlantic Monthly* simultaneously with its publication in England in *Macmillan's Magazine*. Howells accepted this arrangement in September 1879, and the novel was scheduled to begin in the July 1880 issues of the two magazines, but was delayed several months in both cases. James wrote to his father in March 1880 that he was "taking a holiday, pure and simple--before settling down to the daily evolutions of my 'big' novel." He began to write the novel in Florence in April 1880, reworking "an old

beginning made long ago." By arrangement with Macmillan & Co., James sent the manuscript in installments to Clay and Taylor, the publisher's printer. This manuscript is not known to survive. The printer sent two sets of proofs back to James, who revised and corrected them and returned one set to *Macmillan's Magazine* and the other to the *Atlantic Monthly* (the first installment went to Howells July 20, 1880). *The Portrait of a Lady* appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* from October 1880 through November 1881 and in the *Atlantic Monthly* from November 1880 through December 1881. James continued to correct and forward proofs to both periodicals while staying in France and Italy from March through June of 1881.

### **Plot summary**

Mississippi [lawyer](#) and [Civil War](#) veteran, Basil Ransom, visits his cousin Olive Chancellor in Boston. She takes him to a political meeting where Verena Tarrant delivers a feminist speech. Ransom, a strong conservative, is annoyed by the speech but fascinated with the speaker. Olive, who has never before set eyes on Verena, is equally fascinated. She persuades Verena to leave her parents'



house, move in with her and study in preparation for a career in the feminist movement. Meanwhile, Ransom returns to his [law](#) practice in [New York](#), which is not doing well. He visits Boston again and walks with Verena through the [Harvard](#) College grounds, including the impressive Civil War memorial. Verena finds herself attracted to the charismatic Ransom.

Basil eventually proposes to Verena, much to Olive's dismay. Olive has arranged for Verena to speak at the [Boston Music Hall](#). Ransom shows up at the hall just before Verena is scheduled to begin her speech. He persuades Verena to elope with him, to the discomfiture of Olive and her fellow-feminists. The final sentence of the novel shows Verena in tears — not to be her last, James assures us.

## **Themes**

Unlike much of James' work, *The Bostonians* deals with explicitly political themes: feminism and the general role of women in society. James was at best ambivalent about the feminist movement, and the early chapters harshly [satirize](#) Olive and her fellow ideologues. Another theme in the book, much discussed recently, is Olive's

possible [lesbian](#) attraction to Verena. James is not explicit here, partially due to the conventions of the time. But this vagueness may actually enrich the novel because it creates possible ambiguity about Olive's motives.

As Ransom gets closer to winning Verena, he seems to lose at least some of his creator's sympathy. James was rather suspicious of the winners in life who scoop up all the goodies, especially the [sexual](#) goodies. He becomes more sympathetic to Olive in the later chapters as she begins to lose Verena. This is especially evident in chapter 39, where Olive experiences a painful recognition of her situation somewhat similar to Isabel Archer's long nighttime meditation in chapter 42 of [The Portrait of a Lady](#).

The three central characters are surrounded by a vivid supporting cast of would-be reformers, cynical journalists, and sometimes sinister hangers-on. James shows remarkable ability to create a broad cross-section of American society, which helps refute the charge that he could only handle small, closed-off bits of life.

### **Critical evaluation**

To put it mildly, *The Bostonians* was not well-received by contemporary [critics](#), especially on the [western side of the Atlantic](#).<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup> James' portrayal of Boston reformers was denounced as inaccurate and unfair, especially because some felt James had satirized actual persons in the novel. [Mark Twain](#) vowed that he would rather be damned to [John Bunyan's](#) heaven than read the book.

Later critics, though uncomfortable with the novel's rather static nature and perhaps excessive length, have found more to praise in James' account of the contest for Verena and his description of the wider background of feminism and other reform movements. The quiet but significant struggle between Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom does seem more pertinent and engrossing today than it might have appeared to 19th century readers.<sup>1</sup> James bemoaned the adverse effect that this novel and [The Princess Casamassima](#) (published in the same year) had on his critical fortunes. Although he didn't turn away from political themes completely, he never again gave political ideas such a prominent place in his fiction.

*New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady*<sup>7</sup> edited by Jeol Porte is

an excellent book of essays on James. These essays deal with the novel's place in the tradition of modern narrative, its relation to popular women's fiction on the question of marriage, the influence of Henry James's brother William on his life and art and the character of the heroine as seen from the psychoanalytic point of view. James's characters, particularly female ones are guided by their individual consciousness and their effort to enjoy complete freedom is frustrated. James explores the question of morality and responsibility through there female characters. Elizabeth Allen has a point when she describes the case of Jamesian female protagonists:

One of the emerging signs was that of the American girl youthful feminity signifying the individualistic spontaneity, freedom and innocence of the New World.<sup>8</sup>

Despite being primarily a psychological novelist, James had a serious and active interest in understanding a nature of cultural climate in which he lived, for accomplishing the important task of identifying the basic attributes of the existing society. But he did

not find it necessary to give an extensive description through which that society carried on its social and economic activities. James always attained extra-ordinary success because of his extra-ordinary gift for imagining characters who could be taken as crystallized expressions of the basic attributes of civilization in which they lived and moved. James himself believed that "a novel is, in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life". And what made this personal impression so valuable in James's fiction is the light it throws on the nature of a whole culture or civilization.

In both his theory and practice, James was a votary of aesthetic beauty infused with moral values; he believed in man's intellectual and reflective power, his awareness, his ability to explore and grow in the understanding of his inner world. In this way he anticipates some of the insights of modern psychology. In his later work he is determined to reach as deeply as possible into man's inner life and arrive at the integration of the self. Before James settled down seriously to the business of writing fiction, he had been doing a considerable amount of reviewing. In all those

formative years of his literary life, he continued to examine deeply and steadily the under currents that fed fiction and made it a unique artistic experience. Something in the novel set his soul aflutter and though he was to experience its "mystic" delight only when he was fully immersed in the element, he could clearly savour at the start, the taste of this inebriating brew. However, the novel, which was to become for him an instrument of visionary aspect, remained, as he ruefully acknowledged a "pudding" or "desert", almost a bauble, in England and America.

What impressed James most about the novel was its utmost freedom and resilience, its unlimited appetite for all forms of reality. The question of freedom for the Jamesian heroine is connected with another compulsion -the question of persona and mask, of style and stance. Jamesian heroine accepts the world around her on its face value, and is prepared to stretch her faith to the point of pitiful and tragic artlessness. She is open to fresh views and vistas. She always carries a clean, fine and wholesome conscience. Armed thus with nothing better than her splendid innocence, she was always a defined style of life. Even when she is not initially rich, as is the

case with Isabel Archer, she has an unmistakable aristocracy of the mind and a royalty of the soul. In short the Jamesian heroine who engineers her suffering chiefly out of the magnanimity of spirit will in the end wear pain like a russet mantle over her head, and hide tears in smiles that are very nearly wrong out of a breaking heart. She will look queenly in suffering, and mint a philosophy of fortitude out of it.

The general scheme in James is not one character, nor a group of characters in a plot or merely in a crowd. The focus is on a situation, a relation, an atmosphere, to which the characters pay tribute, but being allowed to give only what the writer wants. The real hero in any of James's novels is a social entity of which men and women are constituents. James's critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over Ideas; and his baffling escape from Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are the last test of superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. It is assumed that for a man of superior intelligence it would be difficult to take a definite, unambiguous stand on controversial issues. If James shows skepticism about the popular

enthusiasms of his time and chooses to present them in an ironical perspective, it is only an evidence of his complex awareness of the reality.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is considered a landmark in Henry James's career. In this novel crowded with brilliantly subtle and penetrating character studies, James explores the ramifications of a young, high-minded American girl's first exposure and gradual acclimatization of the traditions of an older European culture. The reader follows step by step the mental process of Isabel Archer. This novel is an excellent example of Jamesian technique of refracting life through the mind and temperament of an individual. And how James handles the theme of problem of human identity is best illustrated by this novel *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Usually regarded as the major achievement of Henry James's early period of fiction writing, *The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the great novels of modern literature. In it, James demonstrates that he has learned well from two European masters of the novel. Turgenev had taught him how to use a single character who



shapes the work and is seen through out in relationship to various other characters. From George Eliot he had learned the importance of heightening the structure of the novel and giving the story an architectural or organic form that develops logically from the given materials. He advances in *The Portrait of a Lady* beyond Eliot in minimizing his own authorial comments and analysis and permitting his heroine to be seen through her own awakening self-realization and also through the consciousness of the men and women who are closer to her. Thus his "portrait" of a lady is one which slowly grows stroke by stroke as touches are added that bring out both highlights and shadows, until Isabel Archer stands at the end of the novel as a woman whose experience have brought her excitement, joy, pain and knowledge and given her an enduring beauty and dignity.

James visualized Isabel as "an intelligent but presumptuous girl" who would yet be "complex" and who would be offered a series of opportunities for free choice in the affronting of that destiny. Because of her presumption that she knew more than she did about herself and the world, Isabel was to make

mistakes, including the tragic error of misjudging the nature of Gilbert Osmond. But her intelligence, though it was not sufficient save her suffering, would enable her to achieve a moral triumph in the end.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer is presented very largely in the terms of her imagination. She is in favour of free exploration of life. Her imagination is, in fact, the mainspring of her action: that which leads to "affront her destiny". She had unquenchable desire to think well of herself. She had theory that it was only under this provision life was worth living. Isabel Archer who is confident that she would never do anything wrong actually finds herself entrapped in the end. Her quest for identity and independence leads to lock herself up in a house-prison, from which she is unable to extricate herself.

James strove conscientiously to avoid bringing into the foreground characters and scenes which properly serve only as background for Isabel's education. As he moved towards the chapters that follows Isabel's marriage, he nonetheless feared that there was 'a want action in earlier part' and that might be made up

here. "The weakness of the whole story", he remarked, "is that it is too exclusively psychological - that it depends too little on incident; but the complete unfolding of the situation that is established by Isabel's marriage may nonetheless be quite sufficiently dramatic".

She had talent for expression and too little of the consciousness of genius, she only had a general idea that people were right when they treated her as if she were rather superior. It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the Sin of self-esteem. She often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature. At one point she says too Good wood:

"I belong quite to the independent class I try to judge things for myself to judge wrong, I think, is more honorable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock I wish to choose my fate..."<sup>7</sup>

Isabel's thought were a tangle of vague outlines which had never corrected by the judgment of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had her own way. At moments she discovered she was grotesquely wrong and then she started herself

to a week of passionate humility. Thus it is an ironic blend of strength and weakness which drives Isabel on to "affront her destiny" not merely to confront it and it is her own determination that this destiny should be a very special one. It is an order to preserve this image of her destiny that Isabel rejects Lord Warburton and Casper Good wood as being too safe, too conservative, too predictable. She feels the force of Casper's passion as 'the hot wind of dessert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden' – airs which reinforce Isabel's association with the Garden of Ede, and with virginal innocence:

The Portrait of a Lady is a novel by Henry James, first published as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1880 and then as a book in 1881. It is one of James's most popular long novels and is regarded by critics as one of his finest. The Portrait of a Lady is the story of a spirited young American woman, Isabel Archer, who, "confronting her destiny", finds it overwhelming. She inherits a large amount of money and subsequently becomes the victim of Machiavellian scheming by the Brief Biography of Henry James. Henry James was born in 1843 to a wealthy New York City family, with his father a clergyman and well-connected intellectual. James's older brother William became a highly regarded psychologist and philosopher, while his younger sister Alice was an accomplished diarist. The family traveled extensively during James's youth, residing in London, Paris, and Geneva. Like *The Portrait*, James's novels *Daisy Miller*, *Washington Square*, and *The Bostonians* are all narratives about American women who confront challenges in identity and independence. More recently, John Banville has written a sequel to James's *The Portrait of a Lady* called *Mrs. Osmond*, which continues on from James's ambiguous ending regarding Isabel's decisions after Ralph's death.

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