HENRY JAMES UNLACED:
HOW HIS FEMALE CHARACTERS REPRESENT AMERICA

A University Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of
California State University, East Bay

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

By
Christine J. Ferguson
March, 2007
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Approved:  

Date:  

31 Oct 2006

November 20, 2006
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Introduction

The female characters in Henry James’ stories represent his conflict with America. Though born and raised in the United States, James struggled with the direction of his country’s choices. America renounced its allegiance with England to gain freedom and independence, discarding the restraining British traditions. Yet James remains critical of his country’s progress because he sees Americans beginning to seek out similar social constraints from which they fled. The seemingly un-American traits of prejudice and the stratification of class are adopted by the upper class traveling in Europe, weighing down society with its rigid structure. Our country became a contradiction: a wild young thing returning to its prior cage.

In his political commentary, James cuts both ways: Criticizing Americans for their independent nature, while also commenting that Americans visiting or living oversees suffer from too many self-imposed social restrictions. James provides no answer to the problems, merely asks that we take notice. Subtly woven into the women of his creative genius, his characters emblematically display the struggles and triumphs of America. In “Daisy Miller: A Study” and The Portrait of a Lady, Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer are clearly shown as “types.” He even labels his writing “A Study” and “The Portrait.”

In “Daisy Miller,” published in 1878, and later expanded upon for his 1881 book The Portrait of a Lady, the two main characters symbolize America’s attempts to make a place for itself in the world. Daisy is free-spirited and unbiased, but
Americans in Europe will not accept this newly-monied class and their dismissal of her in effect causes her death, a harsh conclusion. Though written a mere few years later, James gives Isabel Archer more choices of ways to spend her life. She also comes to a seemingly bitter end, returning to an unhappy marriage and her husband’s inevitable revenge. This shows that although more options present themselves, women, and therefore Americans, continue to subject themselves to unnecessarily painful endings. In this book we see other female characters representing various views, as opposed to the limited scope of women included in “Daisy Miller.” In her book *Portraying the Lady*, Donatella Izzo states, “the opinions on the aesthetic and personal relationship between Henry James and the woman question are curiously polarized. On one hand, the proliferation of scholarship on this topic attests to its centrality; on the other, the divergence of interpretations would seem to indicate its essential ambivalence and instability” (6).

According to Harold Bloom in *Bloom’s Reviews*, in 1915, as his final political statement in protest of America’s neutrality at the beginning of World War I (13), James renounced his American citizenship and became an English subject. This showed that possibly the best course for America was to return to its roots to seek stability within those rigid bounds.
Chapter 1 – Biography

His family, style, and historical background

England experienced its Victorian Period from 1832-1901 with Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne in 1837, ruling until her death in 1901. Though a strong female leader, she opposed giving women the right to vote (“Kings and Queens of the UK”). Opinion on the issue of women’s advancement newly ignited and highly divided. If James supported the queen’s beliefs, it seems unfair to condemn him when such a strong female leader was a proponent of it. Innovations in science and technology contributed to the instability and uneasiness of society. During times of great change the population clings to stability particularly by reenacting past practices. Adding the redefinition of men’s and women’s roles produced too much to deal with during this period of upheaval.

Literature reflected issues affecting the people in that day, such as problems surrounding the Industrial Revolution, growing class tensions, the early feminist movement, pressure toward political and social reform, and the impact of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution on philosophy and religion. On the streets during the late 1800’s, Jack the Ripper murders five prostitutes in crimes that remain unsolved, this period remains “a decade of financial panic marked by radical labor movements and violent strike-breaking,…massive immigration into Britain and America from Eastern Europe and crises on the Exchange and Wall Street” (Blair, 126). In a period defined by several wars, including the American Civil War which lasted from 1861
until 1865, many young men were defined by their military prowess. James, due to an ambiguous injury stayed home while his two younger brothers experienced the thrill of wartime combat responding to a strong anti-slavery sentiment and enlisting in the Northern Army. Fulfilling a “youthful desire for action, freedom, adventure…it was also a leap to manhood and the sudden achievement of a superior position in the family hierarchy” (Edel, Life, 61). Soon after, “[i]n intellectual Boston the war marked the era of ‘radicalism’ and a return to old conservative virtues” (Edel, Life, 67).

Literature that could truly be defined as “American” sprung up in the Early National Period. Though the English style was continued, writers used authentically American settings, themes, and characters; poetry moved into realms independent of English predecessors. Then the end of the 19th century marked the beginning of literature’s Naturalistic Period, a style which provided an even more accurate description of life than Realism. Darwin’s theory of evolution impacted the writers to portray characters merely as higher-order animals whose behavior is entirely based upon heredity and environment. Writings tended towards topics of frankness, severity, and tragedy.

Born on April 15, 1843 as the second son in a family of five children, and named after his father, Henry spent much of his early career being referred to as “Henry Jr.” His immediate family contains two other famous members: his father Henry Sr., and his brother William. Leon Edel provides a comprehensive life story of this man who outlived all of his siblings to the age of seventy two. Labeling James’s life
“passional” and “celibate,” Edel believed that James did not need to act out his libidinal desires, instead seeks “to sublimate them using the written word and sensual gratifications” (Edel, *Life*, xii).

A quiet observer, from a prominent family, James’s grandfather, who would become known as William of Albany, emigrated from Ireland in 1789 after the Revolution. Merely eighteen years old, his drive enabled him to amass a fortune valued at three million dollars through various profitable business ventures. Testimony to his powerful status in the community lies in his connection with the building of the Erie Canal (Grattan, 15-16). A land-holder in upper New York state and Manhattan, his name held power and eventually streets in Albany and Syracuse were named “James,” as well as his city namesake: Jamesville, New York. Of the thirteen children born in the New World, eleven survived to enjoy the riches and status accumulated by their father.

Henry Sr. seemed a different type from his father William of Albany; instead of falling into the business world, Henry Sr. focused on spiritual beliefs and the upbringing of his children. Losing a leg in a horse stable fire at age thirteen, he suffered a prolonged prostrate rehabilitation which stimulated his intellect. At age twenty one, William of Albany’s death exacerbated his emotional problems. With no financial shortcomings, in the next few years he chose to seek understanding for his misgivings over religion, therefore he enrolled in the Princeton Theological Seminary. Studying several years while his first two sons were born, Henry Sr. soon thereafter chose to take his young family abroad to England in search of answers he
was unable to find in America. His brother William, very embroiled in religious philosophy, believed “[t]he pivot round which the religious life, as we have traced it, revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny” (William James, 381). Personal destiny was to be a theme much explored by James, in particular the destiny of women.

Always interpreting the meaning in life and anticipating the path of history, Henry Sr. spent his lifetime as a philosopher and theologian, finding that many standard religions were too narrow for his “intensely social and loving spirit” he therefore “broadened his religious philosophy into a…universalism which embraced in its redemptive yearning, the entire race of mankind” (Young, 320). In 1844, at age thirty-three, suffering from a mental breakdown of sorts, Henry Sr. experienced a day-nightmare fearing the “invisible shape squatting in the room ‘raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life’” (Edel, Life, 7). Within the next years he became a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist, religious visionary, teacher, and mystic. He reconciled this evil image as a stage in the process of spiritual renewal called “vastation.” For the remainder of his life, he carried Swedenborgian teachings with him, believing we are all part of one another, therefore Hell is selfhood and the attachment to self, whereas Heaven is brotherly love. These beliefs differed from the popular Naturalism which dismissed supernatural explanations, resorting to scientific laws to account for all of nature. Henry Sr. took his ideas of “brotherly love” to very interesting levels, adopting ideas about communal societies, and lecturing how “[e]very appetite and passion of a man’s
nature is good and beautiful, and destined to be fully enjoyed” (Edel, Life, 8). As a lecturer and as a person he was unusually affectionate yet hard to understand. “His contemporaries felt he lived too much by his intelligence, and there remained something rather ineffectual about him – he could lecture on art, on property, on democracy, on theology, but he remained fundamentally aloof from the core of action” (Edel, Life, 10). This aptly describes many of Henry Jr.’s difficulties with his father; confusion about his true beliefs, particularly in regards to women, troubled him and possibly his attempts at reconciliation and evaluation were expressed in his works, particularly The Portrait of a Lady and The Bostonians. Henry Jr.’s mother, Mary, served as a balance to Henry Sr.’s extravagance; she provided stability in a family continually uprooted in the quest for the perfect education for the boys. Quiet yet powerful, she was “strengthened by the worship of her husband and the love of her four sons and daughter, who accepted her not only as their devoted mother but also as the exalted figure of their father’s veneration” (Edel, Life, 11). Mary’s function was to “certify the speaker’s respectability…[s]he was the net above which the spangled ropedancer demonstrated his divine independence of social and natural restraint” (Habegger, Father, 295).

Henry Sr.’s extreme devotion to his wife seems contradictory to his beliefs about the direction of marital relationships. Initially he lectured that “love and marriage were not compatible in the present civilization” hence “monotony, monogamy, or exclusive constancy, are for love true suicide” (Habegger, Woman, 34). Bearing the wrath of public scrutiny and disapproval, he began a course of confusing choices,
trying to hold true to his beliefs in a society unwilling to tolerate them. His primary statement was revised, and he “instead proclaimed that all men must follow a long and painful process of self-correction” wherein “[w]oman is man’s angel, a totally different kind of being from himself” (35, 36). This was a far stretch from his speeches on how he dreamt of “new social harmony that would unchain human sexuality” because binding a man to one woman has “sure to inflame his passionate longings towards every other woman from whom you have excluded him.” Mormons fell in to similar categories with their still-secret beliefs in polygyny, and a community in Oneida, New York, functioned “where each member of one sex was married to all the members of the opposite sex, and nearly everyone practiced supervised promiscuity.” He followed Charles Fourier’s ideas of a self-sustaining cooperative community organized into small groups wherein monogamy was only one of several forms of marriage. “Women who wished to remain single would be able to support themselves; those women or men who preferred to marry and be faithful to their spouse could do so; provision would be made for those who wanted a series of sexual partners, or who needed more than one spouse at the same time” (29-33).

Habegger feels that many seriously underestimate Henry Jr.’s condescending views of women. Even James’s friend, Constance Fenimore Woolson asks how he can write a portrait of a woman when a woman could not do the same in return (5). But, possibly, Habegger finds even more offense as he quotes James to say “‘I don’t think all the world has a right to it (marriage) any more than I think all the world has
a right to vote” (7). Taken verbatim, James appears chauvinistic and elite, yet I choose to differ with Habegger’s interpretation since James remained a bachelor with no apparent love affairs. Questioned by numerous critics, the answer found: James discreetly edited out his sexual affairs much as he recounted his life history with inaccuracies. Based on the wealth of writings we have both from him and about him, I find it difficult to subscribe to Habegger’s thoughts. I believe that he knowingly blended and buried the details of his life story to suit his needs, yet, a complete lifetime documentation bears impossible – omissions (intentional or otherwise) and mistakes occur. In the light of his free-love upbringing, it seems choosing an alternative sexual path would not have shocked his family, or even some of the new free-thinkers; however, his father’s open-minded beliefs focused only on heterosexual unions (Habegger, Father, 279). Influenced as a young man by the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne with The Scarlet Letter and The Seven Gables holding his attention, he then discovered Walt Whitman in the 1850’s. James comments deliciously that “Whitman achieved an impropriety of the first magnitude” (Small Boy, 41). Notoriety is something to which James should have been accustomed since it followed his father’s career, though, in contrast, Whitman’s work blatantly included homoerotic images.

Sheldon M. Novick takes the controversial stance, alone among the primary biographers of James’s, that a homosexual affair existed between James and Oliver Wendell Holmes for a brief period of time during the Civil War, when James was twenty two (109-111, 471-472). He also infers a later affair with Russian Paul
Zhukovski, occurring between 1875 and 1876. Three primary sources are typically used for the opinions on his sexuality. First, a note by one of his doctors in 1905 indicating his “low amatory deficiency.” Next, a letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Van Wyck Brooks discussing Brooks’s book on James, wherein Brooks attempts to prove him a literary failure because he left the United States; Fitzgerald asks, “Why didn’t you touch more on James’ impotence (physical) and its influence?” (Edel, “Slate,” 1-3). For Fitzgerald, it seems a known fact that James was impotent, rather than gay. Lastly, the remaining clue, midst the many personal writings destroyed by James himself, is a diary entry wherein he reminisces about something that occurred in the spring on 1865. At this time, he sold his first book review for $12, Nathaniel Hawthorne died, and there is a brief mention of Holmes in a letter filled with sexually-charged language. James lists “unforgettable gropings and findings and sufferings” of “inward passion.” Using words like “thrills’ and “throbs” and “daydreams” his heightened emotional state comes through clearly, yet the literal interpretation may forever remain a mystery. The line,

I can’t help, either, just touching with my pen-point (here, here, only here) the recollection of that (probably August) day when I went up to Boston from Swampscott and called in Chares St. for news of O.W.H., then on his 1st flushed and charming visit to England and saw his mother…and got the news of all his …success and felicity, and vibrated so with the wonder and romance and curiosity and dim weak tender (oh, tender!) envy of it. (Kaczorowski, 6)

Well, if nothing else, obviously James wished for his personal life to remain candid and such writings, though expressive and intriguing will remain as obscure as many of his opinions he laced throughout his writings.
As a child and young adult, the James family endured social backlash because of Henry Sr.’s unusual stance on sexuality and society. He squirmed under the pressure and subsequently altered his public deliveries to avoid stating his beliefs as blatantly. While James remained relatively silent on his views on this issue, his father’s everlasting conviction that men and women are inherently different and marriage cannot continue due to the state of our society must have embedded itself somewhere in James’s mind. Perhaps James learned the lesson from watching his father that non-conforming sexual mores must be maintained silently. As a writer wishing to make a name for himself, the state of his personal sexuality, particularly variables from the norm, would best be withheld, so as not to hinder wide acceptance and positive evaluation of his work for the writing itself and not to condemn the writer’s personal lifestyle choices.

Equality between the sexes exists in a tenuous state: never to be experienced by some, never to be desired by others. With the U.S. Census Bureau annually predicting divorce rates between 40 and 50%, seeking or at least expressing alternate relationship configurations does not seem so far-fetched. Henry Sr. remained married to the same women his entire life proving that though one believes in other values, their incorporation into a traditional household can succeed. James, later in life, states his father’s ability to “see his own period and environment as…a great historic hour…[h]is measure for the imminent and immediate, of socially and historically visible and sensible was not an easy thing to answer for.” Carrying his “wares of observation to the market,” his offerings would produce “rather a flurry” and “almost
a scandal” (Dupree, 362-363). Acknowledging Henry Sr.’s greatness requires confessions of the burden placed upon the household by his father’s outspoken ideas.

From his brother William, James sought a lifetime of fraternal support, repeatedly denied and supplemented with William’s forthright opinions cloaked as advice. In 1903, when contemplating a return to America, William frankly dissuaded him, listing that “their eating habits would disgust him, their speech would appal him. Lecture-giving was the dreadful ordeal – he should give up the idea.” Instead of heeding these warnings, James visits his brother, becoming “frankly charmed by its rural simplicity and peace” (Seymour, 114-115). Apparently even his brother could not anticipate the response from James, often accused of being high-brow, yet satisfied with sincerity, hospitality, and the honest scenery provided by nature. “Henry was always to refuse to be bound by the expediencies advocated by his elder brother. And he felt none of the urgency William expressed about his future” (Edel, Conquest, 158). Life absorbed into his observant nature at an unhurried pace.

As a writer he fits somewhat into the Realist Period, though not by the early definitions which required the nearly scientific reflection of life. James chooses to write on certain topics, his primary themes often camouflaged beneath many layers of plot. At first glance, his stories appear deceptively simple accounts of upper-class society, yet his social commentary lies in a closer reading, as every word contains compacted meaning in his lengthy descriptive passages often devoid of dialogue.

James forges new styles of writing, making it difficult to classify him into one category. He pioneers “point-of-view” writing allowing stories to unfold from new
angles, and engaging the reader’s intelligence to grasp his meaning since the narrator may be unreliable, requiring interaction on the part of the reader to make judgment calls. Writing before the modern “stream-of-consciousness” style, he instead uses perspective to reveal or hide the true nature of his characters. Very attentive to detail, his character’s names, the settings, and the language he uses all impart a necessary element to his storyline. History of the late 1800’s and his family’s background also lend crucial elements to James’s unique style, enabling his literature to withstand time.
Chapter 2 - *The American* (1877)

**European historical weight versus American freedom**

As Kevin J. Hayes recounts in the Introduction to his collection of nineteenth century criticism, James found himself censured for his endings and his ever-increasingly cold-blooded manner, and unsympathetic characters. Following reviews closely at first, James, a critic himself, begins to tire of what he sees as the reviewer’s “unintelligence” and “extreme narrowsness.” Yet, he admits in the Preface to the Oxford edition, that when the story began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*, it was still largely unwritten causing him “frequent hauntings and alarms” as monthly installments were expected to continue without interruption (3). A young writer, learning to produce under a steadfast deadline, makes choices that perhaps he would do differently under other circumstances. Many writers must face such pressures, their maturity, confidence, and innate ability driving whether one’s work shall gain acceptance or disregard.

James starts us out on the first page with the information that Newman “if the truth must be told,…had often admired the copy much more than the original.” This seems a direct statement bolstering America’s value since we are a copy of our parent country in England, though we strive to create our country’s individuality. Newman pursues the “original” in his courting of Claire de Cintre, daughter in the haughty Bellegarde family, only to conclude without a chance of reconciliation. Claire’s mother is the daughter of an English Catholic earl. Claire, half English and half
French, had been married off at “eighteen, by her parents, in French fashion, to a man with advantages of fortune, but objectionable, detestable, on other grounds, and many years too old;” a union which resulted in her widowhood at age twenty-eight (50). At the end, Mrs. Tristram tells him that she likes Newman as he is, which he questions, only to receive the reply “As you are” (363). This gives the impression that his American attributes are favored over the complicated binds of European aristocracy encountered in Claire’s family. His unpretentious honesty seems refreshing in their stagnant pedigreed European world which focuses on formality and ceremony.

The title of The American became such a subject of debate in America that one wonders if the content received equal attention. Apparently nationalistic American critics responded poorly to the image of Christopher Newman as the American, a typical representation of our country (xi-xiii, 35). Of course Newman does not represent everyman, but possibly he shows what Americans wished for: wealth early in life, tall good looks, a well-received out-going personality, with the means and interest to spend his days in pursuit of pleasure. He easily stumbles upon a former fellow American soldier while first visiting Paris; the wife, Mrs. Tristram, plays matchmaker and connects him with Claire. In many ways Newman exhibits the fairy tale prince that Americans may not identify with, but aspire to be, admiring him from afar. An American, conquering the sites of Europe, absorbing the culture, and meeting European high-society, it seems natural that the reader wants Newman to make love to the strange and lonely French princess, his fairy tale counterpart.
An evaluation of this somewhat Gothic tale brings praise to James for inheriting his father’s rich and pure diction, being brilliantly equipped with “carefully-trained taste, large acquirements of lands and races, and association with the best minds” yet he “sits beside his characters, observing and delineating their qualities and actions with marvelous skill, yet apparently untouched by any sympathy with them” (Hayes, 21). To me, this observation, written for the New York Tribune in 1877 contains an apt description of James; the detached observations from oblique angles make his writing unique and does not pose a fault with his style. Though his book The American comes near the beginning of his writing career, it spotlights his thematic female character which displays an undercurrent of the culture clash between America and Europe. This book’s storyline depicts the rich, handsome American in Europe seeking a bride. Aptly named Christopher Newman, his traits come across as too liberal for European standards. His laid-back natural ease contrasts with the uptight nature of Europeans. Upon his friend’s suggestion, he courts Claire deCintre, a French woman from an established aristocratic family, the complete opposite from the crassness of a typical American. His openness is offset by her pride and inaccessibility, his innocence by her sophistication. Acquiring her hand in marriage compares to his acquisition of a fine piece of art, an attempt at gaining some culture into his wealthy but superficially unadorned life. In 1867 James had written to T. S. Perry, “we young Americans are (without cant) men of the future…to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture…we can deal freely with civilizations not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc) claim our
property wherever we find it” (Veeder, 1). Claire, like Isabel later on, in many ways is viewed as an accessory to a man’s life. Throughout the novel, there is little indication that Claire possesses will of her own; in contrast Daisy, as an American, expresses too much will and determination – a distinction between cultures. Claire is “fated by the history of her family to accept a lifetime of unhappiness” (Poirier, 45). Daisy, from the nouveau riche has no history and sets out to make it herself.

Many old-fashioned elements exist in The American, with a side story where Claire’s brother, Valentin fights a duel for a woman. Both Claire and Valentin exemplify old-world traditions and the lack of options for people in such an exclusive class. Their mother, who jealously guards the family, distastefully calls Newman’s occupation “Commercial.” And, though Valentin wished to do something with his life, the concept of him taking on a profession mortifies his family. “Newman’s blind belief in the enormous virtue of commercialism points again to his representational status, from James’s point of view, as an American man” and very much portrays an aspect of America that appalls James (Fowler, 55).

Often seen from afar as an apparition of sorts, Claire first puts off Newman, then accepts his hand in marriage, only to later revoke her offer. Though she appears to float insubstantially throughout the novel, she quietly takes charge to determine the outcome of the book and her life. Newman threatens exposing the Bellegarde’s family secret murder, inciting blackmail to leverage revenge against them, which shows the interactions in this courtship as very far removed from a loving emotional realm; the feelings displayed belong to the traditional role of acquisition and
conquest, similar in many ways to the manner in which countries conquer new lands, staking a claim on the unexplored territory with little personal attachment to their property. Perhaps this American seeks marriage as a means to show America’s growth and power as a country, the strength and impudence of our youth exerting its wrath on the former parent from which it previously detached.

Claire, trapped in the box of a woman at that time, refuses marriage and with limited alternatives, opts to incarcerate herself in a Carmelite nunnery indefinitely. The play, produced moderately successfully in 1890, required a happy ending wherein Newman and Claire marry (Kaplan, 337-341). Yet, in reality, few choices belonged to women, and, any exerted disturbance, particularly in well-established families, was quickly diverted into less socially dangerous channels. Though the critic from the 1877 Atlantic Monthly questions the choice of ending, it seems “worth considering whether the catastrophe was not essential in order to show how venomous and fatal is the power belonging to aristocracy when it has been warped by age, avarice, and falsehood” (Hayes, 32). For Newman, access to the European elite remains a closed, closely-guard door; Americans may mingle to an extent, but first the Bellegardes expel him, then Claire herself abstains from further interplay with him. “Newman ends, like the marquise and her daughter, out of the world, in a quiet place, with no words. The moment brings him to reluctant grace” (Auchard, 28). We see the contrast of European historical weight versus American freedom – both possess fatal flaws, yet they remain unable to mesh together and use the best from each world.
Chapter 3 - “Daisy Miller: A Study” (1878)

An American girl, conquering a new frontier, Europe

Leon Edel in *Twentieth Century Views, Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays* indicates that James preferred the use of the word “nouvelle” to describe his short stories (173). The *nouvelle* “Daisy Miller” reflects the changes American women were undergoing in the late 1800’s. Daisy, an American girl traveling in Europe with her mother and brother, possesses financial wealth yet appears uncultured and possibly ignorant; James depicts this primarily in Daisy’s social behavior. She dismisses European customs and lives by her own rules, an unacceptable choice for a young lady during that time. James’s writing explores the conflict between Americans and Europeans through use of metaphor. He himself seems torn – an American with a Scottish and Irish ancestry, he travels extensively and eventually moves permanently to England. Very popular in society, he writes at length about proper etiquette and the repercussions for dismissing cultural rules. He states truthful consequences suffered by American women who refused to live by the traditional European principles being forced upon them by other Americans. Harold Bloom comments:

His main themes explored the conflict between the innocence of the New World and the sophistication and wisdom of the Old, which he most vividly depicted as sensitive portraits of young American heroines whose travels abroad inevitably lead to clashes of manner and ideology. (Bloom, *Comprehensive*, 13)
An article taken from *The Nation* entitled “Americans Abroad,” dated October 3, 1878 expresses James’s views on the international social scene in response to a column featuring a short account of the American colony in Paris. Well-traveled and much involved in the social circles, James contributes expert views on social accord. He mentions how very American it is to even discuss this matter; people from other countries typically do not congregate to analyze the impression they are making on behalf of their country – Americans behave much more self-consciously in this manner. Even if foreigners were criticizing him, a European would remain indifferent and feel he was merely an individual, not the spokesman for homeland.

The Americans traveled in “seasons” to Europe; in 1878 their numbers were notably high, with an ever numerous amount of them “who have betaken Europe for an indefinite residence” (Tuttleson, 358). James’s notations are paralleled with the characters in “Daisy Miller.” For his article he writes,

> Those observers of whom we just now spoke, who are always ready to be a party to national self-analysis, have probably, in many cases, collected some new ideas. They have encountered, for instance, a few more specimens of the unattached young American Lady—the young lady traveling for culture, or relaxation, or economy—and, according to the different points of view, she has seemed to them a touching or a startling phenomenon. (Tuttleson, 358)

As Daisy falters due to her lack of knowledge and innocence, noticeably also “[a] great many Americans are very ignorant of Europe, but in default of knowledge it may be said that they have a certain amount of imagination. In respect to the United States the European imagination is motionless” (362). And, as Americans adopting European habits, the Frederick Winterbourne’s and Mrs. Costello’s adopt a closed
mind wherein imagination and creative thought about their fellow Americans amounts to nothing; instead they choose to critique and slander, applying stringent values to people who have no idea that they must be adhering to these unspoken guidelines. “The young man emphasizes that the American girl is to him an undiscovered country where Geneva scruples do not apply” (Eakin, 15).

Daisy’s true name is Annie Miller, perhaps in reference of Annie Oakley the famous sharpshooter, born in 1860. Annie Oakley would be roughly the same age as James’s Daisy to whom he does not attribute an age, though it is disclosed that her brother Randolph is “only nine” (“Daisy,” 70). Daisy herself is a sharpshooter in terms of personality, her frankness repeatedly startles Winterbourne becoming one of the main factors that keeps him wondering about her innocence. His stoic nature needs to be opened up to experiencing her originality; “the young American might move from the constraints of his European withdrawal and its sterile forms toward the freedom of the American girl and the experience of life and love which she represents” (Eakin, 15).

Daisy is a real American in the sense that she displays a free spirit, bold personality, lack of sophistication, and willingness to follow her own path. Her mother and brother are familiar with their courier, showing the equal treatment of persons from other class levels. We also see her as a true representation of our country because she detects the falsity in others who try to shun the rawness associated with Americans. Of Winterbourne she questions, “if he was a ‘real
American’; she wouldn’t have taken him for one; he seemed more like a German” (“Daisy” 53).

Much as the Roman evening air was a miasma to Daisy, 19th century America was also toxic to women. “The naïve rebel, Daisy, an embodiment of willful freedom from conventional definition, might seem more eccentric than real. Yet such a figure might represent a significant impulse at work in American life” (Bell, 49). American women, though possessing the “American” characteristics belonged to a different realm than American men.

Defining the American as innocent, spontaneous, and a natural go-getter could be sharply contrasted with the experienced, artificial, and inactive European. Americans living in Europe displayed more “European” traits than Europeans themselves. In his characters, James may seek the ideal balance of America’s youth with Europe’s experience and knowledge. Edmund Wilson compares James’s style to that of Shakespeare because:

[T]hey are occupied simply with the presentation of conflicts of moral character, which they do not concern themselves about softening or averting. They do not indict society for these situation; they regard them as universal and inevitable. They do not even blame God for allowing them; they accept them as conditions of life. (Edel, 20th century, 66)

Christof Wegelin in his book *The Image of Europe in Henry James* discusses the complicated conflict between Europe and America. One’s duty was to be faithful to our country, yet James, after spending many years living abroad becomes an English citizen. Though other artists similarly leave the United States, James’s decision
brings the reason for this unpatriotic behavior to the American forefront. In his writing, James often mentions the culture which is more apparent in Europe. America, a new country, derives its minimal sophistication from imitation of European society. But, possibly this emulation mimics an image of Europe’s past which no longer exists. America’s reconciliation of its feelings about Europe “had given rise to certain images of Europe, all dominated by the consciousness of a lingering past” (Wegelin, 7-8). James stands distinguished from other writers because he progressively deepens his vision in his treatment of Europe. “His unusual opportunities of observation enabled him to recognize the element of ‘superstition’ in the earlier images of Europe, their subjective elements typical of the American imagination” (Wegelin, 8). International contrasts serve as a means for the analysis of morality. Evaluating James’s body of work reveals his “strong commitment to American modes of thinking and feeling…[a] final shift in the focus of his contrasting evaluation of America and Europe, may suggest what values so attracted him to the Old World that he continued to make his life there” (Wegelin, 8). In 1878 James professes,

> The American may carefully explain that he is living abroad for such and such special and limited reasons—for culture, for music, for art, for the languages, for economy, for the educations of his children; the fact remains that in pursuit of some agreement or other he has forsaken his native land, and the European retains, ineffaceably, the impression that if America were really a pleasant place he would never do so. (Tuttleson, 359)

Wegelin notices the eternal question of snobbishness abroad was being pondered by James in his 1894 *Notebooks* because, “[w]ith the passing of the old agrarian
America and the birth of new money ‘aristocracy’ after the Civil War, the hankering for the externals of European culture and for the amenities of an old ‘leisure class’ flared up with a new vigor well stoked with funds.” Americans were criticized by Europeans for ignoring the changes in Europe, instead the past was displayed in our fiction, forcing a sort of romantic yet incomplete image. While we glamorized the castles and the history, it was transparent to the European who was living it daily. James called this biased vision of Europe “superstitious valuation” (17-19). Yet, it should not be our place to critique his authorial use of specific images to convey the story; all writers choose their words wisely. With James, his writing comes across as very realistic, therefore his views of the countries are lifted from the pages and ascribed as his opinion, when in fact, as with much of his fiction, a statement is there but it remains cloaked within larger pieces such as the storyline itself and the characters. Like with “Daisy Miller” all aspects of the story are there, yet they each contain a bit of ambiguity. James conceals as much as he reveals, leaving the reader ultimately to choose their interpretation of his work. It is known that other Americans at that time were being openly disparaging of all that was European. Perhaps this was a way of separating our county and elevating its status beyond that of a new entity to something improved from its predecessor. As James draws out in “Daisy Miller,” Americans emulating European values, often forget what it meant to be an American altogether after spending too many years overseas. To me, James is a very masterful writer because he engages the reader’s curiosity, providing just enough information to begin the thought process, allowing one to draw their own conclusions,
or knowing that the world is comprised of many shades of gray. I agree with Robert Pippin’s statement in *Henry James & Modern Moral Life* regarding what can be “shown” through literature versus what can be “said” with philosophy. He praises “the value of literature in casuistic questions; the power of literature in challenging the fixity of our moral categories by revealing differences in application and helping us to appreciate shadings and ambiguities” (19). In many ways James is ambiguity itself. Often analyzed, he remains controversial and still misunderstood. There are many conflicting elements in James’s work, to some readers “James seems manifestly hostile to Puritan or New England moralism, suspicious of the hypocrisy and smugness that characterize his morally judgmental characters” then there is “his commitment to other values, like ‘life’ and the supreme importance of beauty and taste” also his “extreme subtlety” and his use of the “novel form itself” (23-24). In Hayes’s collection of criticism “Daisy Miller” quickly became James’s best-liked book to date; James himself praised English reviewers because “[i]ts success has encouraged me as regards the faculty of appreciation of the English public; for the thing is sufficiently subtle, yet people appear to have comprehended it.” This suggests he achieved what he considered the ultimate goal for writers: creating a literary work which satisfies both writer and his audience. “Never again would James’s artistic quest and his desire for public acceptance so happily coincide” (xiii).

Interestingly, this story grew in James’s mind after hearing a casual remark from a member of an elite Europeanized American group that resented the intrusion of any outside into their exclusive colony. They ironically objected to his story, “mistakenly
thinking to themselves that James had done an injury to American girls, but telling him when he insisted upon his kind intention and the fundamental purity which he had brought out, that, in that case, he had poetized her” (Kelley, 267). Yet there holds an obvious truth in the caricature of this American girl who conquers a new frontier, Europe. Much as her male forefathers sailed from England to the New World and then became frontiersman, covering the expanse of the country, now Daisy, removed long enough from Europe to forget about it, sets forth to expand her realm back across the ocean, though those who have regained Old World values promptly discard her and the raw immature country that she represents.
Chapter 4 - The Portrait of a Lady (1881)

An American woman chooses captivity

In Henry James’s book The Portrait of a Lady, Henrietta Stackpole provides an example of an American who questions America’s values, and also that of England. She begins by rejecting anything European, but, in her ultimate marriage to the Englishman Mr. Bantling it is not that she “renounced an allegiance, but planned an attack. She was at last about to grapple in earnest with England” (“Portrait,” 613). Henrietta’s marital values express modernity; she encourages Isabel to leave Gilbert Osmond, stating, “nothing is more common in our Western cities, and it’s to them, after all, that we must look in the future” (549). She “threatens to articulate what remains ever present but always implicit in the text: an argument in favor of divorce” (Griffen, HJ Review, v. 27, no. 2, 156). Possibly James elects expatriatism because he opposed these types of supposedly forward-moving relationship constructs made in our country; or, by living abroad he may attempt to know the “other” from within gaining insight or distancing himself from values in his home country he does not share. Walking away from the country that gave birth to us seems ineffective therefore the reconciliation of “parent and child” could bring America back to a place of understanding its roots and thus focusing on making better decisions for its future. In contrast, Isabel rejects Americana as represented by suitor Caspar Goodwood who expresses ambition and tremendous will “in the manner his country and his time best allow: he has become a magnate, a titan of industry” (Berland, 126-127). Though
she shirks his advances, a certain sense of obligation or guilt remain attached to his appeal for her hand in marriage. James’s notes describe the situation as thus: “His passionate outbreak; he beseeches her to return with him to America. She is greatly moved, she feels the full force of his devotion – to which she has never done justice; but she refuses” (Edel, *Notebooks*, 15). He attempts to sway the American woman back to her own soil, but she plants herself in foreign ground.

As she quests through Europe, perhaps she seeks “self-definition…in the crowded, multi-layered outer world” where “psychological and social identity are part of a single process in the development of an individual” and “marriage ultimately represents the reduction of a free, spontaneous spirit to a constricting social form” (Sicker, 51, 83). “[T]he poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes, a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional” (Edel, *Notebooks*, 13).

The ultimate question in *The Portrait of a Lady* is why Isabel returns to Osmond at the end. Robert Pippin best describes the ending as thus:

> A young American woman declines the overwhelmingly justified option of divorcing her deceitful, manipulative husband, declines the chance to return to America and renew a life ‘for herself’ with a young American in a new marriage, and opts to go back to an utterly failed, hopeless marriage with her smug, Europeanized, American expatriate husband. (30)

Yet to some this decision “is best comprehended as the result of an ethical widening of perspective produced by her experience of suffering that finally enables her to integrate herself more fully into the communal body and take up a socially responsible role as Pansy’s mother” (Jottkandt, 1).
James draws the parallel between Isabel and Christopher Newman in *The American*, describing her as “‘an Americana – the adventures in Europe of a female Newman, who of course equally triumphs,’ in the spirit of irrepressible liberty, over ‘the insolent foreigner’” (Blair, 62, Letters 2:72). Obviously Newman’s “success” equates the loss of his potential trophy wife, while Isabel ends up with the man whose attributes disappoint her. In *Henry James and the “Woman Business”* Alfred Habegger points out that James returned repeatedly to a theme which dominated his time: the orphaned girl and the father-lover (4). Though, as in his other books, James dodges overt sexual imagery, preferring to dance around the edges with innuendo. Edmond L. Volpe finds that James “studies the passion in relation to the rest of man’s life” because he “was not interested in depicting overt actions, unless they reveal drama of the inner world” which accounts for the “nebulous atmosphere” (Buitenhuis, *20th c Interpretations*, 113).

Richard Chase states in his article, “The Lesson of a Master,” that “Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* was the first novel by an American that made, within the limits of its subject, full use of the novel form” (89). James’s pictorial style contains much detail and careful observation; he credits himself for his research, while critiquing authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne for leaving that area of their novels unfinished. *The Portrait of a Lady* possesses undeniably poetic elements as well. Chase notes that “[i]t is an important part about James’s art that he gave up what he considered the claptrap of romance without giving up its mystery and beauty” (90). Yes, when we view Isabel Archer’s life at the end, the pretentious nonsense eroded away with the
passing years. But, does mystery and beauty remain? I agree that James manages to leave the reader with those elements, making his novel a success in that he achieved his desired goal. Isabel’s reasoning for returning to Osmond remains forever an unknown. At this closure of the book, her life appears bleak except we can feel her strength and beauty of character shining through. The optimist projects her subsequent rescue of Pansy from the monastery, and then their freedom. This view says that American women will become triumphant in their course through history, though they may stumble along the way, just as America’s ability to succeed is inevitable without necessarily moving forward in a straight path. Habegger notes that James read a conservative essay in the late 1870’s, shortly before writing *The Portrait of a Lady*. This essay, by Mrs. Sutherland Orr entitled “The Future of English Women” warned that “female emancipation would entail certain fatal consequences: Children would fail to learn a ‘sense of difference’ between the sexes, womanly tenderness would disappear, and so would love.” Liberation was futile in the essayist’s opinion because she believed sexual difference was inborn; women were inferior to men. James praised her, called her a “sensible creature” (Habegger, *Woman*, 7). James’s writing though wordy and precise contains sly asides often occurring as interjections from the writer. Whether his compliment of Mrs. Orr’s piece supported her view, her style, or provided a clever jibe disguised as a pat, we will never know. I differ from Habegger in that my interpretation of James does not conclude an antifeminism stance. With a wide education, an open-minded family, and an observant nature, I believe his style would be prone to recording, analyzing,
and refrain from taking a clear-cut swath. The statement about a child’s inability to
differentiate between man and woman (should equality occur) may have played into
his thoughts when writing Pansy’s character. Osmond dominantly determined her
suitors and her future, steering her from the liberated path that Isabel walked on when
they met. His exacting control left no doubt in Pansy’s mind as to the specific roles
of men and women in their world. This brings to mind another story, the cautionary
tale by Louisa May Alcott, “Cupid and Chow-chow” (.Keyser, 127). Written circa
1872, James quite likely read Alcott’s story and mulled it over while preparing his
tale. “Cupid and Chow-chow” depicts a forceful feminist mother figure to daughter
Chow-chow. By emulating her mother, we see the gender dysphoria in their family
environment. Cupid must be emasculated, while Chow-chow must suffer a blow to
the head in order for men and women to live in harmony; Alcott covertly opposes the
natural union between sexes much propounded in society, quite the opposing stance
to Mrs. Orr’s essay of the same period.

On the other hand, Isabel’s choice to go back could also be seen as a bird
returning to her cage, as America returned to England, its motherland, for guidance of
moral and social behavior. The fledgling departs on bitter terms, only to return to its
nest and almost unknowingly adopting the principles of its parents. James depicts
Osmond and Madame Merle, both long-time expatriates, as corrupt and divorced
from American values; they are the evil characters in this novel, though they wear the
deceptive shroud of a fellow countryman.
Leon Edel, often considered the ultimate source for criticism on James, is excerpted by Harold Bloom with this commentary on *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The American*:

In the end one feels that Isabel’s disillusionment, the damage to her self-esteem and the crushing effect of her experience, reside in the shock she receives that so large a nature should have been capable of so great a mistake; and in her realization that instead of being able to maneuver her environment, as her freedom allowed, she had been maneuvered by it. Christopher Newman had had a similar shock…America, in Henry’s two novels, represented – in the larger picture – the New World’s concept of its own liberties, the admixture of freedom and of power contained in America’s emerging philosophy, and in the doctrines of pragmatism of which Henry’s brother William was to be founder. In drawing his novel from the hidden forces of his own experience into the palpable world of his study and observation, Henry James had touched upon certain fundamental aspects of the American character. (Bloom, 38-39)

Her inheritance provides the means to explore and live a self-sufficient life, an unusual situation for a woman of the late 1800’s. But, possibly her real inheritance lies in the care bestowed upon her by her uncle and by Ralph, a character representational of James’s vaguely handicapped nature and his quiet introspective observation. Ralph forms a connection with her arguably stronger than all others. This unknown cousin, living in a foreign country, finds a place close to Isabel’s heart, much to the anger of her jealous and uncaring husband. Ralph intervenes a direct hand in the financial means left to Isabel by her uncle, a gift to allow her to pursue life on her terms. “Figuratively speaking, the story told in the novel is of Isabel’s leaving an American house – a way of life, that is – for a European house. Ostensibly she conceives of this as an escape from frustrating and cramping confinement to a
fuller, freer, more resonant and significant life” (Vann, 91). Yet, this freedom in many ways undoes her because she allows herself to become appropriated by Osmond, he takes her money and shelves her like merely another piece of art for his collection, though she cannot become the perfect piece of art that he desires, her will makes her ugly to him. Their parting, written in strong language, implies that, through their relationship, she seeks to resolve the problem of national identity because their strife inflames her “old passion for justice” and James likens their opposing stances to “the sign of the cross or the flag of one’s country” (Portrait, 583). This is powerful specifically since both are Americans. Like the abyss between Winterbourne and Daisy, Osmond represents the American living abroad whose ties to America fray to dissolution, while Isabel still possesses the quest for freedom and exploration in her, though it is quickly extinguished by Osmond’s heavy cloak upon her. Viewing a life lived under such restraints, Isabel “envied Ralph his dying…life would be her business for a long time to come” (Portrait, 607).

The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James by Priscilla Walton examines Realism in relation to this novel. Walton believes The Portrait of a Lady undercuts the notion of the autonomous thinking, for it demonstrates that that subject is not autonomous at all but subjected to many societal and psychological forces. Interestingly, and perhaps despite itself, the text draws a parallel between the subject’s subjection to and by its Subject and the Realist reader’s subjection to and by the Realist text, and foregrounds how little freedom each is allowed ideologically (162)

Walton attempts to reconcile the “contradictory and circumscriptive nature of Realist Masculine referentiality” and concludes that “[t]hese Feminine texts, like the women
figured within them, cannot be confined to a single univocal interpretation” (161). 

The highly-disputed conclusion has interpretations ranging from the straight-forward in which Isabel promptly returns to Osmond’s cold bosom and continues her pathetic life with him, to the endings that attached to the ambiguity and questions where her path takes her and what, if anything, Osmond figures in her future. We understand that she has free will, yet how free is any woman of that time period? “The Portrait of the Lady purports, in its form and its content, to offer the idea that people are free to choose the pattern of their lives;” Isabel announces this throughout the book. Financial means free her to direct her destiny. “[B]ut that because she is female and hence somewhat irrational and unstable, she will choose erroneously. The text, therefore, works to justify patriarchal authority, for the circumscription of women is presented as a kindness, a means of helping them help themselves” (Walton, 52-53). Yet she may merely choose the socially-accepted option which avoids divorce; by previously dismissing several suitable suitors, her deviant behavior binds her to the punishment of a confined and horrible life with Osmond. In any case, Isabel holds our attention more than James’s other characters. Harold Bloom believes she “comes closest to Shakespearean dimensions” because of her “power to read us more fully than we can read her” (Bloom, Reviews, 9).

Her freedom is largely a myth because of the assumption that women “independently determine and control their own destiny. But the contradiction lies in that this idea is negated by the text itself, which ‘frames’ the protagonist from within and from without.” James structured the first half of the novel from the narrator’s
perspective; the second half shifts to a farther viewing, wherein society as a whole views Isabel’s actions. The author interrupts the story to remind the reader of the societal codes, and to point out Isabel’s faults (Walton, 53). Because of these interludes, we become aware that James wants us to understand Isabel’s dreams remain incapable of the fulfillment in such a society. This foreshadowing prepares us for her ultimate return to the dominating Osmond, and (depending on your view of course) the willing subjection to the noose about her neck. She may be likened to a caged bird set free, returning willingly to its prison, even though the world lies in wait. During the late 1800’s this was very true of women’s place in society: they experienced elements of freedom, yet most chose to remain chained and oppressed. Perhaps we speak not of a matter of “freedom” but rather should seek an acceptance that the essence of men and women remains unalike. Striving for uniformity shall always pose a failing task; instead, as acceptance of different races and religions has progressed, we must apply our acceptance of differences to the struggle for equality between the sexes. Possibly the ending is merely emblematic – a return to the struggle with herself as we all must come to terms with our life decisions, whether or not they are favorably accepted by others. In Michelle Mendelsohn’s book review, she states Gert Buelens has defined the term “oblique possession” as the “richly erotic dynamic of mastery and surrender.” Mendlesohn sees this as a “means of constituting identity. Simultaneously mastering and submitting to an erotic power – spatial or human – is a means of asserting one’s own identity and self-possession” (Griffen, HJ Review, v. 27, no. 1, 101). Though they discuss The American Scene, this description
aptly applies to Isabel’s relationship with Osmond. The concept of surrender to another as a means of gaining personal fulfillment or advancement seems an idea not previously applied to the ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* and is worth considering. Feminists may very well dispel this interpretation; however, life is comprised of balance; without giving up a part of yourself, how can you let in another person? This very erotic principal can be applied beyond sexual encounters, to our daily mundane interactions. “Oblique possession” – perhaps those two words hold the answer to the still-pondered questioning of Isabel’s decision of an American women choosing to remain captive by an embittered expatriate.
Chapter 5 - *The Bostonians* (1886)

Feminism wields a masculine force

Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant’s relationship borders on homosexual as Olive attempts to seclude Verena from men and sequester her. Though James states no sexual interactions between the two, their relationship nonetheless grows intimate and exclusive. Olive purports her status as a key proponent for women’s rights; however, she controls and suppresses Verena, in the same manner that she condemns men for extracting their authority over women. A naïve girl from a controlling family, Verena ends up used as a pawn by everyone, including Olive. Verena’s thoughts remain masked from the reader in a similar manner that James presents many of his main female characters. We learn about Verena through the views of others, or by statements from the narrator such as, “[s]he was an artful little minx, and cared as much for the rights of women as she did for the Panama Canal; the only right of a women she wanted was to climb up on top of something, where the men could look at her” (160). He weaves his opinions by the use of such cutting statements; the reader has no knowledge how Verena feels about Panama Canal, which, in 1879 had its first practical attempt at cutting the canal through the land, a mission subsequently abandoned in 1881. This reference bears significance since the canal served to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, operating as a key factor in international shipping. James’s use of a symbol involving the cooperation of countries towards a common goal of simplified shipping of goods can be seen as a parallel to women’s rights.
The Panama Canal suffered a difficult beginning; nearly abandoned, the project was eventually brought to fruition. Building the canal stirred a much-contested political debate which to this day remains volatile in regards to which country holds power over it. Similarly, the women’s movement caused heated debate in many countries, with an ensuing struggle between genders regarding rights of possession. Equated to a piece of valuable land, Verena’s father, Selah Tarrant, barters over her worth with Olive. Because Verena is a money-making commodity barely beginning to realize its full potential, Selah resists Olive’s increasing influence on Verena. Not until Olive pays annual sums for her exclusive rights does he release his grip on the girl. Meanwhile Olive considers “if she should offer him ten thousand dollars to renounce all claim to Verena, keeping – he and his wife – clear for the rest of time” (89). In effect, Olive’s wealth allows her to transact business deals like a man, but, to her dismay, her cousin Basil Ransom applies a stronger psychological influence over Verena, jilting Olive’s control of Verena. Curiously, in her seemingly strong drive for equality, Olive reduces Verena to chattel. Olive’s fortunate financial situation could free Verena to explore life’s options outside of the norms of social constructs involving marriage as a means of gaining access to income. Instead Olive chooses to transfer Verena’s constraints to her own hand, her crazy desire to take possession of the girl seems to outweigh the logic of how such a transaction hinders womankind’s advancement towards equality.

Habegger believes “Olive’s morbidity is not pathological but the result of her helpless knowledge that she is bound to lose” to a man because James ultimately
wishes to underhandedly dismiss women’s rights for anything other than domesticity. Though James preaches “the central tenets of radical feminism: women will never be free to realize and become themselves until they are free of their need for men, until they know that their basic bonds are with each other, and until they learn to make a primary commitment to each other” (Habegger, Woman, 5).

Perhaps this is why James draws Olive as having no attachments to men. Her character displays a malady of undefined nervous afflictions, representative of the women typified in contemporary medical and literary journals, their condition expressed in terms as thus:

The female possessed of masculine ideas of independence, the viragint who would sit in the public highways and lift up her pseudo-virile voice, proclaiming her sole right to decide questions of war or religion, or the value of celibacy and the cure of woman’s impurity, and that disgusting antisocial being, the female sexual pervert, are simply different degrees of the same class – degenerates. (Howard, 687)

In the world of The Bostonians, where “family values are under fire and the feminine appears to be the corrupting influence,” James gives us a sexually ambiguous, ambitious, feminist Olive (Graham, 146-147). To offset this force, he provides the submissive and beautiful feminine girl, Verena. In this new day, Verena’s devotion is being sought by both Olive and Ransom.

Though young in age, the Mississippian Ransom retains old-fashioned manners with his gentlemanly displays of behavior and his attitudes that women’s advancement receives his attention only insofar as his ability to gaze upon an attractive Verena while tuning-out her statements about feminism; in his eyes, women remain inferior to the male and should submit to his requests finding fulfillment in
traditional female roles of homemaker and mother. His statements such as, “I consider women have no business to be reasonable” underscores his traditional masculine nature (169). Ransom “was the stiffest of conservatives” whereas Verena sees herself as “only a girl, a simple American girl” (49-50). These statements ring parallels with Winterbourne and Daisy.

Primarily set in Boston, Olive travels to Europe with Verena for a few months early in the book. Supposedly to provide Verena with expansion of mind and to visit the leaders of the emancipation of the sex to see “if they were in advance;” Olive’s other motivations include removing Verena from the attention of interested gentleman callers (176, 160). Travels to Europe define the characters; Ransom’s lack of international travels repeatedly devalues his worth throughout the story. Yet Olive’s sister, Adeline, says she almost likes him better because he has not been there. This echoes back again to the theme in “Daisy Miller” of how traveling abroad affects Americans, a repeated questioning of whether foreign travel serves to expand the mind or whether it turns travelers away from their homeland because they view it critically when abroad. Obviously this topic comes from James’s personal experience. His father, a strong believer in the best education, no matter which country provided it, transported the children across the Atlantic many times in search of an elusive perfect place. In many ways, Verena’s father Selah, caricatures James’s own father with his untraditional beliefs about male and female roles. James makes references to alternate communities explored by Verena’s parents, where, under the direct lead of her father, they lived in the Cayuga community, an allusion to the
Oneida community which flourished because of its commercial success in farming from 1848 to 1881. A lifestyle viewed as immoral by most, Oneida supported polygamy and polyandry, allowing the ladies to “wear short hair, and jackets and trowsers” while carefully limiting propagation. Mrs. Tarrant “incurred the displeasure of her family, who gave her husband to understand that, much as they desired to remove the shackles from the slave, there were kinds of behaviour which struck them as too unfettered” (56, 383). The word “unfettered” created images of freed slaves while women remain weighed down with invisible chains of societal morals, corseted in more than just dress.

Donatello Izzo’s book *Portraying the Lady* analyzes many critical interpretations of James’s viewpoints on women. *The Bostonians* “describes in sympathetic and prophetic terms the historical necessity of women’s emancipation” but it also “is the most honest and extreme representation of women’s oppression in the literature of the nineteenth century” with the questioning of whether James’s “‘fatalism,’ which sees such oppression as inevitable and ‘natural’ because it is based on the inherent balance of power inscribed in men’s and women’s sexuality.” This book’s value lies in its “analysis of American social reality” (7). Joseph Conrad calls James “a historian of fine consciences” because of his acute “observation of social phenomena” (Edel, 20th century, 15). The end of the story lies heavy with symbolism: before Verena’s big public speech, Ransom “by muscular force, wrenched her away” while Olive watches, “the expression on her face was a thing to remain with him for ever; it was impossible to imagine a more vivid presentment of blighted hope and wounded
pride.” To shield her identity from the crowd, he “thrust the hood of Verena’s long cloak over her head” while “Ransom, palpitating with his victory, felt now a little sorry for her.” James closes his book with the two of them outside, having narrowly escaped from the rowdy awaiting crowd. She expresses she is glad, yet, “beneath her hood, she was in tears. It is feared that with this union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed” (348-350). Ransom succeeds in removing her from a life of speaking on the women’s cause and subjecting her to his domesticating love. The reader alone can judge whether his forceful choice to alter her path shall serve to bring her happiness.

James, as always, leaves an open-ended interpretation of the conclusion, they balance on the edge of their new life, two lovers without apparent financial means, leaving behind all that they know to begin anew: an ode to love, but also a reality check for a girl who believes she can change the world. Verena’s public appearances bring her into the spotlight of male suitors; her beauty lures them to her, and one finally derails the strict course of her life set forth by Olive. Verena possesses little will of her own, and example of another girl-woman passed from the control of a dominating parent, to that of a self-serving woman, and ultimately into the strong arms of romantic love.

We wonder if James issues his words as a cautionary tale, or merely as an accurate depiction of our society. *The Bostonians* was believed to be penned largely as satire and irony by James, the grandson of an immigrant, unable to relate to the “gentility of the Brahmins and the frugality of Concord or the manner in which New England considered culture to be an arduous duty rather than a joy of life and of civilization”
James’s descriptions of Verena as a “gently animated image” and “supremely innocent” serve to create a picture of mindless beauty (135, 86). In addition to finding that James made excessive demands on his readers by not straightforwardly explaining the action of this book, critics of his day objected to James’s interjections throughout the story; instead of appreciating his literary technique, his style was blasted as “a violation of every conceivable rule of literary good breeding.” James claimed the “right to enter the heads and hearts of his characters at will, and many readers found this authorial prerogative disturbing” (Hayes, xiv). Today his techniques produce no disgruntled evaluations.

Several times we gain insight into Olive’s mind where she compares Verena to Joan of Arc; Olive “seemed to see the glow of dawning success; the battle had begun, and something of the ecstasy of the martyr” (112-113). This seems an interesting choice for comparison by James: a virgin with a calling, ultimately executed because of society’s prejudices, misconceptions, and societal necessity to fit inside a certain feminine mold. Olive herself has willingly taken the “vow of eternal maidenhood” leaving no room in her life for any masculine presences except for those who supported and furthered their cause (296). Joan of Arc apparently held the fascination of other writers; in 1897, a few months before meeting with James, Mark Twain, preoccupied with Joan of Arc, expressed his wishes that James translate a certain French book about her because James’s status (already a master) would make the book live forever (Edel, Master, 37).
Outside of the female mold stands the neighbor, Doctor Prance. Comparable to Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Dr. Prance comes across as so far outside the norm, Ransom describes her as no “more susceptible of domesticity, as if she had been a small forest-creature, a catamount or a ruffed doe, that had learned to stand still while your stroked it, or even to extend a paw.” Doctor Prance surrounds herself with her career; in fact it absorbs her very name since no first name is apparent when referring to her, in effect neutralizing her sexuality. She shuns the goings-on at Olive’s stating about the women’s group, “[t]hey’ve got a capacity for making people waste time.” In his conversation with her about her stance on women’s rights, “Ransom could see that she was impatient of the general question and bored with being reminded, even for the sake of her rights, that she was a woman – a detail that she was in the habit of forgetting, having as many rights as she had time for” (38-39).

Ransom thinks of her as “a short-haired female physician” and they spend time together on walks and fishing when they both stay at a house where Ransom is the only male. He thinks of her as a buddy yet realizes the distinction because he notes how he “would greatly have enjoyed being at liberty to offer her a cigar” (274). When they part he cordially tells her, “I shall always remember our little expeditions. And I wish you every professional distinction” because, for her, her life is her job, she longs to see her “office-slate” again (314). Unlike Henrietta, Doctor Prance remains alone instead of an out-of-character ending pairing her up with a male love interest.
With strong female characters such as Doctor Prance and Olive, feminism wields a masculine and powerful force in this story. American women begin to segregate: soft like Verena, or hardened as the feminists. With increased freedom comes a withdrawal from the need for a male partner. These ladies exhibit a purpose in life beyond that of previous generations, and not including traditional female roles such as wife and mother.
Chapter 6 – What Maisie Knew (1897)

New frontiers: women opt for immoral behavior

“Mr. James can write fiction which is instructive as well as entertaining; but he differs from most of his fellows in telling a story which is humanly interesting and letting the rest take care of itself” (Hayes, 290). This statement, made by a writer for the Chicago Tribune in November 1897 expresses my beliefs about much of James’s work. Referring to the book What Maisie Knew, this review varies substantially from others of the day which viewed his controversial subjects of divorce and adultery with disgust. The English Pall Mall Gazette sees it as “a work very difficult to criticise, very perplexing to appraise” (284). Well-written with comical elements apparent to modern-day readers, the Chicago Tribune article concludes that “[s]o long as parents are to be divorced” the torment and turmoil on the children “will remain a problem” (291). The nineteenth century cowered from the sordid quarrels and explicit undertones of this work; these scandalous things occurred, but adultery was forcefully suppressed to the private lives; showing public relationships between a man and woman not married to each other constituted socially unacceptable behavior. A child such as Maisie living with an unwed couple, even with the condition of parental abandonment, offends the moral sense.

The characters in this story display exaggerated attributes, which we receive through a child’s eyes; defiantly erogenous domestic relations, deemed scandalous, comprise Maisie’s everyday world. Here again we see James trying to reconcile the
new image of women. Maisie’s mother splits from her husband without any apparent remorse – an act judged as the fall of woman from virtuous to unworthy, a shift society admonished and the overall Women’s Movement reticently accepted. As a single woman she sets up house, only to find her governess, Miss Overmore, attached to Maisie and wheedling herself a better deal as Maisie’s father’s mistress, and ultimately as Maisie’s stepmother. Miss Overmore uses her beauty as capital to intrusively advance from an impoverished background into a more solid financial situation by enchanting a handsome albeit still married man. In turn, Maisie’s mother also opens herself up to adultery by enchanting young Sir Claude into matrimony. Choosing poorly again, this relationship soon shows irreparable rips. Still burning from the loss of her first husband to a younger woman, Maisie’s mother progressively increases her adornment and lowers her collarline to enhance her attributes to her suitors while her scalding tongue scolds the men she no longer needs. The adults exhibit immoral behavior, heavily renounced in its day, though the book, written with a light, comical hand, reads almost like a play with complex levels of action between the characters. The nineteenth century did not deem adultery acceptable, especially when instigated by women.

With the first American woman earning her PhD in 1882, women’s magazines still primarily being run by strongly antifeminist editors that “exalted the ancient and honorable profession of the homemaker (Fryer, 13), it should come as no surprise that the 26th US President, Theodore Roosevelt (TR Assoc) issued this statements:

[T]he woman who deliberately avoids marriage, and has a heart so cold as to know no passion and a brain so shallow and selfish as to
dislike having children, is in effect a criminal against the race, and should be an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people. (Fryer, 15)

Women like Maisie’s mother constituted a problem for society, they did not fit within the accepted social standards and their new-found traits, which emulated those of men, frightened many. James repeatedly has Sir Claude admit his fear of Maisie’s mother, as he tried to avoid her harsh words about his lack of abilities in the home.

The movement away from traditional family structure is addressed by the President, and also by James who shows both of Maisie’s parents walk away from her upbringing, content to leave her in a state of unknown, somewhat in the care of the two yet unwed “stepparents.” The mothers in his story profess love for the child, and exhibit it in an overstated manner of showy public displays, followed up with negligence and haphazard support. Though written a few years before the statement by Roosevelt, the novel expresses the same sentiment except that James takes care to enlighten the atrocious coital behavior of the all adults to the point of it being ridiculous and humorous.

Morality plays a strong role in this book – the questioning of it and the outward farcical adherence to it. The older, less educated, unattractive governess Mrs. Wix serves as the balance to immorality, with repeated interjections saying, of the adulterers, that “nobody, you know, is free to commit a crime…You’d commit one as great as their own – and so should I – if we were to condone their immorality in our presence” (164). But, how shall a child rein in the deviant behavior of the adults that surround her?
Primarily set in England, James uses the European continent, France in particular, as the place which will safely harbor the improper conduct of unmarried adults possessing a child who accompanies them merely by the verbal rejection of her parents’ legal duties. In the conclusion, all choice lies in Maisie’s hands; she may go with Sir Claude, Miss Overmore, or Mrs. Wix. After false starts and stops, Maisie chooses to board the steamer at the last moment, returning to England with Mrs. Wix, leaving the two secretive lovers behind, and foiling Miss Overmore’s plan to snare Sir Claude by keeping the girl and sharing access with him. Of course, Miss Overmore seeks to use her beauty and intelligence to cunningly legitimize this awkward position, though her actual scruples fall far beneath this standard since she has an affair with him far before either of them was released from their marital obligations. Perhaps James channeled his father’s belief that the expression of love between unmarried couples is “divinely beautiful and sacred” and not promiscuous (Habegger, *Father*, 280).

The only American in this novel is the horrendously ugly black “Countess” that finances Maisie’s father after his split with Miss Overmore seemingly in exchange for sexual favors. The racial descriptions are degrading and their relationship falls into an even more questionable category than that of the other rule-bending adults. But, he needs monetary support and chooses to accompany her back to America, offering Maisie a half-hearted invitation to come along. Also in the category of weak male is Sir Claude, described as “poor plastic and dependent male” for living in “mortal terror” of Maisie’s mother’s next vicious attack on him (158, 159); his failing derived
from the male creature’s susceptibility to sex. This book explores very well the interdependency of the genders, bringing the new weakness of men, both financially and in social situations to the forefront of the public’s attention. A true equalizing of the sexes, with England remaining the land of proper etiquette, while the corrupt ways of other lands infringe quickly upon the innocents, with no hope for respite. Displaying the possibility of the emasculated male, James appears to sidestep his opinion on women’s rights and accept that the future is here. Yet, Maisie chooses the morally correct option in the end, extracting herself from a possible future of bordellos, given an opportunity to claim some of childhood innocence which passed her by while living in turmoil subjected to transitioning combinations and configurations between the four adults. In true James fashion, the reader must speculate whether that selection brings Maisie the best outcome, but this in itself provides strength to the female argument proving women can evaluate complex situations and will elect an ethical solution. This empowers the nineteenth century woman, especially since this morally correct choice was made by a young girl given a corrupt group of values by the unstable adults in her surroundings. If Maisie can make up her own mind, then women should surely be allowed the freedom and the right to choose their destinies. Yet a return to moral choices may not be the answer:

Mrs. Wix shares with that other governess embattled against evil spirits (the governess of “The Turn of the Screw”) a sense of moral mission which threatens Maisie’s free being as much as the cynical manipulations of the other adults…[Maisie] must also discover that in acquiring a ‘moral sense’ she will still lose. Even Mrs. Wix is the enemy of Maisie’s free spirit, for Mrs. Wix only differs from the rest of Maisie’s mentors in offering to confine her in sentimentality and conventional morality. (Bell, 247)
Women must find a middleground between the old limited destiny and the new potentially immoral realm. Yet these choices are not clear-cut and the story-teller conveys them in their confused and convoluted state.

In Joseph Wiesenfarth’s Book, *Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy*, he aptly infers that James prefers to show the story rather than tell it. The novelist does “so much with so little. “[T]he dramatic qualities of economy, intensity, and objectivity” abound, yet he does it with a sparse technique representing “action cast in scenes and pictures and presented through a centre of vision” (75). However, Louis Auchincloss instead comments on James’s heartlessness stating that his books “are dehumanized by reason of his inability to create characters by a dialogue” (108). Yet, dialogue is not necessary when James provides insight into a character’s mind. In this time of women expanding into the realm of immoral behavior, perhaps an allusion to the inner working of the mind is more accurate than the words passed between characters. This new realm for women seems intuitively inferred by James rather than overtly stated, which is quite possibly the best portrayal of how these changes took place.
Chapter 7 – “The Turn of the Screw” (1898)

A domestic woman, enslaved by her mind

Criticisms of previous works “often expressed anger that he seemingly wasted so many words and so much creative energy on trivial things. No one made that complaint about ‘The Turn of the Screw’” (Hayes, xviii). Written twelve years after The Bostonians, James’s novel The Turn of the Screw captures the strength gained by women nearing the turn of the century. The “woman issue” comes to the foreground as states begin to grant women the right to vote. The main character in The Turn of the Screw, the unnamed governess, single-handedly frightens her young charge, Little Miles, to death. James shows a woman with power, deceit, and a mind of her own that cannot be pierced, leaving the reader guessing as to her true intent as well as wondering what really occurs. Perhaps the storyline falls under the heading “ghost story” allowing a neat categorization; or, an alternate reading may show the destructive power of women when finally granted freedom and rights of their own after many years of suppression. By leaving the governess nameless, James makes her every woman, ready to either go insane or murderous once the restraints of masculinity are lifted. Yet, she remains female because her initial reaction to her employer is boundless passionate love. Her crazy actions quite possibly express this unrequited, unmentionable desire. A young, beautiful woman with the power of a household at her fingertips, but unable to quench the fire within herself. James shows us the complexity and impenetrable nature of a woman, also an apt way to define
aspects of our country: America kills, feels passionately, and possesses a many-faceted exterior matched only by its complex interior. The outside world cannot understand it, but the power exuded inspires awe, criticism, fear, and confusion. As early as 1924, while others were interpreting this story superficially, Edna Keaton suggested that the governess is “pathetically trying to harmonize her on disharmonies by creating discords outside herself” (Tompkins, 20th c Interpretations, 56). In Leon Edel’s Headnotes he remarks that childhood is typically a time of freedom (HJ Reader, 256), therefore this can be seen another comment by James on freedom and the restrictions that accompany it. Previously focusing on women from higher classes, in this work we see the governess trapped by her restricted means to earn a living, as well as by her personal feelings for her employer, creating actions in the story that ultimately lead to the destruction of the children’s freedom too.

The character of the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, serves as a foil to the governess. Mrs. Grose’s nature comes across as simple as the governess’s is complex. Another example of a woman at the turn of the century: simpleminded, easily led, and decidedly “female” in the alternate meaning of the word. And, a different depiction of America: the mindless, youngster, who believes without thinking for themselves, and trudges along a path laid by others.

What do these two contrasting views of women and the country reveal about James? Obviously he poses many questions. A clear definition of anything does not exist. He wants us to see the variety while creating generalized types to simplify his world. Though written in a different genre, and a varying style, James again tells a
story of a solitary woman around which a plot develops, but on another level it provides a psychological study of the governess’s mind. He places subtle hints in the text to foreshadow the action. Very adept at technique, James ends his story with the line, “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.” Little Miles dies in her arms of fright after she claims, “I have you, but he has lost you for ever!” (85). While grappling with the apparition visible only to herself, the governess has either shaken the boy to death, suffocated him, or frightened the beating of his heart into ceasing. Whichever explanation the reader chooses matters minimally – the gist of his statement comes across as a lonely affection-starved woman, from a fragmented poor family, when given a means to make a living, still succumbs to the failures of the modern women: unable to love the man she chooses, unable to fulfill her maternal duties adequately. If James lived in our current period, I believe his statements on the “progress” made by women seemingly would remain similarly critical in that we cannot obtain all the we desire, particularly when our needs are unclear even to ourselves. Perhaps his father’s dominant, ground-breaking, and embarrassing values about male/female relationships contributed to James’s inability to hold traditional relationships as the best, or the only, option available.

In Priscilla Walton’s *The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James* her Prologue chapter, entitled “Releasing the Screw,” provides interpretation using Realism to analyze the role of the governess. She mentions the two main interpretations: a tale of demonic possession, or the diary of a madwoman. “[W]hat
has largely been ignored and what is perhaps at the root of the debate is that the story dramatizes the problematic nature of Realist interpretation;” James’ story “undercuts its own supposed Realist impetus when it generates indeterminacies and contradictions that disrupt realist readings of it.” Realism traditionally is a true and faithful rendition of people in literary works and “[r]ealist theorists believe that this mode of writing presents a ‘reality’ that is knowable, explainable, that engenders, as the text works towards a closure, a singular interpretation.” James subverts these assumptions because “its oft-noted multiplicity of meaning undercuts its own supposed singular construction” (3).

An interesting theory, though Walton’s impressions of James seem restrictive. A talented writer of that time period, he does not necessarily conform to the practices of the day. Because this story figured late in his career, I believe his exploration of writing as a visual of art has been well developed; his very detailed style, lends to an intense pictorial image. In this aspect, James was a Realist, a so-called secretary to society, documenting what crossed his path. Yet The Turn of the Screw cannot fit neatly into the category of Realism. With this story, James tries his hand at another type of story-telling. Perhaps ghost stories remained a hold-over from childhood reading, or maybe his brother William’s psychological analysis of life impacted Henry’s writing. Indeed, Henry Sr. and his two famous sons abruptly changed the family line into the intellectual sphere, creating a new dynasty within the James family (Grattan, 2).
In *The Turn of the Screw*, he sets the story of the governess within the narration by Douglas, so possibly James is practicing literary styles. Walton explains it as thus:

I would like to demonstrate the ways in which femininity and absence deconstruct the univocal impetus of and within *The Turn of the Screw*, which consists of two main endeavours to decode and to explicate them. The text is divided into two parts: the prologue comprises the efforts of Douglas and the narrator to present the governess and the account she has written; the bulk of the tale consists of the governess’s story. While the narrator and Douglas try to explain, to control, and to confine the meaning of the governess, the governess tries to place, to discern, and to elucidate the meaning of absence. However, both femininity and absence subvert their ‘author’s’ intent and work against a Realist referential interpretation; their indeterminate and inconclusive nature generates a plurality of readings that cannot be unified and closed. (4)

I wonder if James did try to “control” and “confine” the governess within the structure of his story, or if he was merely adding an element of suspense by obscuring the occurrences. If you follow Walton’s line of thought, then her theory can be applied to the vast feminine in James stories and be seen as a conscious effort to suppress women and keep them restricted.

Walton questions James’s use of the prologue, indicating that critical writings call for this type of an introduction, but fictional writings do not. “On the one hand, they exist to pique the readers’ interest, and on the other, they serve to direct the reader along the interpretive path that the author has chosen to follow…he must provide for her account with prefatorial remarks. This feeling could result from a belief that the governess’s tale calls for male validation” (5-6).

The Prologue tries to establish the governess as a “lady” which denies her any sexuality. This labels her fascination and devotion to her boss as love, instead of a
young woman’s lust, or the effects of being driven stir-crazy in an isolated location without stimulating interaction. Walton states that “feminine sexuality has no singular presence in the Victorian worldview;” the governess’s sexuality bursts through Douglas and the narrator’s efforts to repress it, and “its absence is present even in Douglas’s description of her” (7). Douglas’s description of the governess leads the reader to believe he was in love with her; his careful account of her creeps around the edges of allowing her to have a feminine sexual presence. Just as we understand his infatuation with her, he explains the governess’s attraction to the master. The narration consists of allusions, what we extract comes from the tone of the passages and the omissions. A young beautiful woman in love but isolated clearly provides a setting for fantasy, whether of the ghostly nature, or of a sexual nature. James does not write about sex but piques our interest by laying details before us, allowing the reader to draw their own conclusion.

Other stories of this era deal with “women’s issues” in various manners. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” was published in 1899, the same year as Kate Chopin’s “The Awakening.” James’s story came out one year before. Perhaps all three authors were attempting to reconcile the sexual element of women. The stories by Gilman and Chopin more clearly can be placed in that category, yet, I believe that James also writes along such a tangent though with more subtlety and not as easily seen because of his masculinity. Instead of agreeing with Walton that James was locking up the governess’s desires, I see him as trying to provide her with a means of release by baring her story in a blanketed narration. Instead of seeing the
obvious, a woman attacked by spirits or a woman gone mad, I think he wants the reader to see the tight bounds placed on her by society, constrictions closer even than the corseted fashion of the day, causing her physical as well as mental hardships as she struggles to reconcile her feelings in a world that holds no place for them.

I agree with Walton that “[t]he similarities between femininity and absence arise from their mutual unknowability. Neither can be made known, for neither has a single presence within the narrative, and both elude the imposition of any final meaning.” This theme presents itself in a number of James’s writings. Possibly he, as an unmarried man, feels he cannot accurately convey the female point of view, or maybe his writing “demonstrates that interpretation is a limitless process, and the tale itself remains impenetrable and inconclusive” (11). Walton believes that as James “strives (particularly in his later years) for clarity and precision in conveying his literary views, his writing becomes increasingly more obscure and diffuse” (13).

In The Act of Reading, Wolfgang Iser states, “[d]ifferent meanings of the same text have emerged at different times, and, indeed, the same text will have a different effect from that of its first reading” (29). Depending one’s perspective and life situation, the reading of a book may very well produce varying effects between readers and even on the same reader when read at different stages in their life. Iser sees literary works as possessing two polarities: “the artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader” (21). A reader is oriented in their society, but nineteenth century America experienced a series of upheavals. Literature, as a reflection of life, could be searched for answers
particularly when the other systems in place (religious, social, and scientific) showed instability. Seeking guidance from James’s works brought the reader to interpret appearances, which were “no longer the veil concealing the substance of a meaning; now they are the means to bring into the world something which has never existed at any other time or place before. But so long as the critic’s mind is fixed on the hidden meaning, he is incapable…of seeing anything.” Because of these searching inquiries in James’s stories, his writing received a wide interpretation in regards to its essence, or lack thereof (6). The need for this analytical approach falls back onto the time frame, since fear of change incites one to attempt gripping something solid. James’s fiction lends itself to being widely interpretable; it captures the essence of life and weaves it into a story. Reading his novel and seeking solutions to the mayhem in the world will only create greater dismay since James ultimately provides no answers in the conclusions of his stories, only open-ended scripts allowing the reader to ponder of the path which lies ahead. The representational material is perhaps too realistic, lending to the unfulfilling aspect of his writing. Perhaps his style sways the reader to believe an answer lies within since it is very thorough, but, inside the meticulous descriptions lies his innate ability to dissuade any forgone conclusion. As Iser believes, the most important element involved in literary interpretation is the reader himself (20). In the governess, do we see a domestic woman enslaved by her mind, driven mad by the conflicting roles of women in America? Or do we dismiss it as just a ghost story?
Chapter 8 - *The American Scene* (1905)

A changed country; struggling feminine independence

James’s collection of various previously published writings from the past thirty years reads as a historical documentation of places at that time, also infused with his views of society in England and America. Blair describes the section entitled *The American Scene* as “his own extensive observation of American manners, institutions, and the public life,…the restored American absentee records numerous scenes in which the making of Americans – of American ‘race,’ of American culture, of American civic fate – is enacted” (158-159). James prefaces it with his confession that, due to a quarter of a century absence from America, his views of the country are “almost as ‘fresh’ as an inquiring stranger” and he “had not on the other hand had enough to cease to be, or at least feel, as acute as an initiated native;” he is “the pilgrim with the longest list of questions, the sharpest appetite for explanations and the largest exposure to mistakes” (335). Using this book in closing for the works reviewed seems an appropriate ending because this statement says it all. For me, the question as to whether he is a Realist writer is also answered: he is the most realistic writer because he shows both sides. This aspect of James has served to frustrate and confuse people for more than a hundred years. His description of eastern states, from Massachusetts to Florida, engages our imagination because their vivid quality takes us a step back into time. Edmund Gosse remarks:

This strange and eloquent book, divided by such a chasm from all ordinary impressions of travel made by the competent and intelligent
stranger, is highly typical of Mr. James’s later manner of writing. It is
produced in that curious mode of his, by which an infinity of minute
touches, each in itself apparently unemphatic, are so massed and
arranged that out of them arises, when the reader least expects it,
perhaps – a picture which absolutely controls the imagination. (Hayes,
xx)

And control the imagination he does. James section on Boston comments that
there is “no sound of English” as he walks the streets; the immigrant element is not
much mentioned in his fiction, yet the changing demographics abound, described as a
“sense of rupture,” a sharp connection, despite of the brevity. A sentence captured at
any given point in time, becomes just that, a frozen image, one person’s perception of
a miniscule moment, yet James has the eloquence to tinge the commonplace
happenings with his exquisite conveyance: the beauty of mere words offset by the
everyday workings of a city. James sees a certain degree of crassness necessary to
get along in such a ruthless age. Of a shopkeeper he wonders how they “can bear to
be barked at in the manner he constantly hears used by customers – he recognizes that
no agreeable form of intercourse could survive a day in such air.” And James finds
that “[t]o make so much money that you won’t, that you don’t ‘mind,’ don’t mind
anything – that is absolutely, I think the main American formula” (544-550). He
observes:

The frustrated American, as I have hinted at him, scraping for his poor
practical solution in the depleted silver-mine of history, is the
American who ‘makes’ too little for the castle and yet ‘minds’ too
much for the hustled herd, who can neither achieve such detachment
nor surrender to such society, and who most of all accordingly, in the
native order, fails of a working basis. The salve, the pecuniary salve,
in Europe, is sensibly less, but less on the other hand also the
excoriation that makes it necessary, whether from above or below.
(551)

This statement about commerce in America versus commerce in Europe can be extended further and applied to the monetary differences between men and women. “[S]ince the American girl has no sphere in which to create material achievements, she can gauge her worth only on the basis of the response she receives from others…she understandably often remains unawakened, fails to achieve a fully human status” (Fowler, 47). Thus the liberation of women seems a necessary component for the equalization between the sexes. Yet, this is not so simple; we must walk away from the shackles of history to accomplish this step.

Edith Wharton quotes James from *The American Scene*: “It takes a great deal of history to make a little tradition, a great deal of tradition to make a little taste, and a great deal of taste to make a little art.” English-speaking people too often miss to make the connection between careful execution of style and deep feeling, whereas European readers grasp this concept. To James, “the vital matter for him was always the *subject*” (Edel, 20th century, 32-33). Wharton, a long-time friend of James, began publishing her work about twenty years after James, was, to her dismay called “an echo” of his writing (Wharton, 907). Wharton, like James, was criticized as an American “whose work deteriorated more and more” after she cuts her ties with the states. Yet many writers and exiles from their respective countries such as Pound, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ford, and Lawrence disbelieve a vital connection is necessary
with their native soil, instead the writer transcends localities and countries (Edel, 20th century, 60-61).

As James walks around the storefronts of Boston, he watches the hostile interactions amongst people, the wave of immigrants, the world becoming a hungry place, everyone shoving for their piece but lacking happiness or even knowing what they want to do with it once they get it, because of the changes in the world our society lacks definition very similar to the Women’s Movement. His description rings true even today, a hundred years later. He asks, “[W]hat are the signs of intellectual promise, poetic, prosaic, philosophic, in the current generations?...It would be verily the end – the end of the old distinguished life, of the common intelligence that had flowed formerly, for the attesting flame, from so strong a sap and into so thick and rich a cluster.” The old charm lingers in the corners, a “little spent and ‘blown’...ghosts” (553-556).

Yes, America for the English immigrant has now existed long enough to have its own ghosts. In the beginning, as a new country, we struggled as any child struggles, to make a place for itself, to establish an identity. As the years wore on, European values were once again embraced because our country lacked the cultural element so intricately woven into an established society. Next we questioned the ways of the Europeans and bore a critical finger upon the Americans who embraced too fondly the ways of other countries, forcing a reckoning of our culture. Finally, as James evaluates the turn of the century, we have our own apparitions: a labyrinth of progress and regression. In evaluating our country, we review the roles of man and woman
because we are representatives of our environment. “The ‘universal law’ which everywhere has resulted in the mutual participation of men and women in the creation and preservation of civilization has in America been successfully ruptured “(Fowler, 46). James uses his characters aptly as thus, yet many questioned his use of this technique. Instead, in portraying the cross-continental paths of society, I ask how can he *not* have created figures typical of our experiences? Women are ideal examples because of the additional plight before them. As an author, he exemplifies Daisy and Isabel, not to devalue their choices for feminine independence, but rather to illuminate their struggle within the tight boundaries of an ever-changing country.
Conclusion

From James’s travel writings, in particular *The American Scene*, we gain a larger picture of what his world contained. Sara Blair accurately extracts pieces of what James describes as turn-of-the-century project of Americanization “from Ellis Island to the Confederate Museum, from the newly erected skyscrapers of Wall Street to the burgeoning pleasure palaces of Palm Beach – for the creation if what Theodore Roosevelt would trenchantly call the American race.” Described by James as “phantasmagoric” are the emerging technologies photography, stereography, and film. Also impacting his world, the “overarching, all-reaching Pullman train” (13-14). Coming so far in just two generations, things such as train travel were barely imagined by his driven and successful businessman grandfather. Technological advances opened up borders to broader distribution and travel, and opened up minds to the placing of America in a worldwide market. We became a place with a diverse ethnic composition which only compounded the existing unknowns of the Women’s Movement, allowing foreign influences to broaden that dilemma even further. In a world without boundaries, perhaps his highly debated decision to become an English citizen should not be seen as his personal snub to all that is American, instead the evolution of societal changes should be seen as fluid, with a melding of definitions, much like his characters: Americans who act European, stereotypes, and people from different countries exhibiting similar behavior. Featuring females, James transcends gender issues, intermingling the recently redefined roles of men and women with
worldwide changes. American or European – he shows us typical examples of each. As T. S. Eliot remarked about the posthumous debate over James’s true country affiliation: “Henry James is an author who is difficult for English readers, because he is an American; and who is difficult for Americans, because he is a European” (Edel, 20th century, 55). For this reason, James appeals to me – he captures a view greater than our borders, and he gives voice to the many people from immigrant families, such as myself, who belong to neither culture, yet belong to both.

James uses female characters to portray America’s struggle as a country – its growth and possible return to its English roots. Though many of his female protagonists suffer and sacrifice, this depiction points to James’s ability to extract key issues from his society, and are not an indication that he promotes male chauvinism. The themes of submission and control weave through his storylines in an almost subliminal manner, yet these subjects demand the attention of the reader, and of society as a whole. James wrote “[t]he whole of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together” (Auchard, 73).

In the end, it all comes down to the writer. We write what we know, what we feel. Our style and content reveal those values important to us. As you the reader can see a part of me in this paper, we also see James in his works. His focus appeared, on the surface, very small – an episode of a character’s life. Often we were not provided with a beginning and an ending, merely an excerpt, allowing the observer to delve into the beauty of the ordinary and share a glimpse into another time. Yet James’s characters signified so much more. His struggles with America’s growth, politics…
I can’t look at the English and American worlds, or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic and that that melting together will come the faster and the more one takes it for granted and treats the life of the two countries as continuous or more of less convertible, or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same subject.

—James to William James, 1888 (Letters 3:243-4)

Male, female, American, English – yes, we are all simply different chapters of the same subject. James’s writing appeals because it is universal, a historical documentation of that specific period in time, and an inside glimpse of the growing pains experienced by America which can be seen as an echo in the growth of the Women’s Movement. Society becomes merely an ever-shifting idea, captured at times, but ever questioning and questing, with its future limited only to the imagination. As Philip Sicker mentions in his opening statement, “James once wrote to a friend that he was interested only in that which was difficult” and, in reality, even the simple things in life are difficult, therefore James touches upon so many areas yet draws no conclusions. The thread that laces through his stories has an underlying plea for us to absorb his observations and be aware of the wide world around us. So much lies beyond the mere images captured in the portraits of his ladies.
Works Cited


