



## DISCOURSE ON THE ART OF CHARACTERIZATION OF HENRY JAMES: VICTORIAN PERSPECTIVE

Muslim Mohammed Lahmood Al-Mamoori

(AL-MUSTAQBAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, BABYLON, IRAQ.)



### ABSTRACT

The present paper "Discourse on the Art of characterization of Henry James: A Victorian Perspective" is a formal analysis of action, situation and the art of characterization in the selected short works of Henry James which would help in understanding his art of woman characters in the light of Victorian era. It would seem at first only prudent to heed James's own maxim that characterization and action are inseparable in a successful work of fiction<sup>1</sup>.

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#### الخلاصة:

ان البحث الحالي "مقالة حول فن التشخيص لدى هنري جيمس: من منظور فكتوري" هو تحليل للفعل والموقف وفن التشخيص في اعمال منتقاة من هنري جيمس ستساعد في فهم فنه عن الشخصيات النسوية في ضوء العهد الفكتوري. قد يبدو للوهلة الاولى فقط حريصا على مقولة جيمس ان التشخيص والفعل الروائي هي غير منفصلة في عمل روائي ناجح.

**Keywords:** *Women Characters, Freedom, Family, Idealization*

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James incidents illustrate his characters, or at least they are intended to, and his characters 'determine' incidents. These incidents are neither varied nor violent. By far the most common is a conversation between two people, their speech interspersed with even more subdued incidents typically of the kind which James mentions as below:

"It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is <sup>2</sup>".

Although apparently chosen as a random example, this woman may be any of James's women

characters, Mrs. Ambient the Countess, the telegraphist Mrs Monarch or any other woman. This incident is a powerful and significant one because it dramatizes and objectifies the emotion process (of suspicion, anxiety, or most probably growing awareness) which the heroine is presently undergoing. The only way to explain the powerful effect of such a banal incident is to treat. It as an illustration of character. The excitement flows from the vitality of any of the young women characters of sufficient autonomy to invest even the smallest gesture with the vitality of their personality. It sums up to the fact that what happens in the story or the



above incident is an illustration of her character, then we may hold the young woman pretty strictly accountable for everything that happens (Bentley, Nancy, 1995).

James gave his heroines freedom, freedom from severe financial obligations and in this instance freedom from the random but often coercive stream of incident and detail which in reality impedes and deflects the individual. For example III the above quoted scene, the woman has freedom to make a wholly expressive gesture.

If James's characters are indeed free to make their gestures, the incidents in which they are involved, wholly expressive of themselves, then it is reasonable to study Jamesian characters and his techniques of characterization as seen in the selected short stories, for he created and manipulated them within an action or situation (Bosanquet, Theodora, 2006).

Incident may illustrate character, it may also and sometimes more importantly, orchestrate the reaction of the reader. One observes a certain pattern which moves character from one situation or condition through successive stages to a final resting point that is discovered to be in virtual opposition to the point of origin<sup>3</sup>.

Henry James's sense of women as important material for fiction emerges not only from the novelistic tradition which has long dealt with heroines, but from the American culture which was recognized from within and without to accord women a particularly prominent position. One of the emerging signs, was that of the American girl's youthful femininity signifying the individualistic spontaneity, freedom and innocence of the New World. James too recognized the figure as particularly characteristic in commenting on the work of an American contemporary,

"The author intensely American in the character of his talent, is probably never so spontaneous, so much himself when he represents the delicate, nervous emancipated young woman begotten of our institutions and our climate, and equipped with a lovely face and an irritable moral consciousness"<sup>5</sup>.

The popular idea of the American girl was one, which emerged in the context of a Victorian ideology of the feminine, which was similar on both sides of the Atlantic - critical was the idea of true womanhood! This was not very new nor did it deny the range of feminine attributes from earlier periods, but the emphasis was different. Idealization of woman became heavily domestic in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the industrial revolution there was a growing contrast between the position of working class woman, increasingly employed outside the family and middle class women sitting in the newly conceptualized home with nothing to do. One can see as at least partly resulting from this leisure both the growing demands for women's greater economic freedom and legal equality and an increasing emphasis on any ideas and reflections at all levels which justified the statuesque and persuaded women to remain in the private world of the home. To rationalize this domesticity, the notion of the separate spheres of the sexes was popular, spheres which were naturally different but equal in importance though not in reward,

"The nineteenth century was confident that it knew the difference between the sexes and that these differences were total and innate. Women were inherently more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men and were happier doing tasks, learning lessons and playing games that harmonized with their nature?"<sup>6</sup>

Both the reflection on and rebellion against the notion of the domestic idyll and woman's place in it was essentially middle class. Middle class women neither went out to work, nor had any real function within the home. It was they who had the time and sometimes, the education to look beyond their 'separate sphere'. Yet the contemporary demand to live as a domestic paragon was only one of the two poles of response to the position of women (Cott, Nancy, 1987).

Some of these ideas about women in Victorian America can be understood by a study of Alice James (1848-1892) the younger sister of Henry and William James, who did not become famous and did not produce any lasting work except a diary of the years.



(1889-1892) Alice James's journal and letters display a rare gift for language, sharp wit, psychological acumen, and an intuitive grasp of political and economic realities. F.O. Matthiessen compared her 'wealth of inner resources' with Emily Dickenson's and Henry James wrote to William that their sister's journal constituted a "new claim for the family reunion."<sup>7</sup>

Alice James's story is interesting for what it tells us about a particular life and also for what it says about Victorian American Women, about James's family and about the phenomenon of neurasthenia in nineteenth century America. The conflicts in Alices ostensibly quiet life were intense, between natural intelligence, energy and curiosity on the one hand, and the passive virtues of genteel femininity on the other, between the teasing adoration of the male Jameses and her sense of exclusion from their intellectual world; between an extravagantly loving, permissive, childlike father and a firm, practical managerial mother; between the sensuous education in Europe that Henry James senior provided for his children and a new England morality of self-control. Like many other upper and middle class women and men of her time, Alice James turned her social and personal conflicts inward and become 'neurasthenic', subject to nervous attacks and exhaustion, to fainting spells. Some Victorians managed to alleviate their suffering in marriage, writing or 'good works', others succumbed to invalidism and spent virtually their whole lives in bed. The experience and transcendence of this condition were the stuff of Alice James's life contending with 'her nerves' for thirty years., she managed to keep her head, her comic sense, interests in the outside world, personal attachments and a fierce integrity and she never gave way to self pity (Dachslager, Earl L, 2005).

Henry James appreciated Alices writing and she was closest to him Alice's narration of her own life was interrupted for long periods by illness, Henry's fire and the burning of her letters. Undoubtedly more of what she wrote is missing than collected, and the diary covers only the last four years of her life.

Through family correspondence much about Alice is known. That the James's were inveterate travellers and prolific letter writers is a great advantage since their correspondence is so full of articulate life But this wealth of source material creates a new problem, a constant temptation to draw excessively on the accounts of the very significant, others in the *James's* family. The powerful and well preserved voices of two of the American nineteenth century's best writers threaten to drown out their sister's less voluminous but nonetheless articulate account, just as the intellectual din at the family dinner table in the 1860's kept her quietly in the background."<sup>8</sup>

Not much evidence is available about Alice James's relations with her mother. Since the drama of Alice's life is in many ways a private interior one, the relations between mother and daughter are central to a full understanding of Alice. Almost ten years after James died, Alice recorded in her diary:

"Even since the night that mother died, and the depth of filial tenderness was revealed to me, all personal claim upon her vanished, and she has dwelt in my mind as a beautiful illumined memory, the essence of divine maternity from which I waste to learn great things, give all but ask nothing"<sup>9</sup>. In addition, in 1890 on re-reading her parents' old letters she found her "Mothers words breathing her extraordinary selfless devotion as if she simply embodied the unconscious essence of wife and motherhood!"<sup>10</sup>

"Extraordinary selfless devotion", "the essence of divine maternity," "give all but ask nothing." These phrases do not reflect the image of the practical, rather domineering figure who ran the tumultuous James's household with a firm hand, who was described by a family acquaintance as large florid, stupid seeming" and who emerges in a series of terrifyingly powerful mothers in Henry James's fiction. But Alice was not alone in conferring sainthood on her mother, "Henry Senior saw in his wife the personification of selflessness, which was the ultimate virtue in his moral pantheon, and the tyrannical mothers in the novels of Henry Junior



were reserved for fiction, his language about his real mother is similar to Alice's:

"she was patience, she was wisdom, she was exquisite maternity- - It was a perfect mother's life ... to lay herself down in her ebbing strength and yield up her soul to the celestial power that had given her this divine commission."<sup>12</sup>

In the biographies of Henry and William James, Alice is a significant but minor character, whereas both brothers and their father had major roles in her life. Can these men, who seemed in many ways larger than life while they lived and seem even more so now, take on supporting roles in someone else's drama without taking over the stage. It is a complicated problem. One tends not only to rely too heavily on the James's men's abundant and entertaining versions of the family saga, but also to be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of material about William and the two Henrys in their own works and biographies. How are these enormously complex and interesting lives to be fitted into Alice's story without disastrous oversimplification?

For Alice James, the central drama is not a love story, but a struggle of character and spirit. Shortly before she died, Alice wrote to William apropos of the neurasthenia that had plagued most of her adult life, "When I am gone, pray don't think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else, had neurotic science been born."<sup>13</sup>

Idealization of women became heavily domestic in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of industrial revolution, there was a growing contrast between the position of working class women, increasingly employed outside the family and middle class women sitting in the newly conceptualized home with nothing to do and then elite women were expected to be more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men. This was considered to be the 'true womanhood'. Marriage was the highest expectation for them and they also had to be upholders of law and morality. In this - context American girls were recognized as civilized women, provocatively youthful and egalitarian - They had to represent America in its social relations, customs, manners and forms At the same time, they

were also required to represent the different and changing America as free, easy democratic, young and rich Innocence and frankness were the hallmarks of their personality Women are portrayed in all their grandeur and gloom the works of Henry James (Eakin, Paul John 1988).

The tales of Henry James such as *The Author of Beltraffio*, *The Lesson of the Master*, *The Real Thing*, *The Middle Years*, *The Figure in the Carpet* and *In The cage*<sup>14</sup> are essentially unrelated tales but contain vivid feminine characterization (Eliot, George, 2005).

*The Author of Beltraffio* (1884) is a story about a writer. Paul Ambient, whose wife Beatrice, finds his works objectionable and fears that they will have a detrimental effect on their son Dolcino. While the narrator, a rather gushing admirer of Ambient, is visiting the couple, Dolcino falls ill. In an attempt to reconcile Beatrice to her husband, the narrator suggests that she read her husband's novel. Beatrice complies and reads it over her child's sick bed. Repelled by the text, she attempts to save her son from corruption by refusing to give him his prescribed medication. When Dolcino's condition worsens, Beatrice repents and tries to save him, but it is too late and he dies as a result of her actions. James reiterates his theme that art and women are irreconcilable (Edel, Leon, 1985).

Another short story like *The Portrait of a Lady*, works to uphold a nineteenth century, Realist, Humanist status quo. In it women are figured as inferior beings who cannot understand or appreciate art In Ambient's view, Beatrice's perception of a novel is a thing so false that it makes him blush. It is a thing so hollow, so dishonest, so lying in which life is so blinked and blinded, so dodged and disfigured, that it makes his ears burn. Further women are not only incapable of artistic appreciation but also barred from artistic production. Hence in Ambient's view, Gwendolyn is an 'aesthete' not an artist. This interpretation is in accord with the narrator's for whom Ambient is in the original, and 'Gwendolyn' had the natural aptitude for an artistic development - she had little real intelligence: women's concerns are mundane, not conducive to fine literature. The narrator says of Gwendolyn, she had I believe, the



unusual allowance of vulgar Impulses, she wished to be looked at, she wished to be married, she wished to be thought original.

The pattern of nothing and something is illuminated through post- structuralist feminist theory for, from this perspective what is being privileged as the source of artistic creation is the Feminine "other" or that which subverts referential singularity. Because the Feminine other constitutes a space, an absence, it gives birth to the plurality necessary for the production of art (Edel, Leon, 1963).

If women are plural, it is because they are denied a single presence within the textual discourse. Within James's terminology, they are either evil or marginal. Adeline Tintner discusses their destructive aspects when she uses the ironic imagery, which the story employs to arrive at the conclusion that women figure as devils and dragons. This section ends on the note of the burning of the book and the realization of both Paul Overt and the reader along with him that Mrs. St. George dressed in the colour of the devil (red) is a lady dragon who like the city burning dragon of the Golden Legend, burns books. (Ironic 118) Tintner also Marshall's evidence to support her contention that Marian Fancourt is a nascent dragon and displays qualities similar to those of Mrs St George." In keeping with this argument, for St. George, even the feminine mercenary muse is a threatening figure! I think of that pure spirit as a man thinks of a woman, in some detested hour of his youth, he has loved and forsaken. She haunts him with reproachful eyes, she lives forever before him. As an artist you know I've married for money. I refer to mercenary muse whom I led to the altar of literature. Don't do that my boy, she'll lead you a life (Evans-Pritchard, E. E.1962).

When they are not emblemized as devils women essentially cease to count. While a warning against women is the crux of St. George's argument, that warning becomes somewhat ludicrous in the light of women's textual insignificance. In the smoker's scene section 111, women become synonymous, with cigarettes. It is a great thing to have a wife who proves to one, all the things one can

do without. One might never find them out for oneself,

"She doesn't allow me to touch a cigarette ... Have you got one yourself? Do you mean a cigarette? Dear no a wife: No and I would give up my cigarette for one." (Geertz, Clifford, 1973).

The story grants privilege to the referentially disruptive Feminine 'other' for out of the absence of certainty, grows art, for only absence, as the story indicates engenders plurality. The absence of any certainty with regard to St. Georges sincerity allows for the creation of *The Lesson of the Master* as well as for Overt's writings within it While this story is curiously non committal on the success of Overt's works-which again constitutes an absence, since the best answer to that perhaps is that he is doing his best but that it is too soon to say.This answer is deferred to the next story *The Real Thing* in which absence and plurality are celebrated as the only means of artistic production.

James came to write *The Real Thing* based on an incident He was talking one day to George du Maurier." The artist told him about a couple whose reduced circumstances had compelled them to propose themselves as models for his weekly illustrations of upper-class English life. They were impeccable in background and appearance.

They wouldn't have to pose to "make believe". They were 'the real thing' but hiring them would have meant the dismissal of his two professional models (Herron, Bonnie , 1995). There had not a drop of blue blood in their veins but they nevertheless "had had for dear life, to know how to do something." The question, James goes on to recall struck me as exquisite, and out of a momentary fond consideration of it 'The Real Thing' sprang at a bound."<sup>15</sup>

The Middle Years depends upon an image of itself, the middle years for its existence. But The Middle Years is a negative image of the tale, for it dramatizes the story of an author who cannot produce the ideal text (Hochenauer Kurt, 1990) ." As a result, The Middle Years maintains that the ideal text is unwritable. It thereby undercuts its masculine realist ethos and so demonstrates as does the next



story *The Figure in the Carpet*, the fruitlessness of the search for the presence or something which will elucidate the absent, unwritable meaning.

*The Figure in the Carpet*, which appeared in 1896, is in effect a sort of compilation of the motifs that are examined so far. The tale revolves around the search for the meaning of the texts of Hugh Vereker, a famous author. The narrator, a young critic who has just reviewed Vereker's latest novel, meets the writer at a house party. Vereker expresses disappointment in the article and explains that the narrator like all critics has missed the intended meaning of his work.

The narrator intrigued at the idea of a hidden figure in Vereker's carpet decides to uncover it. He is frustrated however and later tells his friend George Corvick of his attempt, in the hope that Corvick will be able to disclose what he cannot. In turn Corvick tells his novelist fiancée Gwendolyn Erme of the search. But they are all unsuccessful in deciphering Vereker's figure. Corvick then decides to take a journalist's position in India, while he is there, the meaning becomes clear to him and he confirms his find with Vereker. Although Corvick stops the narrator's pleas for elucidation with the promise that all will be revealed in a forthcoming tale, he does agree to tell Gwendolyn after they marry. The two do marry, but on their honeymoon, Corvick is killed in an accident. Gwendolyn later admits to the narrator that she has learned of the secret and that she lives in it, but she refuses to reveal it to him. In the meantime, Vereker and his wife die, leaving Gwendolyn the sole living repository of the secret. She proceeds to publish two further novels, and marries another critic, Drayton Deane, shortly thereafter she dies in childbirth. When the narrator approaches Deane he professes ignorance as to the existence of the figure. The narrator although frustrated, perceives that his revenge on Gwendolyn is the widower's growing preoccupation with the absent figure (James, Henry, 2007).

*The Figure in the Carpet* has probably received more critical attention than any other Jamesian short story. "Indeed the figure in Vereker's carpet, which functions as the text's absent centre, allows for a multiplicity of interpretation since it can

be easily adapted to very different modes of reading. The textual idea of a secret learning leads the stories' realist humanist critics to cite the substantiation of their belief that sensibility is requisite in the comprehension of literature. Leavis believes that 'The Figure' James bemoans is the state of literary appreciation, and he uses the author's prefatorial reference to what Leavis calls his great unappreciated author (190) to berate other Jamesian critics for their lack, "If he could have foreseen the criticism and appreciation, starting with Miss Rebecca West's characteristic tribute, his work would receive in the two decades following his death he would hardly have been consoled"<sup>16</sup> (190).

Those characters who are on the outside - the telegraphist, Mr Mudge and Mrs. Jordan - perceive the world through their relation to what is, for them an absent center. Their language shapes their reality and cements their marginal position. The oleaginous, Mudge thinks in terms of his grocery trade and its relation to the upper classes; the exuberance of the aristocracy was the advantage of trade since the more flirtation as he might roughly express it the more cheese and pickles. He is also struck with the concentration between the tender passion and cheap champagne. (171) The flirtations he imagines effect the trade, which he supplies. However, at the same time that he supplies the inner circle with goods, his distance from it is emphasized by his role as a supplier. He plies his trade in order that he may garner enough money to approach the inner circle, yet the nature of his profession (grocer) forever ostracizes him from it, for the center needs the margin as much as the margins need the center.

Knowledge like language, effects a deferral, and she shrinks from the 'abyss' of unknowability. When Mrs Jordan asks if she knows anything her interlocutors had, in the cage sounded depths, but there was a suggestion here somehow of an abyss quite measureless. Like St. George in *The Lesson of the Master*, the telegraphist stops creating because her realist approach precludes a delight in multiplicity. She does not realize that it was the language's plurality which allowed her to create initially and her longing for knowability leads her back to reality - which for the poor thing ... could



only be ugliness and obscurity, could never be the escape, the rise.

The story ends with the telegraphist looking forward to a future with Mudge and she reflects on the fact that it was Mrs Jordan's fiance, Mr. Drake, the butler, who at least settled the matter for her. Mr. Drake it would seem is still involved in the fiction writing which the telegraphist has abandoned, since he and his new wife will continue to attach their interests to Mayfair. Again it is the absence of any real knowledge, which allows for creativity, but creativity does not engender Masculine knowledge or possession since it derives from the space of the Feminine other. While absence is, therefore essential to artistry, to confine language, as the telegraphist tries to do, is ineffectual and impedes the imaginative process (James Henry, 2004).

#### NOTES

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