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0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

Edited by J. Gerald Kennedy

Excerpt

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*Henry James's Incipient Poetics
of the Short Story Sequence:
The Finer Grain (1910)*

RICHARD A. HOCKS

Many critics of Henry James are aware that after he completed the arduous task of selecting his novels and tales for Scribner's or The New York Edition (1907–9), revising all the chosen texts and composing his dense theoretical *Prefaces*, James went on to write something important other than his now much interpreted travel memoirs and autobiographical volumes. In fact, he composed and published five final tales between March 1909 and April 1910 – “The Velvet Glove,” “Mora Montravers,” “Crapy Cornelia,” “The Bench of Desolation,” and “A Round of Visits”; then he quickly republished them in book form with a new title, *The Finer Grain*, in October 1910, and changed the order as follows: “The Velvet Glove,” “Mora Montravers,” “A Round of Visits,” “Crapy Cornelia,” and “The Bench of Desolation.”¹ Because the New York Edition's *Prefaces* are generally regarded as a veritable apotheosis of James's lifelong artistry – even by those who now contextualize or else deconstruct them – the status of five final tales said to have just “missed” making The New York Edition seems at first a bit like that of five cabooses standing stationary on a track parallel to that of the enormous luxury train to which they might have been joined. Edward Wagenknecht's observation in this regard is the norm: “Since the publication of The New York Edition was completed in 1909,” he writes, “it was not possible to include any of them in that collection; they made their first appearance in book form in *The Finer Grain* (Scribner's, New York, and Methuen, London, 1910).”² Wagenknecht, that is, assumes that these tales appeared as *The Finer Grain* because they were too late to be absorbed into the architecture of The New York Edition. Certainly this is a plausible assumption, both because of the close proximity of these stories to James's famous edition and also because of the presence of his many earlier collections of tales from which James plucked innumerable stories, giving them an utterly new appearance and placement within The New York Edition.

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[More information](#)

At the same time, however, these last tales have intermittently provoked extraordinary comment. For example, R. P. Blackmur wrote in 1948: “[James’s] fourth period began with a visit to America in 1904 and 1905 and might well have prepared him, had he lived longer or had not the First World War intervened, for the still greater art of which we can see the signs in the volume of stories called *The Finer Grain*, collected in 1910.”³ Clearly such an assessment grants an accomplishment other than the caboose separated because of mistaken scheduling; it suggests instead that James was on the verge of a whole new “fourth manner.” There are, moreover, several major critics who have praised several of these last tales, among them Ezra Pound, Dorothea Krook, J. A. Ward, Peter Buitenhuis, Adeline Tintner, and Nicola Bradbury, although their evaluations do not embrace the concept of the collection as something greater than its individual parts. For that matter, it is hard to tell whether Blackmur himself conceives of *The Finer Grain* as a unified artistic entity or as a collection of tales that point individually toward a new direction in James; presumably he means the latter. Pound praised all these pieces as among James’s best work; Nicola Bradbury speaks of “A Round of Visits” as exhibiting at once “a strict sense of form” and eliciting the quality James himself attributed to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, “the joy of sovereign *science*.” For Dorothea Krook, “the relation between these stories [in *The Finer Grain*] and the novels appears to be that of the sketch or study to the finished portrait,” exhibiting the “prevailing mood and atmosphere” of “harshness, grimness, pessimism – the Ecclesiastes note” found in late novels such as *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ivory Tower*. Adeline Tintner reads “The Velvet Glove” as a mock epic and “A Round of Visits” as an analogue to *Paradise Lost*, and J. A. Ward, similar to Krook, emphasizes James’s sense of the experience of suffering and pain, especially in “A Round of Visits” and “The Bench of Desolation.” Finally, Peter Buitenhuis responds to the title as an “accurate summation of James’s effect in all this late short fiction,” his manifesting the “finest grain of consciousness and the richest compositional effect.”⁴ These commentators and others have noted various important features about *The Finer Grain* stories without, however, probing the collection’s status as a *sequence* – not simply as five tales of high merit, nor as an appendage to The New York Edition.

Very recently, however, this has all changed. Investigating *The Finer Grain* as a short story sequence has become the endeavor of three quite different James scholar-critics, and their hearty efforts, both individually and together, suggest at once the great importance, yet also the lingering

Cambridge University Press

0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Henry James's The Finer Grain (1910)*

3

problematic, of the whole enterprise. In their "Introduction" to a facsimile reproduction of *The Finer Grain*, W. R. Martin and Warren U. Ober propose that the volume presents James's very first "coherent vision" with "full scope" of the "grand concept of the intelligent imagination . . . which displays itself most conspicuously perhaps in art, but which – the stories show – must also be at work in all human relationships and affairs if the good life is to be achieved." Commenting on James's admiration of Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches*, Martin and Ober further insist that "the carefully grouped, deeply related constellation of short stories, as opposed to collections with looser or more obvious connections, is, we believe, a distinctly modern phenomenon. It becomes a prominent feature of twentieth-century literature in English, and with *The Finer Grain* Henry James is a pioneer in this form."⁵

This is a wonderful initial thesis, and one could hardly ask for a more articulate and promising expression of it; yet the body of their argument quite unintentionally swerves away from its own claim. Martin and Ober write of the themes of "imagination," "art," and "life" implicit in the stories; they likewise affirm James's relation to both the "Romantic tradition" and to his distinctly post-Romantic Nietzschean imagination, his conception of the "artist-as-superman." This leads them to a peroration linking James's celebration of imagination and consciousness in the *Prefaces* and in "Is There a Life After Death?" (also written in 1910) to *The Finer Grain*. They thus conclude: "These [Prefaces] are *sui generis*, having a scope and an authority unmatched in the three-hundred-year history of the novel. *The Finer Grain* can be seen as a fruit of this great gestation, the culmination of a long striving for the highest coherence. What we find in the five carpets are variations of the same figure – the divine yet human faculty of imagination. Since Milton there has been no grander subject."⁶

Although I concur wholeheartedly with the elevated status Martin and Ober here accord James's imagination and sensibility, and have written to that effect for some twenty years, I continue to argue that James is less the Nietzschean artist (an idea first proposed by Stephen Donadio) and more the William Jamesian artist; but that really puts us together in the same general intellectual school. I also agree – and, again, have written on just this matter – that the *Prefaces*, a tale such as "A Round of Visits," and "Is There a Life After Death?" are extraordinarily comparable in poetic density and resonance.⁷ And yet for all its legitimacy, Martin and Ober's argument for aesthetic and thematic parallelism seem a somewhat different matter from *The Finer Grain's* status as a

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

short story sequence, that is, as a distinct genre. In brief, they have proposed an important initial hypothesis, have even quoted from Forrest Ingram's classic definition of the short story cycle ("a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the other"⁸) but have then somehow swerved away from that issue in proclaiming James's "divine theme" of the artistic "imagination."

A second recent attempt to deal with *The Finer Grain* as a short story cycle is Richard Gage's 1988 study, *Order and Design: Henry James' Titled Story Sequences*, the first to tackle this issue in James's vast corpus. Gage's is an ambitious attempt to argue "organic unity and connectedness," "thematic continuity," and "architectural form" in James's six short story volumes with "evocative titles," as well as in volume eighteen in The New York Edition. Gage's real interest is in thematic unity, a position that causes him sometimes to strain and overclaim Jamesian interlinkings, especially when dealing with *The Better Sort* (1903); or else his unhappily definitive proposal that *all* of James's titled story sequences interconnect precisely like the "dots" on Georges Seurat canvases, an analogy which, at the very least, reduces the intrinsic merit – as well as the process that Ingram calls "modification" – of each constituent James tale, a number of which, like "The Beast in the Jungle" in *The Better Sort*, are exceptional early modernist works in their own right.⁹

Gage has better luck with *The Finer Grain*, however, because there he wisely follows James's publisher's description and argues for a "grain"-women leitmotif as well as the necessary "graining" of male protagonists, "tested and proven in the furnace of human experience."¹⁰ Even so, the lingering difficulty with Gage's long chapter on *The Finer Grain* is precisely the problem of the study as a whole, his excessive claims surrounding James's thematic "coherence, organic growth, development, and a sense of architectural balance" throughout *all* his titled short story volumes.¹¹ Once again, as with Martin and Ober, I agree that James is a great artist and craftsman, but I doubt that insisting so relentlessly on thematic unity and plot explication is the most convincing way of demonstrating the actual significance, architectural or poetic, of a collection like *The Finer Grain*.

The third and most recent attempt to come to grips with this group of stories is Richard Lyons's 1990 essay, "Ironies of Loss in *The Finer Grain*," an analysis that likewise sounds unabashedly thematic, yet in fact approaches the tales with a deftness and feel for their actual subtlety

Cambridge University Press

0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

Edited by J. Gerald Kennedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Henry James's The Finer Grain (1910)*

5

not present in Martin and Ober or in Gage; indeed, Lyons's conjunction of irony with loss already insinuates a quiet, subtle interlacing of mode with theme. This perceptive new analysis of the tales emphasizes their "complexities of tone and attitude" in treating "the various forms of loss" and "costs," including "the loss of illusions" and the "implicit threat to the imagination" – that is, *not* Martin and Ober's divine celebration of it. Lyons dissects not only the "social satire" and "element of self-parody" of these pieces but also their distinctive "mixture of comedy and pathos," and even their Chekhovian "intermingling of tragedy and comedy, an evocation of moods of loss, of transience, of ironies just fending off despair." He detects not so much a Jamesian fourth manner, as Blackmur had proposed earlier, but rather a "shift of emphasis," in which James accords "feelings of loss and defeat their full and richly shaded measure of irony and pity." Lyons's discussion of "The Bench of Desolation" is particularly fine.¹²

These three critics and their approaches are truly interesting to ponder together. Lyons, for instance, never discusses the genre of *The Finer Grain* as such, and, most significantly, refers to the individual tales *only* in the sequence of their *serial* publication, not in the different order of James's volume. Nevertheless, Lyons's thematic analysis conveys most successfully James's integrating preoccupation with deprivation, ambiguity, and irony, elements that mark the author's last collection as proto-modernist in conception and execution. Martin and Ober, one recalls, proposed James as precisely just such a modernist "pioneer in this form," and yet their analysis veered away from the claim. Lyons, in other words, seems to make good on Martin and Ober's "pioneer" thesis, while remaining uninterested in the sequence as a genre.¹³ As for Gage, his vigorous insistence on "organic unity," "architecture," and "pointillism" sits most uneasily astride his actual methodology of plot summary and thematic explication, so unlike the fluid, nuanced thematics of Richard Lyons. In short, the difference between the *unity* Gage proclaims and the *integration* Lyons in effect conveys is the acute difference between a work that is premodern and one more distinctly modernist in mode. So if Martin and Ober are to be validated in their claim about James "the pioneer," it is Lyons who better confirms it.

Until 1895, Henry James's numerous collections of tales were simply and routinely miscellanies with titles taken from stories in them; thereafter all his volumes beginning with *Terminations* (1895) and *Embarrassments*

Cambridge University Press

0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

(1896) have titles newly devised. Although there are six such titled collections, as mentioned earlier, and also several untitled groupings of tales in The New York Edition, it is, I believe, *The Finer Grain* that in 1910 first presents us with a short story sequence proper. Its singularity and cohesion arise first from genetic evidence of two kinds. To begin with, we are told by James's amanuensis Theodora Bosanquet in her diary that:

It is almost literally true to say of the sheaf of tales collected in *The Finer Grain* that they were all written in response to a single request for a short story for *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. The length was to be about 5,000 words and each promising idea was cultivated in the optimistic belief that it would produce a flower too frail and small to demand any exhaustive treatment. But even under pressure of being written by hand, with dictated interpolations rigidly restricted, each in turn pushed out to lengths that no chopping could reduce to the word limit.¹⁴

This tells us that the tales were composed more or less simultaneously and seems to confirm the closeness in composition already indicated by the contiguity of the magazine publications. In point of fact, one would be hard-pressed to say whether this and the evidence to follow confirms that James authored what Ingram would define a cycle of stories “*composed* as a continuous whole, or *arranged* into a series, or *completed* to form a set.”¹⁵ In any case, these compositional circumstances differ from any of James's other volumes, including those five others with newly devised titles (treated identically by Gage as exemplifications of organic unity).

The other singular feature about *The Finer Grain* is James's prefatory statement to his publishers, intended no doubt for the book jacket, purporting to explicate his book title and perhaps suggest an organizing principle. It reads as follows:

The Finer Grain consists of a series of Tales representing in each case a central figure (by which Mr. Henry James is apt to mean a central and a lively *consciousness*) involved in one of those greater or less tangles of circumstance of which the measure and from which the issue is in the vivacity and the active play of the victim's or the victor's sensibility. Each situation is thereby more particularly a moral drama, an experience of the special soul and intelligence presented (the sentient, perceptive, reflective part of the protagonist, in short), but with high emphasis clearly intended on its wearing for the hero or the heroine the quality of the agitating, the challenging personal *adventure*. In point of fact, indeed, it happens in each case to be the hero who exhibits this finer grain of accessibility to suspense or curiosity, to mystification or attraction – in other

Cambridge University Press

0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

Edited by J. Gerald Kennedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Henry James's The Finer Grain (1910)*

7

words, to moving experience: it is by his connection with its interest in the “grain” woman that his predicament, with its difficult solution, is incurred. And the series of illustrations of how such predicaments *may* spring up, and even be really characteristic, considerably ranges: from Paris to London and New York, and then back again, to ambiguous yet at the same time unmistakable English, and ultra-English, ground.¹⁶

This explanatory statement is unique to any of James’s collection of tales, although it is hardly what most of us would call a dust jacket style. It is vintage late Henry James prose, thereby presumably telling us a great deal while at the same time making certain that the work it purports to describe remains what Robert Luscher would call “an open book.”¹⁷ Gage understandably seeks to use this document as his foundation from which to “unify” *The Finer Grain* around certain key points, particularly the “special” Jamesian “intelligence” or “consciousness” as well as the various “grain”-women who appear in the sequence. And one of Gage’s best ideas is the possibility that “fine-grained timber is generally stronger than coarse-grained; that to be fine-grained means to be many-fibered,” so that ultimately fine-grained characters in the volume “are not weak but strong.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, the most salient feature of this supposedly descriptive passage is its rich elliptical abstractionism, the same quality found in late short fiction like “The Great Good Place” or “The Beast in the Jungle,” as well as in the *Prefaces*. To be sure, one can easily identify the “sentient, perceptive, reflective” hero-gentlemen from each tale: John Berridge from “The Velvet Glove,” Sidney Traffle from “Mora Montravers,” Mark Monteith from “A Round of Visits,” White-Mason from “Crapy Cornelia,” and Herbert Dodd from “The Bench of Desolation.” Correspondingly, the “grain”-women are quickly identifiable and perhaps even more plentiful: Amy Evans from “The Velvet Glove,” Mora Montravers (and Jane Traffle, I believe) from “Mora Montravers,” Mrs. Follott (and perhaps Florence Ashe) from “A Round of Visits,” Cornelia Rasch (and possibly Mrs. Worthingham) from “Crapy Cornelia,” and Kate Cookham (but also Nan Drury, I suspect) in “The Bench of Desolation.” Still, having said that, and having also given due acknowledgment to Jamesian interior reflectors of consciousness, one wonders where we are; interior reflectors of consciousness, after all, are the norm in the late James, hardly distinctive to *The Finer Grain*. This leaves us with the “grain”-women, all of whom come into conflict with their male counterparts (each with his “finer grain of accessibility . . . to moving experience”). Perhaps James’s language citing “the active play

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the victim's or the victor's sensibility" should engage us: "Victim" and "victor" suggest a pattern of forceful conflict, even war, between the male protagonists and their "grain"-women – in fact, the women might be thought of as going "against the grain" in their relationships with the "finer-grained" men. Other significant language includes the phrase "mystification or attraction," which carries multiple suggestions. The first is of James's "ghostly" realm, so dominant in this late period, one that gravitates toward the surrealistic sphere and joins the modernist landscapes of Eliot, Conrad, Woolf, and Pound. "Mystification" and "attraction" also convey the element of extravagance and the phantasmic found in these stories, while it also points toward the feature of a psychic parable or fairy tale so prominent in "The Bench of Desolation," "A Round of Visits," and "The Velvet Glove." An attractive "mystification" is also the quintessential element of the late Jamesian style, including the prefatory statement itself, and a crucial reason why its meaning remains fluid, implicitly making *The Finer Grain* an "open book" regardless of any discoverable "themes."

In a way, perhaps the least mystifying element in the entire statement is James's last sentence, in which he speaks of the geographical movement "from Paris to London and New York, and then back again, to ambiguous yet at the same time unmistakably English, and ultra-English, ground." That is, his statement makes sense *if* one recollects the difference between magazine and book publication: By placing "A Round of Visits" and "Crapy Cornelia" third and fourth in the volume (they are fifth and third, respectively, in order of magazine publication), James achieves in his settings the geographical trajectory he alludes to. Why he prefers that order probably stems from his perception that "The Bench of Desolation," the final tale (fourth in magazine appearance), has the sort of "Winter's Tale" resonance that makes it the ideal "anchor" among these five. Also, I suspect James realized that the same tale, however convoluted and extravagant its mode, by its dealing with lower-middle if not quite working-class people and set in "Land's End," where one gazes at the sea from the bleak marina, conveyed a sort of spiritual coastal finality, an end-of-the-land perspective that suits the end of the volume. Certainly the tale is "ultra-English" in its seaside setting on and beyond the edge of land, so to speak, but also in its comprehensive ethos in a way that the volume's other English tale, "Mora Montravers," set in more provincial Wimbledon, just outside London, is not. Furthermore, inasmuch as *The Finer Grain* is James's last published fiction, the fact that he chose the phrase "Land's End" to denominate his fictitious town of Properly is significant: For although "The Bench

Cambridge University Press

0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

Edited by J. Gerald Kennedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Henry James's The Finer Grain (1910)*

9

of Desolation” does not take place in the actual English locale of Land’s End in Cornwall but is rather almost certainly Brighton on the southern coast near James’s own seaside town of Rye, “Land’s End” represents figuratively the westernmost point of land in mainland England closest to the United States, thus perhaps signifying James’s own life and career as an American writer who lived in England and wrote international fiction. Such metaphorical overtones, however, cannot diminish the strong ironic and satirical elements inherent in James’s fictitious name of Properly, given to a town long known for its sexual *impropriety*—namely Brighton.¹⁹

The geographical sequencing brings up another formal issue of no small importance. Once James decided his tales were to move “internationally” from Paris to London to New York and then back to England at “Land’s End,” he quite obviously had the choice with his two New York tales—“A Round of Visits” and “Crapy Cornelia”—of which to place third and which fourth. I do not believe he flipped a coin. “A Round of Visits” was his final tale published serially, and it is a very powerful work, a broad indictment of cultural values, a study of complicity, a violent narrative ending with a brutal suicide. “Crapy Cornelia,” too, contains a critique of the present society by contrasting it nostalgically with the past, but the terms of the critique are less momentous and culturally resonant than in “A Round of Visits.” Perhaps James felt that by putting “Crapy Cornelia” fourth in the volume the reader would get a slight “breather” between his two most powerful tales, “A Round of Visits” and the finale, “The Bench of Desolation,” allowing a greater appreciation of each.

That is one possibility. However, I do not believe it was the principal reason for James’s decision to place “A Round of Visits” third in *The Finer Grain*. He placed it third, I think, because “A Round of Visits” is the only story in which the protagonist’s principal encounter is not with a woman but with another man: Mark Monteith’s incredible maneuvering with Newton Winch in the final scenes leading up to Winch’s suicide not only takes precedence over all the briefer previous “visits” with “grainy” women but even evokes that unmistakable aura of an encounter with one’s own alter ego; it is almost as though James finally gives us the scene between the alter and the ego, so to speak, that did not quite transpire in “The Jolly Corner.”²⁰ This story’s formal element of asymmetry in this one respect within the collection probably dictated its placement in the final sequence: by putting it third, James created geometrical balance out of imbalance, for he flanked it on both sides with two tales in which the encounter conflicts transpire between the hero

Cambridge University Press

0521430100 - Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities

Edited by J. Gerald Kennedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and a woman, not another man. Formal questions of this sort mattered deeply to James. For example, his “Preface” to *The Wings of the Dove* is largely preoccupied with his perception of, and worry over, its structural disproportion in the sequencing of the novel’s ten books, so much so that he even discourses on a “misplaced pivot” occurring in Milly Theale’s Book Fifth.²¹ By contrast then, his positioning “A Round of Visits” third in *The Finer Grain* in effect creates or places his “pivot” symmetrically in the middle.

I would also suggest – though I would not press the point – that because James alluded to his geographical trajectory in the publisher’s statement, perhaps the concept functions in an analogous way to T. S. Eliot’s geographical sequencing in *Four Quartets*, as a way of using the “visiting mind” to engage the transnational issues besetting the modern world, while defining a “subtext” of one’s own personal “pilgrim” odyssey as both an artist and a representative member of the same fractured community. If *The Finer Grain* is analogous to *Four Quartets*’ international “pilgrimage” in this regard, it suggests that James’s poetic mode, like Eliot’s, is a modernist’s reconception of Dante, a feature R. P. Blackmur believed James exhibited in the late novels as the “poetry of the soul in action.”²²

Far more certain in *The Finer Grain* is the formal, recurrent pattern of reversal. Like the St. John’s River in New Brunswick, Canada, which flows toward the sea and then reverses itself in the wake of an overpowering high tide, each tale executes a phenomenal reversal in the interpersonal relationships between hero and “grain”-women. In “The Velvet Glove,” after John Berridge becomes enamoured of the beautiful young woman he meets at sculptor Gloriani’s garden (the same place where Lambert Strether had said “Live all you can” in *The Ambassadors*), he is later shocked to learn that she invites him “home” seductively only in order to persuade him to write a “puffing” preface for her trashy novel *The Velvet Glove*, written under her pen name Amy Evans. In “Mora Montravers,” Sidney Traffle’s fascination with the free lifestyle of his wife’s niece Mora undergoes a cataclysm when, after Mora agrees to marry artist Walter Puddick with whom she is living in order to collect a bribe from Sidney’s prim wife Jane, Mora immediately divorces Puddick and takes up with another “catch,” so that Puddick can keep the benefit of her aunt’s money. Sidney absorbs a second blow when he realizes that Jane likes Puddick well enough to let him keep the allowance, a twist that the resourceful Mora probably anticipated.

In “A Round of Visits,” Mark Monteith, after being swindled out of