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978-0-521-12717-2 - Desire and Love in Henry James: A Study of the Late Novels

David McWhirter

Excerpt

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1 Introduction: Desire, love, and the question of Henry James

The lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*. This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the "unreal," exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation*.

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

The self's a fine and private place
But none I think do there embrace.

F.W. Dupee on Henry James

In the preface to his seminal study of Henry James's late fiction, F. O. Matthiessen describes the incident which led him to designate the three novels of James's maturity – *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* – as their author's "major phase". As he neared the completion of his work on James, Matthiessen recalls,

a distinguished professor asked me what I was doing, and forgetting that he was uneasy with any literature since Trollope, I told him, only to be asked: "What are you going to call it? *The Old Pretender*?" I had forgotten that once bright, if long since hoary, wise-crack, but that conversation gave me my title. I realized more clearly than before that though James' later evolution had involved the loss of an engaging lightness, he knew what he was about, and that if we want to find the figure in his carpet, we must search for it primarily in the intricate and fascinating designs of his final and major phase. (xiv-xv)

Since the publication of *Henry James: The Major Phase* in 1944, Matthiessen's thesis that the late novels are James's greatest and most

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 DESIRE AND LOVE IN HENRY JAMES

essential fictions has gained widespread acceptance. The idea that James began, with *The Ambassadors*, “to do work of a greater depth and richness than any he had approached before” (xiii) has in fact become something of an article of faith amongst his critics. While a few commentators have continued to support the view of earlier readers like Van Wyck Brooks and Vernon Parrington that the late novels represent a falling-off in James’s achievement,¹ the figure of “the old pretender” has for the most part given way to that of “the master.” And despite the considerable diversity of their assumptions, methods, and conclusions, critics since Matthiessen have almost universally followed his lead in seeing these three novels as both the summit and key to James’s *oeuvre*. The most influential overviews of James’s career – I am thinking especially of the work of Laurence Holland and Dorothea Krook, but also of Leon Edel’s massive biographical study – consistently echo Matthiessen’s high valuation of the late fiction, both in the disproportionate attention they devote to the major phase novels, and in their tendency to read James’s earlier work largely as a prelude to his final achievement. In addition, important reappraisals of James by such critics as Sallie Sears, Ruth Bernard Yeazell, and Leo Bersani have focused exclusively on the late novels. Matthiessen’s own reading of *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* emphasizes what he sees as fundamental resemblances in their style, form, and subject matter. Citing the novelist’s return to the “international theme,” his increasing preoccupation with characters of highly refined consciousness, and the unique qualities of his late style – as well as the remarkably brief period in which the three novels were composed – Matthiessen argues that James’s final works constitute a distinct and basically homogeneous “phase” in his development. And the extent of Matthiessen’s influence on James criticism is demonstrated once again by the fact that his view of the late novels as formally and thematically unified has, in the years since his pioneering study, gone largely unchallenged. James’s major phase has provoked what can only be described as a startling array of responses: the novels have been interpreted as Swedenborgian allegory, as the embodiment of a “demonic” vision of a “morally absurd” universe, and as the locus of an autotelic art concerned mainly with its own aesthetic processes. Yet for all their varied and conflicting readings of the figure in James’s fictional carpet, the critics have almost without exception treated the late novels as though they reflected a consistent set of purposes and techniques – even, in some cases, as though they constituted a single,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DESIRE, LOVE, AND THE QUESTION OF HENRY JAMES 3

continuous text. The trend toward apprehending these novels as a kind of literary triptych has only been reinforced by the increasingly theoretical orientation of recent criticism and its emphasis on intertextuality.

My own approach to James's late fiction involves a recognition that *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* are in many respects as different from each other as they are from James's earlier works. More specifically, my questioning of Matthiessen's concept of a unified major phase is rooted in my belief that *The Golden Bowl*, in its unusually positive representation of achieved love, occupies an entirely unique place in the Jamesian canon. The extraordinary and, for James, unprecedented affirmation of love that emerges in the final pages of his last completed novel signals a dramatic departure from the pattern of thwarted and renounced passion which had always dominated his fiction. With the renewal of Maggie Verver's marriage, emblemized in the embrace, given and accepted by husband and wife, which concludes the novel, James arrives at a vision of realized and reciprocated love which in fact reverses both the unfulfilled solipsism depicted in *The Ambassadors* and the tragic failure of love explored in *The Wings of the Dove*. As Stephen Spender sensed many years ago, *The Golden Bowl* is the creation "of a person who, profoundly with his whole being, after overcoming great inhibition, has accepted the idea of people loving" (194).

James's affirmation of love in *The Golden Bowl* has troubled many of his critics, and has been ignored by more than a few, not only because it undermines the supposed unity of the major phase, but also because it comes at the end of a long career in which the novelist consistently denied his protagonists the experience of fulfilled passion. Indeed, any extended immersion in James's *oeuvre* tends to become an adventure in sustained frustration. For in novel after novel, he constructs situations in which his fictional men and women – by virtue both of the circumstances which surround them and of their own characteristic responses to those circumstances – are unable to consummate their desires in the achievement of love. James's status as a major novelist has long been secure, and his brilliance as a technical innovator and theoretician are almost universally acknowledged; yet it is not difficult to discern, in the profusion of critical discourse devoted to his work, a persistent undercurrent of uneasiness, centered on the disturbing but inescapable fact that his art is seemingly unable to accommodate the representation of mature, fulfilled love.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 DESIRE AND LOVE IN HENRY JAMES

James himself never married, and in all probability remained celibate throughout his long life. The problematical nature of love in his fiction clearly has its roots deep in his personal experience. "I am unlikely ever to marry," James once explained to a friend:

One's attitude toward marriage is a fact – the most characteristic part doubtless of one's general attitude toward life. If I were to marry I should be guilty in my own eyes of inconsistency – I should pretend to think quite a little better of life than I really do. (*L*, 2: 314)

This remarkable if rather appalling admission ought to encourage us to approach the theme of love in Henry James within a broad context of ethical and ontological, as well as psychological concerns. Yet James's critics have typically been content simply to point to the painfully obvious facts contained in his biography, and to dismiss him out of hand as constitutionally incapable of understanding or even acknowledging the actuality of love – especially of sexual love. Here is George Moore, writing in 1886:

The interviewer in us would like to ask Henry James why he never married; but it would be vain to ask, so much does he write like a man to whom all action is repugnant. He confesses himself on every page, as we all do. On every page James is a prude. (in Gard, 172)

Only the terminology has changed when Maxwell Geismar, some seventy-five years later, vituperatively asserts that James suffered from an "infantile-pubescent . . . thwarted sexuality" (436). As in Geismar's case, biographical readings of James have all too frequently resulted in reductive, unprofitable speculations about the novelist's sexuality. Indeed, James has been diagnosed not only as prudish, but as pedophilic, homosexual, impotent, sexually "underdeveloped," and – with reference to his notoriously "obscure hurt" – literally castrated.

One need not to go to these extremes to recognize that something in James's personal psychic economy makes loving, and writing about love in any positive or affirmative way, profoundly difficult for him. But James's attitudes about love are historically as well as psychologically determined. And I think that his critics, at least in part because of the easy availability of psychobiographical explanations, have generally neglected the task of evaluating his problematical treatment of love in terms of the historical context in which he wrote. Many of James's contemporaries – one thinks especially of Hardy, Conrad, and Meredith – share his sense that the enactment of love *is* a problem

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DESIRE, LOVE, AND THE QUESTION OF HENRY JAMES 5

in a world stripped of the religious and social orthodoxies which had anchored the moral realism of their Victorian predecessors. The happy marriages which typically conclude Victorian novels assert the value of love in a universe that is morally coherent and meaningfully ordered. But modern love, cut off from any transcendent or even transpersonal structures of authority, is no longer sure how to affirm itself. Love for James is centrally a moral question – in *Roderick Hudson*, Rowland Mallet forgoes an opportunity to declare his passion for the woman he loves because, as James puts it, “he felt that it was physically possible to say, ‘. . . I love you!’ but it was not morally possible” (1, 470) – but it is a question asked in a moral landscape that is itself increasingly decentered. Paul Armstrong quite correctly sees James’s fiction as “a prolonged inquiry into the status of ethics in a world where norms have no foundation deeper than existence itself” (206). Not surprisingly, some of the most judicious commentary on the theme of love in James has come from critics like Sallie Sears, Stuart Hutchinson, and Naomi Lebowitz, who have recognized James’s position as a transitional figure who, for all his superficial adherence to the Victorian sexual mores of his audience, nevertheless embodies “the ferocious contradictions of his age.” As Sears puts it, James is in many respects “the first ‘modern’ novelist in English,” especially in his “upending of traditional moral categories” (46–51).

Love is made problematical in James’s fiction, not by its peripheral importance or absence – as some critics have suggested – but by its insistent and often painful centrality. His approach to love revolves around two antithetical conceptions of its nature and value, the dialectic between which is, I believe, crucial to understanding his evolving vision in the late fiction. The two poles of this dialectic, which I will henceforth call *desire* and *love*, may be roughly characterized as imaginative and active; they imply two fundamentally opposed modes of experience, two ways of encountering life and transforming it into art, the tension between which informs every aspect of the major phase novels. The mode of desire – what James means when he speaks of “the imagination of loving” (3, 54) – closely resembles Stendhal’s romantic conception of love as a process of imaginative “crystallization” (45–47). Stendhal’s “love” is essentially a narcissistic fantasizing activity of the mind, which seeks not to know and affirm the existence of another person (or of any reality outside the self), but to see in the other an absence in which imagination is free to deploy itself, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 DESIRE AND LOVE IN HENRY JAMES

around which the endlessly proliferating fantasies projected by desire can cluster or crystallize. Rather than engage with the real presence of its object, the desiring consciousness seeks to save the object from life's poverty and finitude by loading it with a rich, multiplicitous, potentially infinite value that is ultimately in excess of its limited reality. Desire is necessarily unrequited, for the reciprocation of passion would bring a true knowledge of the other – a knowledge that inevitably destroys the beautiful but illusory figures of desire's free imagining. Similarly, desire must by definition remain unfulfilled, for it only wants to perpetuate itself *as* desire (as wanting and therefore as lacking), and so perishes in the act of consummation, just as sexual desire “dies” in the discharge of satisfaction. We are very close here to Denis de Rougemont's notion of “Eros”: “a desire that never relapses, that nothing can satisfy, that even rejects and flees the temptation to obtain its fulfillment in the world, because its demand is to embrace nothing less than the All” (62). By fleeing fulfillment, the desiring consciousness condemns itself to a decentered wandering, and effectively bars itself from achieving the definite identity attainable only through the concrete realization – the choice and enactment – of a particular desire. Caught in the solipsistic labyrinth of its own endless wanting, desire pursues an impossible dream of escape from the limitations and imperfections of life, especially from the facts of time and death. It thus purchases its rich imaginative freedom at the cost of divorcing itself from reality and from the power to make and alter reality.

Love, in contrast, is a mode not of consciousness or imagination, but of action. Ortega y Gasset's definition of love (explicitly opposed to Stendhalian “love”) as a “centrifugal act of the soul” that “goes toward the object uniting with it and positively affirming its being” (20) suggests how, in contradistinction to the centripetal narcissism of desire, love insists on the reality and presence of the other. Instead of projecting onto the other the infinite variety of what *might* be, love embraces the other's limited and imperfect reality, and invites and accepts the binding and defining embrace offered by the other. The notion of unrequited love – so central to Stendhal's theorizing – is here entirely oxymoronic, for love can only come into being through the lovers' mutual acceptance and unillusioned knowledge of each other's reality. Since the primary goal of love is to affirm another's being (and thus the existence of a world outside the self), the lover must choose *an* other, must abandon the “free,” decentered mobility of the desiring

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DESIRE, LOVE, AND THE QUESTION OF HENRY JAMES 7

mode (which affirms only its own wanting) and direct his love toward a specific object. The ability to love thus involves a willingness to give up the multiplicitous possibilities of desire's infinite but abstract imagining for the comparatively restricted but nevertheless concrete reality of an identity defined through choice, action, and fulfillment. Hence the lover determines and makes a reality, instead of merely seeking to escape or evade one. Moreover, though desire is necessarily a part of love, the lover wills the death of his desire in the discharge of satisfaction; indeed, only through repeated acts of intercourse and consummation – sexual, moral, and spiritual – can he keep faith with love's defining purpose: to know and affirm the ever-changing presence of the other. Thus love, unlike desire, accepts the cycle of want and fulfillment through which desire continually perishes that it might be born again: accepts, in other words, its own finitude, and its fundamental nature as a becoming in time. So conceived, love is analogous to de Rougemont's "marriage," where desire is bound by reality and transformed into love through "an entirely carnal eros" (302).

Desire and love thus define not only differing conceptions of passionate and erotic relationship, but more generally, two opposed modes of human experience. They imply as well on James's part two radically divergent ways of thinking about the purpose, value and affect of his novelistic art. The desiring mode – manifested formally in James's practice of narrating events through the point of view of a single "center of consciousness" – clearly constitutes the main line of his development. Early Jamesian protagonists like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Christopher Newman in *The American* do seek the enacted fulfillment of their desires. But the disastrous results which attend their efforts – Isabel's destructive marriage and Newman's thwarting at the hands of the Bellegardes are symptomatic of the way in which the attempt to love *always* meets with disaster in James – suggest the motive for the novelist's growing fascination with the kind of passion we encounter in another character from *The Portrait of a Lady*, Ralph Touchett. Cut off by illness, and by his response to that illness, from any active participation in life, Ralph withdraws into the desiring mode, and pursues a wholly imaginative "romance" with Isabel. As James puts it, "the imagination of loving – as distinguished from that of being loved – had still a place in his reduced sketch" (3, 54). Ralph's way of loving increasingly preoccupies James in the works which follow, especially in the fiction of the so-called "experimental period"

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 DESIRE AND LOVE IN HENRY JAMES

which immediately precedes the major phase.² *What Maisie Knew*, *In the Cage*, and *The Turn of the Screw* are all fictions intensely focused on themes of sexuality and romantic love. But in each case, this fascination is filtered through the consciousness of a character who can express and enact passion only through an obsessive vicarious concern with the passion lives of others. In *The Sacred Fount*, the novelist reaches a kind of self-parodying apotheosis of the desiring mode. This strange text – the only long fiction, intriguingly, in which James abandoned his usual third-person center of consciousness technique to adopt the first person – presents an unnamed narrator who possesses what we might characterize as an excess of erotic imagination, which he obsessively projects onto everyone and everything he encounters *except* the woman – May Server – who is presumably the real object of his passion. Living as he does entirely inside the fantasizing processes of his desiring imagination, this solipsistic, possibly insane figure has reached a stage where he appears to be literally unaware of the other's presence.

A number of critics have discerned a kinship between the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* and James's most famous hero of excessive imagination, Lambert Strether. And in my reading of James's career, *The Ambassadors* stands as his culminating and most eloquent defense of his commitment to desire. This first of the major phase novels is in fact more closely linked to his earlier work, especially to the experimental novels of the 1890s, than to *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. *The Ambassadors* favorably contrasts Strether's free imaginative expansion of life's possibilities to Woollett's rigid and reductive utilitarianism. But this deceptively easy antithesis – reinforced by the novel's immersion of writer and reader in the unbroken process of Strether's consciousness – obscures the more disturbing implications of desire: its powerlessness to effect its vision, its refusal of knowledge, and its profound fear of ends – even when the end is love. For all his imaginative intensity, Strether remains a willing prisoner of his own infinite wanting, and is incapable of responding to the act of love proffered by Maria Gostrey at the novel's close; moreover, James, through his own formal choices, validates the kind of living which his protagonist exemplifies.

The Wings of the Dove, though begun by James just a few months after he completed *The Ambassadors*, embodies a developing critique of desire. This is a less evasive work, both in the hard truths of its tragic plot, and in its surprisingly direct evocation of James's own youthful

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

DESIRE, LOVE, AND THE QUESTION OF HENRY JAMES 9

relationship with Minny Temple. The novel's multiple-consciousness form invests its characters with an unmistakable reality – the reality of subjects – apart from their figurative existence as objects of any single consciousness. By thus locating and binding each character's desire within a concretely, dramatically defined reality, James arrives at a new kind of novelistic art capable of affirming the individual's power and responsibility to choose his own fate. On this basis, James tentatively affirms Milly Theale's heroic but thwarted effort – rooted in her tragic acceptance of her own mortality – to realize her desire in love.

In *The Golden Bowl*, James completes and confirms his progress from desire to love. The heroine of this last novel, Maggie Verver, desires as intensely as Strether; but she also demonstrates a capacity to make the painful, sometimes cruel choices – including the choice between her father and her husband – which necessarily limit and ultimately destroy desire's infinite imaginings in the satisfaction of a specific want. In thus allowing Maggie to move beyond the facile Strether/Woollett antithesis towards a unitary perspective that embraces fulfillment *and* loss, imagination *and* action, James succeeds in transforming the vain freedom of desire into the bound fullness of enacted love. The breakthrough embodied in *The Golden Bowl* reflects not only the triumph of a new kind of Jamesian protagonist, but also a fundamental change in the novelist's conception of his art. James returns to the multiple-consciousness form of *The Wings of the Dove*, with the clear intention of exploiting the positive representational possibilities he had discovered in writing the earlier novel. Moreover, Maggie's freely and powerfully undertaken act of love is adumbrated in James's unprecedented willingness to exercise his own authorial power to manipulate his fictional world towards a positive end.

Forty years ago, Matthiessen rescued James's late fiction from the misconceptions and disregard implied by the "old pretender" rubric. Perhaps it is now time to liberate these great novels from the myth of the master. For James's major phase embodies not the unified, valedictory summation of a perfected art, but an heroic struggle – undertaken at a point when most artists have ceased to grow and change – toward a self- and life-affirming vision that had long eluded him, and toward an art capable of expressing that vision. James, particularly the James of the late fiction, has long been seen as the votary of a refined art divorced from the concrete realities of human experience. His "destiny," as John Carlos Rowe has written, "always seems to end

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 DESIRE AND LOVE IN HENRY JAMES

in the intricacies of the late style and its retreat from life into the palace of art" (28). But James's struggle towards love in the late novels, and the ethical and aesthetic revaluations which accompany that struggle, suggest that the myth of the master conceals a courageous embrace of life, made all the more moving by its belatedness, and by the difficult personal and historical conditions in which it unfolded.

Near the end of his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James offers a brief but suggestive meditation on the Alvin Langdon Coburn photographs which serve as frontispiece illustrations for the twenty-four volumes which comprise the New York Edition of his novels and tales. James uses the occasion to denounce the traditional practice of illustrating specific scenes from fictional works – to decry the attempt, as he puts it, “to graft or ‘grow’ . . . a picture by another hand on my own picture” – and goes on to warn that such representational illustration, or “anything that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being, while placed before us, good enough, interesting enough and, if the question be of picture, pictorial enough, above all *in itself*, does it the worst of services.” In contrast, James asserts, the Coburn photographs fulfill the proper function of illustrations,

the reference of which to Novel or Tale should exactly be *not* competitive and obvious, should on the contrary plead its case with some shyness, that of images always confessing themselves mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only of the type or idea of this or that thing. (*AN*, 331–33)

In terms that reflect his own special sense of novelistic realism, James praises Coburn's photographs for providing “a concrete, independent, vivid instance” of the real, while simultaneously offering “an image distilled and intensified” of “the author's projected world, in which objects are primarily related to each other, and [are] therefore not ‘taken from’ ” reality in any direct way.

James's perceptive appreciation of photography as an art at once vividly realistic and profoundly symbolic is especially interesting in connection with the two pictures, chosen by the novelist in collaboration with Coburn, which accompany the text of *The Wings of the Dove* in the New York Edition, and which I reproduce here as my own frontispiece. For these two photographs, entitled by James “The Doctor's Door” and “The Venetian Palace,” evoke in some immediate sense the central Jamesian opposition between fact and symbol, between the real and the image, between the limited actuality of human experience