

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-45386-8 - Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews
Edited by Kevin J. Hayes
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RODERICK HUDSON

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New York *Times*, 10 December 1875, p. 2.

The author of this novel, the “Jr.” appended to whose name connects him with a father whose writings are well known for their rare union of subtlety of thought with vigor of style, has heretofore published essays and sketches which have appealed to the taste of the more cultivated and thoughtful part of the reading public. His last published article, that on Balzac in the November *Galaxy*, is a fine piece of thorough and delicately appreciative criticism, and is also a very characteristic exhibition of Mr. James’ habit of thought, of his taste, and his style of writing.¹ As he has thus far exhibited himself to us, Mr. James—considering him as a writer—is the result of culture, and the observation of cultivated society operating upon a mind naturally perceptive, receptive, and yet fastidious. He has shown no indications of qualities of a robust natural growth; but it cannot hence be justly inferred that he is without them. Circumstances may have given his mind the cast it has worn hitherto, and we may see him, as he attains conscious strength and wins confidence in his powers by their exercise, developing original traits which have hitherto been repressed by the combined influences of doubt and discipline. We heartily hope that such may prove to be the case, for he has already shown that he is what so many of our “popular” writers are not—a literary artist.

Roderick Hudson is Mr. James’ first published attempt at sustained creative work. As a first novel it must be regarded as remarkably successful. Its theme and its personages are quite removed from common-place; some of the latter have a very considerable degree of vitality; the

story is on the whole cleverly although not vigorously constructed, and after we are once, with a little determination, well launched on it, we are not content until we are safely in port at the end of the voyage. *Roderick Hudson* is a rarely-gifted man, a sculptor, in whom egoism is absolute and supreme, and to egoism he adds selfishness, a quality which often, but by no means always, accompanies the other. Some of the greatest and best men the world had seen have been egoists; but goodness and selfishness cannot go together. Roderick’s genius is first recognized by Mr. Rowland Mallett, a New-England gentleman of fortune and of the highest character and culture, who finds in the house of his cousin a little statuette in bronze which the unknown sculptor, then a student of law in the village in which the lady lived, had modeled and given to her. And here, upon the threshold of Mr. James’ story, we find an example of a fault in literary art which yet commands a certain admiration. Cecilia, Rowland Mallett’s widow cousin, is the mere occasion of his meeting with Roderick. She has no other function whatever in the story. She has no more connection with it than the stakes driven to mark out the space for the foundation of a building have to do with the building. And yet Mr. James wastes some very careful work, and many pages, and some of his readers’ time upon her. She is minutely portrayed, both as to her surroundings and her individuality. We are even taken so far into the details of her character as to be told that she had “a turn for sarcasm, and her smile, which was her pretty feature, was never so pretty as when her sprightly phrase had a lurking scratch in it”—a description which leads us first to say that this Cecilia was a very good sort of woman to flee away from. We believe that it is Alexandre Dumas *filis* who wisely says, “*N’epouse jamais une fille railleuse. Dans une fille le raillerie est un*

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[More information](#)

symptome d'enfer." This Cecilia, who is so carefully drawn and finished, immediately disappears, and is no more seen, heard of, or referred to. She is the mere wicket gate at the beginning of our pilgrimage, and we resent having been thus interested in her for nothing. We are inclined to think that this fault is not one into which Mr. James has unwittingly fallen; but that it is a conscious or half-conscious imitation of Balzac, the greatest error of whose art, and at the same time the greatest exhibition of whose skill, was in the impertinent elaboration of mere accessories.

Mr. Rowland Mallett, who is about going to Europe, offers to take Roderick with him and to give him opportunities of study. The offer is accepted; but before they depart a perplexing little triangular arrangement of personages takes place. There is staying with Roderick's mother a certain Mary Garland who, as Cecilia says, is "a sort of far-away cousin; a good, plain girl, but not a person to delight a sculptor's eye." Nevertheless, this Mary Garland has a very captivating smile, and is represented as a person of strong character and deep but quiet feeling. With her at very short notice Mr. Rowland Mallett falls in love, only to discover, however, just on the eve of departure, that Roderick, finding that she loved him, fancied that he loved her and engaged himself to marry her as soon as he was prosperous.

After brief study of the art of the Old World, which he understands by intuition, Roderick goes to work, and (having, it will be remembered, modeled successfully and mastered all the mechanism of his art at home,) achieves success at a bound, and at once becomes talked of—almost famous. But before he makes his first great statue an incident occurs of no little importance to all the personages of the story. As the two young men were sitting together in the grounds of the Villa Ludovisi, a middle-aged and rather overdressed and

pompous lady attended by a little elderly man passed them; and then there sauntered in their wake a young lady about twenty years old, very elegantly dressed, leading a fantastic poodle. The poodle was so absurd that Roderick smiled rather aggressively, whereupon:

"The young girl perceived it and turned her face full upon him, with a gaze intended apparently to enforce greater deference . . . I wonder if she would sit to me." [*Novels 1871–1880*, p. 229]

That is very strongly imagined. The picture is clearly outlined, full of color and full of life. And, indeed, we are inclined to regard this group of people, albeit the characters of all of them are very extravagant, as the most natural, congruous, and vital in the whole story. They are, Mrs. Light, an American woman, once a great beauty, now something of an adventuress upon a large scale; the Cavaliere Nameless, who is also *cavaliere serviente* to Mrs. Light, and Christina Light, the daughter of the latter, for whom her mother is scheming to make a great marriage. After Roderick achieves his success, they, who have till then—and a year has passed—utterly disappeared from view, visit his studio, and there Christina Light plays with her poodle, talks nonsense, and a kind of careless sarcasm with a tone of studied indifference. Roderick asks permission to model her bust. She calls across the studio, "Mamma this gentleman wishes to model my bust. Please speak to him." Then soon she says, "Is it very tiresome? I have spent half my life sitting for my photograph in every conceivable attitude, and with every conceivable coiffure. I think I have posed enough." Her mother hesitates, when Christina bluntly or, rather, coldly says that it is because her mother does not know whether Roderick means the bust shall be paid for, adding, "I assure you she will not pay you a sou;"

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and again she says to her that if Roderick gives the bust to her, instead of carrying it about, she “can always sell it.” But Roderick carries his point. He makes the bust, and he falls hopelessly in love with the original.

Christina Light is no mere dawdling rich-husband-catching beauty. She has character, intelligence, and even a heart. She loathes the position in which she is placed by circumstances, and by her adventuress mother’s schemes, and she plays a part. She is not exactly true and sound all through; and yet she is capable of sacrificing the most brilliant success in marriage, such a success as her mother could not have hoped for, to her womanly feeling and for a marriage that would satisfy the cravings of her heart. The Prince Casamassima becomes a victim of her charms. He is of the ancient nobility; his fortune is colossal; he is not vicious; he is merely a very weak brother in every way. Yet when he is introduced to her at a ball and asks her to dance, she brushes him aside for Roderick Hudson, and that not for mere coquetry or caprice, as amply appears afterwards. Her mother is in despair. And well she may be, for Christina roasts her Prince-Cræsus of a lover thus. They are all, Roderick included, on a pretty terrace, which leads Mrs. Light to speak inquiringly of the terrace at the Prince’s castle. He replies:

“It is four hundred feet long, and paved with marble. . . . What did you inform me was the value of the hereditary diamonds of the Princess Casamassima?”
[*Novels 1871–1880*, p. 319]

Thus does the poor girl scoff at the weak-brained, weak-bodied, weak-willed princeling who offers to buy her with his golden carriages and his quarts of diamonds. And she delights to show her scorn of herself and of the position in which she is placed in the presence of the

mother whom she despises. She becomes deeply interested in Roderick, and yet does not quite love him with her whole heart; a heart that is ready we see to love with total abandonment upon good occasion. That occasion Roderick does not give. With all her admiration of his genius and of himself she feels that he is not quite manly. The virile force to which her feminine nature longs to render due submission, she does not find in his brilliant but unstable, untrustworthy nature. And so under pressure she engages to marry the hero of the terrace, the golden carriage, and the diamonds. He has at least those, and the title of Prince to boot, all of which Roderick is without, and, as she fears, true manliness besides. Roderick becomes moody, listless, nervous, helpless. He has not broken off his engagement with Mary Garland; and at Mr. Rowland Mallett’s suggestion he sends for his mother and his promised wife. The result is not exactly what Mr. Mallett hopes. For not only does Roderick soon confess to him that his mother and Mary “bore” him, but the presence of Miss Garland piques Christina Light. She sees her rival, observes her, treating her not with petty jealousy but in the grand style, and soon to the surprise of all and the consternation of her mother and the Cavaliere, the Prince is sent about his business in a very decided and unmistakable fashion. In her despair Mrs. Light appeals to Mr. Mallett to help her to bring Christina to her senses; and this is done in a scene which we should only mar by quoting from it, but which is very cleverly managed somewhat in the manner of Dickens, for Mrs. Light, although she is a scheming adventuress, is a fool. This scene shows us the author’s nearest approach to humor, which does not seem to be a strong element in his composition. Mr. Mallett has an interview with Christina which is interesting, but utterly in vain as far as the Prince is concerned, she remaining firm in

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[More information](#)

her determination against him, whatever may be the fate of Roderick's suit. But to his surprise he hears next day that she not only recalled the Prince, but was married to him that very night. The cause of this catastrophe is intimated to us very plainly. Mrs. Light, and the Cavaliere, told Mr. Mallett that they had yet one pressure in reserve; and this proves to be that Christina is the daughter, not of Mr. Light, but of the Cavaliere, and that besides, her mother is involved in such disgraceful money affairs that only great wealth can save them all from ruin.

Roderick and his party, Mallett included, go off to live a while in Switzerland. There, in a lonely walk among the mountains, Roderick is overtaken by an awful storm, in the darkness and turmoil of which he falls from a precipice and is killed. He is found by Mallett and a fellow-artist, not mutilated, not bloody, for the rain has washed away all traces of such injury, and, as Mr. James beautifully says, "it was as if violence having done her work had stolen away in shame." The body is borne home, the mother and Mary come out to meet it. "Mrs. Hudson tottered forward with outstretched hands and the expression of a blind person; but before she reached her son Mary Garland had rushed past her, and in the face of the staring, pitying, awe-stricken crowd had flung herself with the magnificent movement of one whose rights are supreme, and with a loud, tremendous cry, upon the senseless vestige of her love."

This is the story of Roderick Hudson, and it must be admitted that it does not lack a great and a peculiar interest. It shows unmistakably that its author has the constructive and the narrative faculty, and that he possesses also no small share of dramatic power; and yet its defects are chiefly those of characterization. In detail, in the portrayal of minute traits, Mr.

James is very skillful. It is in the expression of a strong unity that he is least successful. With one or two exceptions, his personages are aggregations rather than single conceptions; and when he seeks to impress a character upon us by implication he fails. Mary Garland is an example in point. She is evidently intended to leave upon us the impression of a strong, rich, passionate, and truly womanly nature, one whose passions, and even whose passing emotions, are kept under restraint, a nature whose power is in reserve. But the result is that she is tame and colorless. We see what the author means her for; and yet we think of her as a plain, rather prim and awkward, somewhat shy, New-England woman in an ill-fitting stuff gown—a woman who, in the eye of a much better man than Roderick Hudson, could not stand up a moment before the much less estimable Christina Light. Nor is it only the beauty of the latter which gives her her advantage. For, as we have seen, she is no mere beauty. And, by the way, we must remark, in passing, that the author shows great skill in bringing her beauty before our mind's eye. The task is not an easy one. It is not to be accomplished by mere description of form, of feature, and of color. Mr. James makes us feel the effect of her marvelous loveliness of person.

Another personage upon whom Mr. James has spent much labor, Mr. Rowland Mallett, fails to produce an impression of vital individuality. He is an impossible and not a very attractive character, to begin with. He is altogether too perfect to live, and too consciously perfect to be endured. And although we see what he was meant to be, he remains almost a lay figure, a stiff model of oppressive excellence and wisdom, always saying and doing exactly the right thing at the right time. Roderick himself is better, not because he is morally inferior; but because, good or bad, he is

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not made up, but imagined. And yet he is somewhat repulsive from his extravagance. Indeed, all through the book we long for some simple, truthful portrayal of our common human nature.

With all this there is a sameness that is monotonous in the talk of these people. Excepting the Light group, they all talk pretty much in the same way, the way of Mr. Henry James. Jr. Mallett might be a male Mary Garland, and Mary Garland a female Rowland Mallett, Esquire.

But delicate and charming touches of character are not lacking, and of these not a few are spent upon Mrs. Hudson, who is altogether the most natural and living of the New-England group. When she first sees Christina Light and is told that Roderick has made her bust:

“‘Her bust! Dear, dear!’ murmured Mrs. Hudson, vaguely shocked. ‘What a strange bonnet!’”

The same old-fashioned New-England, shrinking from delight in the beautiful, appears with delicately bright characterization, as the mother, son, and Mary Garland are sitting together under a rarely beautiful Italian night.

“‘It is a night to remember on one’s deathbed,’ Miss Garland exclaimed. ‘Oh, Mary, how can you!’ murmured Mrs. Hudson, to whom this savored of profanity, and to whose shrinking sense indeed the accumulated loveliness of the night seemed to have ‘*something shameless and defiant.*’”

In a certain time of great trouble with Roderick, whom his poor mother cannot but regard as having been ruined by Europe, and, therefore, by Mr. Mallett, who is present, she “divided her time between looking askance at her son, with her hands clasped about her pocket-

handkerchief, *as if she were wringing it dry of the last hour’s tears*, and turning her eyes much more directly upon Rowland in the mutest, the feeblest, and the most intolerable reproachfulness. She never phrased her accusations, but he felt that in the unilluminated void of the poor old lady’s mind they loomed up like vaguely-outlined monsters.” Again, on the same occasion, “somehow, neat, noiseless, and dimly lady-like, as she sat there, *keeping her grievance green with her soft-dropping tears*, her displeasure conveyed an overwhelming imputation of brutality.” This is very fine and highly-finished work.

Mr. James’ style is remarkably neat, clear, and, we might say, picturesque, if it were not for a conscious primness which is too often apparent. It is generally very correct, and so very rarely at all pretentious that we are shocked at reading of “anfractuosities of rain.” *Anfractuosities* is a good enough word to be put into a dictionary—and to be left there. But it is not a word for living men and women to be called upon to read in cold blood. We observe with some surprise slips in the use of *would* and *should*. For example—“I used to think that if any trouble came to me I *would* bear it like a stoic” (p. 416.) “‘Suppose you had fallen,’ said Miss Garland, ‘I believed I *would* not fall’” (p. 428.) This from a writer of Mr. James’ quality and a man of his New-England breeding is astonishing.

On the whole, Roderick Hudson is a book of marked merit and of unusual interest, one of the best novels produced in America of late years. It gives us much now and promises more hereafter.

Note

- 1 “Honoré de Balzac,” *Galaxy* 20 (December 1875), 814–36.

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[More information](#)

Chicago Tribune, 11 December 1875, p. 1.

Judging from the specimen before us, Mr. James' talent as a novelist lies in a broad, rich style, in brilliant colloquy, and in a rare faculty for making impossibly-sumptuous characters, electric in their intense vitality. But, judging again from the same example, he wants the firm, sure, even power of a finished artist, who, while composing splendid effects, brings into harmony with them the smallest accessories, and suffers none of the minor passages to degenerate into weakness and vacuity.

Roderick Hudson is a magnificent scapegrace, a sculptor gifted with genius, with physical beauty, with captivating traits of disposition, and, if we may add it in the same connection, with a total lack of the moral sense. His rival-figure in the book, poor Christina Light, is, like him, superbly endowed by nature, and a victim destined for immolation by inexorable circumstance. The tragedy of her fate moves us to pity: for her noble instincts, inextinguished by a pernicious education, should have gained her a happier fortune. Rowland Mallet and Mary Garland, the reputable pair brought into the foreground for purposes of contrast, are tame and uninteresting in their undeviating goodness. It is here that the novelist has shown his weakness. In the attempt to depict a couple of straightforward, single-hearted personages, he has failed to produce strong and distinct individualities. When they occupy the scene, as they do too much of the time, we are invariably wearied with their dull respectability.

Here is a grave fault, to our mind, too, in the plot. Rowland should have recognized the exacted worth of Christina's native character, and by marrying and lifting

her out of an evil atmosphere give her the opportunity that she helplessly strove for, of salvation. By regarding the law of counterparts, Mr. James would have given a far more artistic creation. However, despite of the blemishes we have mentioned, the novel is to be distinguished from the innumerable hosts of its tribe by its power to furnish very agreeable recreation.

Appleton's Journal 14 (18 December 1875), 793.

As specimen of ingenious and sustained psychological analysis, Mr. Henry James, Jr.'s, "Roderick Hudson" (Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co.) is a wonderful production; but as a novel it fails to stand the crucial test. It is surprising, indeed, that a book which is so good in many ways—so subtle in its insight, so full of the finest fruits of culture, and so eloquent withal—should fail so utterly in the essential point of impressing us with the objective reality of the people to whom it introduces us. The difficulty seems to be that, with all his knowledge of human nature and insight into character, Mr. James cannot conceive a *person*. The motives of any given course of action, the influence of antecedents and circumstances upon character, and the complex effects which in human life flow from an apparently simple cause, he can trace with marvelous skill; but he does not seem able to construct in thought the process by which a person reveals his personality, and becomes individual in the apprehension of others. The characters in "Roderick Hudson" are far from being mere puppets, and yet the action of the story is curiously suggestive of a puppet-show. The author discourses elaborately in explanation of the qualities and character-

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[More information](#)

istics of his several *dramatis personæ*, and then they come on the stage and say or do something to demonstrate the acuteness of his insight. They do not reveal themselves—they have no chance to reveal themselves—they are dissected beforehand with a precision and minuteness which leaves no opportunity for the spontaneous or the unexpected. The very conversation is for the most part a reflection of Mr. James's own mental processes, and even Christina Light, the spoiled child of fashion, talks like a trained metaphysician.

But for this deficiency of dramatic faculty on the part of the author, "Roderick Hudson" might be accepted without hesitation as the long-expected "great American novel." The story is finely conceived, and the book has an indescribable charm. The history of a genius must always be fascinating and impressive, especially if it have *vraisemblance*, and the story of Roderick Hudson's rise and fall is almost terrible in its fidelity to psychological truth. But the great charm of the book lies in the atmosphere of Rome which pervades it—the very flavor of Italy. In no other work, except Hawthorne's "Marble Faun," is the Eternal City made so familiar to our imaginations. It infects one irresistibly with the "Roman fever," and we feel as we read that, if all roads do not in fact lead to Rome, at least none is worth traveling which does not promise to lead there.

[Thomas Powell].
New York *Herald*, 26
December 1875, p. 3.

If we could go into a gallery of statuary and breathe life into the marble figures posing gracefully around us we would experience the same strange sensations we

have after reading one of Henry James, Jr.'s, romances. None of his characters are real men and women. They have too much dignity to be called puppets and too much warmth to be called statues. Yet they are more like marble figures than real flesh and blood. We have no human sympathy with his heroes and heroines, still we are drawn to them by an irresistible fascination. Mrs. Hudson is the only real person in this last book of Mr. James', and consequently she is the least interesting. Roderick is a type of genius exaggerated, let us hope, but not impossible in a milder form. It is not so much for the story that Mr. James' books are charming as for their beautiful language and wonderful descriptive powers. Mr. James is not a story teller any more than Hawthorne was a story teller. He is a romancist, and one of the best living. He is cosmopolitan in literature as well as in life, and his models are the best of foreign masters. None of his books end in a conventional way, probably because he is not a conventional writer, and those who look for "and they lived together happily ever after" at the end of the last chapter of any of his novelettes will be disappointed.

In Roderick Hudson we find a young man of genius who was growing up untaught and unappreciated in a retired New England village. A fairy godmother turns up in the person of Rowland Mallet, a rich young fellow, with a taste for the fine arts. Rowland has just arrived at the village to say goodbye to his cousin Cecilia before he sails for Europe. There he meets Roderick and is shown a bronze figure of his designing, which strikes the connoisseur as being of great promise. He immediately proposes taking Roderick along with him to Europe, and the proposition is accepted. Before the two young men set sail Rowland meets a cousin of Roderick's, Mary Garland, in whom he becomes very much interested, but tries to forget when he

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[More information](#)

finds that she is engaged to Roderick. The reader cannot sympathize with this singular fancy on the part of a man of the world like Rowland. She was plain in face, dress and manner. The expressions of her face “followed each other slowly, distinctly gravely, sincerely, and you might almost have fancied as they came and went that they gave her a sort of pain.” There was no reason in the world that Roderick should have loved her either, and we don’t believe that he ever did, at any rate not very deeply. When the two arrive in Rome they meet Christina Light, the beautiful daughter of a semi-adventuress, and Roderick becomes enamored and evidently forgets all about Mary. Christina had a pair of extraordinary dark blue eyes, a mass of dusky hair over a low forehead, a blooming oval face of perfect purity, a flexible lip, just touched with disdain, and the step and carriage of a princess—just such a vision as would turn any young man’s head, particularly an artist’s. Roderick worked well when he first came to Rome, and quite distinguished himself, and his statues were bought by Rowland. But after he became in love with Christina he behaved like a lunatic. In fact, he was little better than insane at the best of times. Christina only liked him as a plaything; he was too weak a character for her. She was so uncertain of herself that she could not have loved as a husband a man of inferior will. Rowland was the unwilling confidant of both parties, for he did not at all approve of Roderick’s conduct. Roderick is the most exasperating character; he has all the eccentricities of genius. He would not work unless he felt a certain inspiration. A Michael Angelo could not have been more whimsical. He hung around Christina everywhere she went, and really thought that she loved him. But what woman could love such a weakling? He was handsome and talented, but he was conceited and bad tempered also. When Christina

really dropped him and married another man he acted in the most outrageous manner. He simply gave himself up to despair. He refused to turn his hand to anything, and he said that his brain was dead. He begged Roderick to shoot him and put him out of his misery. Altogether his conduct was unmanly and unbearable. He did not pretend to love Christina after her marriage, but abused her right and left. “She’s as cold and false and heartless as she’s beautiful,” he said in his rage, “and she has sold her heartless beauty to the highest bidder. I hope he knows what he gets!” She would have done worse had she married Roderick, for his heartlessness would have shown itself after the honeymoon. He was not meant for a finished man. Only a butterfly existence could suit such a character. With the proper ingredients in his make-up he would have been a great man; as it was, he was a great failure.

“James’s *Roderick Hudson*.”
Scribner’s Monthly 11
 (February 1876), 588–99.

Less than a year ago, Mr. James, long known as a writer of brilliant magazine stories, published his first volume, a collection of the same. We now have his first novel before us. The interval is too short to warrant us in looking for any new growth in this book, by which to measure more accurately the merits and place of “*The Passionate Pilgrim*,”¹ and, indeed, we find it to be very much the same in substance and quality with the shorter tales. They were rich samples: this is a sort of extended Bayeux tapestry. We must accord to it the same excellences which we noted