



The effectiveness of an extrinsic approach in reading Henry James's Fiction

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Abstract

Readers, scholars, and researchers may go against the trend of isolating the literary text and cry out for a more open method of reading that allows the reader to surmount the constricted textual space and invade its neighboring area. That method is useful in literary research since it helps in deciphering the codes of the text which may therefore appear more comprehensible and reachable. Biographical and historical criticism has proven its efficiency in understanding the text's point of view through a study of the socio-cultural context of the text and an account of the author's relevant biographical data. The fiction of the nineteenth-century American novelist Henry James is selected as a case study in the present paper not to decline the formalists' concern for the text's form and content as much as to show the invalidity of the idea of the text's isolation. The point is that the historical criticism enriches the scope of the reader in his mental trip in search for meaning. Dealing with satire and realism in Henry James's fiction makes his novels representational par excellence.

Keywords: Text, context, history, biography, representation, woman.

Introduction

With its denial of the influence of the socio-cultural conditions, the authority of authorship, and the authenticity of representation in the process of reading literature, the formalist critical theories have reduced the act of interpretation to the study of the text's intrinsic literary features while considering literary texts as independent linguistic entities. Deconstructionist criticism, equally, breaks with the traditional belief that language represents reality and subverts the Sossurian view that language constructs meaning; it rather advances the idea that language deconstructs meaning because of its inherent instability. It deals uniquely with the text's linguistic context in the light of the Derridean concept of "*différance*" which argues for the non-fixity of meaning, impossibility to reach resolution in the act of interpretation and absence of truth. As a formalist school, New Criticism assumes that meaning lies in a "close reading" of the text. Readers engaged with formalist schools "may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence of meaning"¹ added to the study of some stylistic features like the sound effect, rhyming, metrical pattern, narrative point of view, etc. Formalism criticizes old historicism's obsession with history and reality, including the biographical data, and argues instead that the commitment to an objective reading of a text can be performed exclusively through a close focus on the stylistic devices as used in their linguistic milieu; they decline any need for an erudite background to understand the text and deem it extraneous to read about the conditions of the work's production. According to the literary critic F.R. Leavis, literature should be studied as a separate entity and the critic should not extract meaning from the context but should instead

be focused on the text. An intrinsic approach tends to preserve the concept of canon. What the deconstructive critical theory shares with formalism is the very rejection of the biographical, historical, sociological, cultural, political, and economic context and the treatment of the text as an independent and a self-contained entity. Derrida's statement, "There is nothing outside of the text," discards the outer context and relies uniquely on the internal linguistic context. Old-historicism, new-historicism, and cultural materialism are, on the other hand, preoccupied with the historical context that helps them find meaning in the text.

History in Henry James's Fiction

Scholars of literature who use an open method in dealing with literary texts can either choose a thematic approach or use a theoretical perspective in dealing with matters outside of the text. In their analysis of themes and style, they can draw from the background of the text and make use of the author's biography. They can also apply the new historicist critical approach in their study where they rely, for instance, on Stephen Greenblatt's idea of the historicity of the text and textuality of history (the production and reception of the text in a historical context, and the rebirth of the past into the future). Henry James's fiction is selected in the present paper as a case study to show the usefulness of exploring the personal life of the author and the period of time in which the text was written. If the researcher investigates the representation of the female figures, for instance, he can provide a context-oriented feminist reading. What materialist or cultural feminists have done in their entanglement with cultural materialism that includes itself a political commitment to feminism, as opposite to New Historicism for example, could entail a fruitful reading of the text.

The present research does not offer a theory-based reading of James's fiction, but rather provides an analysis that is open to the outer context as an effective interpretive method. It may take from the cultural materialist critical approach since it explores the historical context of the writer's works along with a close textual analysis in an attempt to reveal their political implications. The present reading of James's fiction bears a special focus on gender issues and manifests an inclination to the analysis of the historical conditions of the nineteenth-century woman and her vindictive participation in the public sphere and involvement in the political life. James's advancement of woman's liberation through his fiction records the dominant anti-feminist ideology on the one hand and disseminates his own favorable position towards woman's emancipation on the other. The reading suggests the possibility of perceiving James's rejection and subversion of the dominant hegemonic position. It is an example of the exploration of a political fiction which becomes a vehicle of power, or as a counter-power in its empowerment of women against the hegemonic patriarchal disempowerment. The objective of the present work is to argue for the usefulness of the openness to the extrinsic elements in textual analysis and the establishment of an interactive relation between text and context in reading fiction. The analysis that carries along the ideology or the political stance that can be extracted from James's works, for instance, cannot be accomplished without a reference to the outer context of these literary texts.

Realism: In Europe, since the revolutions of 1848, fiction moved to realism and became more representational. In American fiction, the symbolist spirit of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville disappeared after the Civil War to be replaced by a more factual record of daily life although American realists were "suddenly brought face to face with the pervasive materialism of industrial capitalism" with "no theory and no unity" for realism, as Alfred Kazin declares². James was partly influenced by Emile Zola who called for "*Le Roman Expérimental*" where "the novelist's task was to undertake a social or scientific study, recording facts, styles and systems of behavior, living conditions"³. In American writing, what unites different authors of the period like Stoddard, Twain, Howells, James or the female local color writers of the Northeast is the replacement of metaphysical speculations as the primary source of knowledge by experience⁴. James also derived his realism from French and Russian models; his acquaintance with Taine, Comte, Flaubert and Maupassant intensified his interest in illustrative realism and pictorialism. He admired the battle waged in France by the young writers Daudet, Goncourt and Zola⁵. In his essay "The Art of Fiction" [abbr. "AF"] (1955), James announces that he took his cue from a lecture by Walter Besant who insisted that the novel must be the result of personal experience and observation.

James himself admits that "the novelist must write from his experience, that his characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life"⁶. In an essay produced in 1902, he calls

for general and representative characters as archetypes drawn from real life. James read *Madame Bovary* and judged the title character to be unrepresentative and too particular; he thinks that her prominence in the novel is too much for her. His criticism of the character's specificity is not unlike his criticism of Dickens's particular characters. James compares the genre of the novel to a painting, stating that "as the picture is reality, so the novel is history"⁶. Sergio Perosaechoes James's view about the novelist who, according to him, has "the right and indeed the duty to deal openly with every aspect of life, even those regarded as taboo in the Victorian age"⁵. As a matter of fact, James applies his theories to his novels where he actually relies on experiment and deals with taboo subjects like politics, sexuality, homosexuality and feminist issues. He attempts to write about anarchist politics in London with an analysis of its institutions of law and auxiliaries. Hence, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) for example, is "a novel about the mysteries of London, about spies and secret societies, and it is also a novel about spectatorship, about seeing and being seen"⁷. Political satire is also present in *The Tragic Muse*, originally published in 1890, through the character of the unmotivated politician and reluctant parliamentarian Nick Dormer. The reference to the political scene in London during that period is helpful first in the understanding of the text, and second in giving an account of the *fin-de-siècle* corrupt political system in England.

The Political and Economic Representation: Violence as a theme is also tackled in James's later novels, as an anticipation of The First World War after a series of political crimes in the world especially in the 1880s. The assassination of Czar Alexander II in Russia and Lord Cavendish in Dublin took place respectively in 1881 and 1882; a series of dynamite practices had begun in 1883; explosions in the Local Government Board, at Victoria Station, Scotland Yard, the Metropolitan Railway in 1884 and in the House of Commons in 1885; in 1886 there were riots in London Trafalgar Square and the scene of the Haymarket tragedy in Chicago. This political trouble in the world at that transitional historical period inspired James to create themes of social and political violence. Figures of evil, physical aggression and moral transgression imbue the fiction of his final period where he emphasized spiritual unsettlement and moral disturbance. Betraying morals constituted a central theme in works like *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) in which Merten Densher plans to marry Milly Theale, the doomed girl, for her money or in his supreme novel of manners *The Golden Bowl* (1904) where Prince Amerigo betrays his wife with her friend and her father's wife.

Pointedly enough, woman's exploitation is an issue which preoccupies James's thought whereby he uncovers the wickedness of the capitalist system. James criticizes the growing investing feature of the theater used by some playwrights or managers to make more profit and condemns the elitism of the audience. He also reprimands mass culture for the commodification of the novel which was instrumentalized by

conditioning readers to reduce the text to its ending and compares the novel to other popular visual technologies like the cinema or the magic lantern which function independently from the spectators. In his fiction, James indirectly attacks American consumerism through the extravagant upper-class's style of living and excessive luxury reflected in over-decorated residences, overgenerous meals, frequent voyages, precious jewelry, over-ornamented clothes. In addition, James draws on the complicity between the capitalist system and patriarchy while focusing on their exploitative nature, the way that he victimizes Verena Tarrant, the heroine of *The Bostonians* (1886) whose utilization starts from a materialistic father and ends with a patriarchal husband.

The Socio-Cultural Recordings: James based his novels on the "reality effect" of verisimilitude to find himself implicated in feminist issues by which he interconnected political and social recordings. He wrote novels that include elements of deception, betrayal, exploitation and victimization. In his notebooks, he describes *The Bostonians* as "a tale very characteristic of our conditions . . . the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf"⁸. In America, New York and Washington D.C., man's status as "businessman" and woman's position as houseworker were a Rooseveltian gender formula that set itself against women's work and made the "schism between male activity and female dependency. . . at its crudest in New York City"⁹. James reproduced the situation of the upper Fifth Avenue women and made them appear as "passive victims, sealed away in ornate mansions, wearing elaborate tiaras, bereft of any means for self-expression through the neglect and indifference of their men Downtown"⁹.

Not only did James report the sexual gap but also brought out its corollaries where he boldly explores the phenomenon of women's intimacy with each other. In *The Bostonians*, James covers such a taboo subject when he portrays an odd relationship between two Bostonian girls to reflect what was then known as the "Boston Marriage" on which James comments in his notebooks saying that: "the relation of the two girls should be a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England"⁸. As suggested by Perosa, the work deals with "combined aberrations of sexual, social and political life"⁵. His novel, in fact, echoes history with its mixed ideologies, eccentric trends, unconventional codes of behavior, political movements. When the author conveys the image of the war between traditionalism and modernism and records the roar of his age, he offers a reading of history, which, despite its possible subjectivity, invites the reader to turn back the pages of time to identify the ideology defended in the text and to reevaluate history while comparing it to other history books and literary works.

His factual recordings were not restricted to the social and political world but extended to the cultural and artistic environment. Cultural life is also represented through the

realistic depiction of fashion in dresses and hairstyle in order to produce a complete realistic portrait of the nineteenth-century woman whose psychological trouble along with her physical appearance are authentically described. In *Henry James and the Art of Dress*, Clair Hughes speaks of this realistic physical portrayal of James's female characters and supports his argument by the example of Isabel's "authentic" image that is based on "a recognisable moment in fashion"¹⁰. He describes her style as conforming to the Perfect Lady of the mid 1870s and corresponding to ladies coiffures of Harper's Bazaar of 1876. Yet, James not only represents woman's fashion of dress but also produces the "fashionable" art of the time; in "The London Theatres" (1957), he reveals that "The theatre just now is the fashion, just as 'art' is the fashion and just literature is not"¹¹.

The rise of the theater and the celebrity obtained by the actresses of the time urged James to reproduce in his fiction such public figures that were apt to reveal their talent, exhibit their sense for art and strive for independence. His thematic choice of the theater in his novels reflects its rising importance at that period. Like Theodore Dreiser, he constructed the figure of the actress / artist as the peak of the hierarchy of work within the stimulating social and cultural conditions. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser focused on "the privileged role of acting and the theatre that had since the beginning of the Romantic period been seen, on the one hand, as the central institution of the city and, on the other as the most serious challenge to the romantic theory of the self"¹². Yet the lack of endurance and the impatience of some histrionic female figures impelled their quick surrender and retirement from the stage within a short period of time; Rudolf Dricks put in 1892: "If she [the girl] gets on at all, she does it quickly, if she is not successful within a week or two, she usually retires to the seclusion of her family circle"¹³. James seems to transmit factual data about actresses or performers who give up quickly to find themselves taken by the current of traditionalism and conventionality.

James's Feminism

In his narratives, James covers the socio-cultural surrounding of the modern woman as an emerging type of woman in the nineteenth century. His female characters represent the new woman who destroys the barriers of the home and involves herself in the public life, not as a mere participant in the working life but as a performing woman in the theater as a symbolic public space. He discusses the patriarchal environment in which the public performer shows up. He represents the notion of woman's perfection and True Womanhood as seen by patriarchy in some of his major or minor female characters and equally criticizes capitalism and its exploitation of women in collaboration with the patriarchal system. He records the feminist movement and its call for reform with an emphasis on woman's talent in political addresses (Verena Tarrant) and her audacity and power in performing hard missions (the Princess). Through the characterization of actresses in his novels and short

stories, he puts the focus on woman's theatrical genius and her warranted success which granted her with a manipulating power without involving her in the wiles of immorality and prostitution. He conveys the society's reaction towards the female performance and art while bringing, for example, in his two parallel plots of *The Tragic Muse* the contrast between the theater and high society or the diplomatic world, and between art and the political world. Using the naturalistic spirit, James shows that women will remain manipulated by patriarchy and can never achieve freedom if they surrender to conventions and give up their struggle. Some of his heroines remain caught under patriarchy and cannot liberate themselves because of their lack of faith in and conviction of their cause and due to their self-imposed imprisonment.

Drawing on James's positive portrayal of the female performer and arguing for his constructive criticism of the feminist movement, we may describe him as a pro-feminist, defending woman's rights through his fiction. He seems to subvert the conventional exclusion of women from the public world by creating liberated female characters. He reproduces successful female rhetoricians, capable of mobilizing and persuading female mobs of the vitality of their emancipation. He defends woman's public participation through his creation of independent and active female figures that imitate authentic women in real life. He also advances woman's liberation through his condemnation of marriage and family as patriarchal institutions and attack on capitalism as an ally of patriarchy.

James's Reforming Ideology: Realism and satire are inextricably intertwined in James's fiction; their integration stands in contradiction with James's own definition of realism as representing life as it is. The presence of satire in his realistic narratives seems to invalidate the nineteenth-century definition of Realism as a literary trend that was supposed to depict contemporary life and society as they were, using verisimilitude in reproducing everyday activities and experiences without idealization or romantic subjectivity. Even if realism seems to render truth or reality as it is, the author's critical view interferes with the image of truth to make the work subjective rather than objective. Priscilla Walton claims that "Realism, despite its apparent 'naturalness' is perhaps the least coherent and natural of literary theories"¹⁴. Satire, as a criticism of social conventions and a ridicule of human vices and abuses, interferes with the author's realistic practices and precludes the work's authentic representation of both situations and portrayals. The realistic author is thus transformed into a biased reformer and the whole notion of realism is disturbed. Realism "becomes a means of justifying a standard of morality and a means of ensuring a certain civility; to some extent, it took the place of religion as a homogenizing power"¹⁴. The reader should consult history books to be able to lay bare the point of view that is conducted in the work and the ideology and political position that are disseminated to the receivers.

In realistic literary texts, the abyss between objectivity and subjectivity is bridged by the author's interference with the text and his intention to achieve certain effects on the reader. By transmitting his beliefs through the plot, setting and character, the author disturbs the impersonal and ahistorical aspects attributed to the text, and thus makes his discourse a cultural power through which he controls the reader. In her essay "Realism and Feminism in the Progressive Era", Patricia Schroeder exposes different arguments of feminists' hostility to realism and claims that some rejected it because they saw that it reflects male experience exclusively; others argue that it tends to normalize the traditionally unequal power relations between genders and classes. She records some views of feminists who believe that realism "reinscribes this inequality in a particularly dangerous way by pretending to be an objective recording of the world while representing women as sexual 'other' and excluding female subjectivity"¹⁵. This antagonistic view towards the subjectivity of realism nourishes the accusations of James as a misogynist. A critic like Walton argues that masculinism is apparent in James given that realism itself is masculinist, sexist and elitist. Winfried Fluck also accuses James of an "unwitty complicity with a social system which his work claims to distance or even transcend by art"⁴. Mark Seltzer similarly claims that James's works of art are "an aesthetic and theoretical rewriting of power"⁴. Judith Fetterly, for instance, thinks that James "invokes the conventional romantic pattern of the pursuing male and the yielding female"¹⁶. Some critics suggest that his first domestic novels like *Watch and Ward* (1871) go hand in hand with his later political and social novels in terms of empowering the male characters over the females. The novel narrates the story of Roger Lawrence who adopts the orphan Nora Lambert and decides to raise her so that she can become his own bride when she comes of age. The literature of domesticity created a "conservative defense against – expansion of women's nondomestic pursuits" just like the new popular literature which consisted of "advice books, sermons, novels, essays, stories and poems advocating and reiterating women's certain, limited role," as argued by Nancy Cott¹⁷.

However, the researcher who performs studies in literature understands that subjectivity in realism is not always defending the most powerful group in society; it can be critical and subversive, uncovering the author's desire to change the social and conventional rules. In a process of neglecting Wimsatt and Beardsley's Intentional Fallacy and Barthes's death of the author, the present study of James's "realistic" works discusses the author's likely positive intentions towards modern woman's situation. His subjectivity invokes his reformist spirit not necessarily siding with puritanical attitudes or patriarchal values, but rather with woman's liberation. The fact of satirizing woman's wretched conditions under the patriarchal and capitalist systems while positively portraying independent and talented women is pragmatic enough to place James as a feminist reformer. John Carlos Rowe believes James to be "a likely ally for feminist politics and an apt subject for feminist literary criticism"¹⁸.

Not only do his novels show his “sympathy for his female characters”¹⁹, but also his plays “set women in powerful positions” and describe their efforts to reform the moral lives of those around them in order to make them “move toward subjectivity and selfhood”²⁰. As a critic, James also shows concern for woman’s matters, especially when he writes essays like “The Manners of American Women” or “The Speech of American Women.”

In his fiction, James echoes the power-structured relationships in society in order to criticize them rather than reinforce them. He creates independent, liberal and revolutionary female characters and activates woman’s presence in the fictional world of his novels. He provides the reader with talented, intelligent and bold women with new ideologies and unconventional attitudes. He endows his female figures with the power and determination which are often absent in his male characters. Kazin describes James’s most favorable archetype of “the American girl, his ‘princess,’ the ‘heiress of all ages,’ [who] was always a more dominating figure in James’s fiction than his pale, indecisive males”²¹. Submissive and conventional female characters are pictured as suffering and unhappy creatures. His representation of female characters reflect his desire to liberate the female sex, a desire which can also be detected in his personal life, especially through his deep and close relationship with his liberal-minded cousin, Minny Temple. Fred Kaplan claims that James loved Minny for her “precociousness, her brashness, her independence of spirit”²². She was a dynamic woman who wished to travel, discover and challenge the Victorian age. James “reversed their gender roles” claims Kaplan, “and acted as the passive support for her aggressive independence”²².

James’s dissatisfaction with the unequal distribution of power in his society stirred his subjectivity and mobilized his bias towards woman’s emancipation in his realistic works that pretend to be representational. Therefore, if the reader does not investigate the situation of women in the nineteenth century, he might not be able to interpret the textual data and extract the author’s political position. The creation of independent female characters in James’s works is a sign of James’s feminism. The character of Charlotte Stant, “the appealingly independent, energetically ambitious, but initially penniless young woman”¹⁹ in *The Golden Bowl*, or Isabel Archer who is also poor but “independent” or even Kate Croy, the active manipulator in *The Wings of the Dove*, are examples of James’s positive portrayals of liberated women.

The Themes of Homosexuality and Marriage: In *The Bostonians*, James chooses an unconventional love plot between two women as an expression of dissatisfaction and a way of transgressing social norms. It is through the establishment of sexual liberation in his fiction that the author questions the validity of heterosexuality as a cultural construct. Starting from a fashionable life style among women in New England, James reproduces a close emotional attachment between two young

women. Boston, which was chosen to be the setting of events and the spot which celebrates the intimate friendship of Olive and Verena, may historically have been one of the American cities which embraced such same-sex relationships. The use of Boston as a setting is symbolic in the novel since it was an all-encompassing city which held conflicting values. Being the city of New England heritage and Puritanism, Boston is the symbol of culture. However, Bostonian radical feminists are placed in the novel as reformers who tend to deconstruct cultural constructs and reconstruct a new identity for women. Ransom, though a Southerner, defends culture and strives to save Boston from the hands of the feminist reformers. To understand the implications of the setting, the reader should have knowledge of the history of Boston, a city in which gay relations multiplied originally as a natural attraction among the same sex and have then become an argument against the cultural basis of heterosexuality.

During the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, there was no objection to women’s attachment to one another; these relationships were referred to as romantic friendships or Boston marriages. They were familiar in the United States, Europe, and England and were documented through a bulk of letters exchanged between women. Women were allowed to form exclusive bonds with each other; the emotional nature of those bonds was reckoned while the sexual component was uncertain and undocumented. Romantic friendships were popular, for instance, in the life of the American poetess Emily Dickinson who wrote a large number of romantic correspondences and poems to Susan Gilbert, then to Kate Scott Anthon. It was said that Dickinson’s seclusion was caused by Kate’s interruption of their friendship. Fetterly points out that *The Bostonians* was inspired by James’s sister Alice and her Boston marriage with her long time companion Katherine Loring; her letters and diaries disclose the nature of their relationship. James creates a dynamic relationship between history and story through his examination of these romantic friendships in his novel. Yet he refuses to be a mere historian and decides to deploy those friendships in a political context. He criticizes the political institution of marriage whose aim is to keep women under control, and shows that these female unions function as a political response to the limitations imposed on one’s sexual freedom.

An openness to the historical appearance of this phenomenon of female homosexuality is needed to better grasp the political implication of the possible lesbian bond between the two protagonists of *The Bostonians*. In 1870, the term “lesbianism” was used to refer to sexual bonds between women, and in 1890, it was used in a medical dictionary as a sexual disorder. In her essay entitled “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relation between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carroll Smith Rosenberg claims that “these bonds were often physical as well as emotional”²³. The physical aspect of these female relationships was extracted from the conditions of life offered to such girls where they “might spend every hour of every day

together”²³ and they “routinely slept together, kissed and hugged each other”²³. Although “the line between sex and tenderness in such friendships was peculiarly elusive”²³, the sexual side may not be denied. Society has provided lesbians with a lasting categorization and considered them as an anomalous social group. Psychiatrists of the time identified lesbianism as an abnormal and unnatural sexual inclination and the refusal of the hetero ideology as a sexual deviation and disorder. Sexologists like the German Richard von Krafft-Ebing and the British Havelock Ellis approached lesbian behavior as a form of insanity.

The female couple of *The Bostonians* represents an ideal example of Boston marriage as James himself declares; it is a romantic friendship charged with emotions of love and passion. Olive is primordially committed to Verena while experiencing all the feelings a “natural” couple may have. Her fear to lose Verena is directly announced: “I am so afraid I shall lose you. Verena, don’t fail me – don’t fail me”²⁴. Similar to Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and her long nightmare meditation after Osmond asked her to influence Lord Warburton to marry Pansy is Olive’s recognition of her situation in chapter thirty nine when she begins to lose her friend: “Verena’s staying out in a boat from ten o’clock in the morning till nightfall was too unnatural, and she gave a cry . . . , which expressed only a wild personal passion, a desire to take her friend in her arms”²⁴. The passage is full of emotions, intending to show the romantic aspect of the relationship. When James uses expressions like “her *wild* [emphasis added] personal passion”, “she gave a *cry* [emphasis added]”, her “*hungry* [emphasis added] jealousy”²⁴ and when he describes Olive begging Verena to remain with her: “she *burst* [emphasis added] into tears, threw herself into her friend’s bosom. ‘Oh, don’t desert me – don’t desert me, or you’ll kill me in torture,’ she moaned shuddering”²⁴, he may intend to dramatize Olive’s emotional attachment to Verena in order to reflect upon that new social phenomenon. The aggressive and hysterical behavior of Olive is caused by an excess of emotionality as well as an overwhelming fear to lose her “sister self”. A psychoanalytic reader may think of it as a result of a repressed sexuality, deeply rooted in woman’s history of oppression: Bertonneau suggests that “Olive’s prudery in fact makes her repressed eroticism volcanic and potentially explosive”²⁵.

Like gender, which is seen by feminists as a cultural concept pasted over male and female biological identity, marriage is considered as a patriarchal institution which maintains sexual discrimination. Caught into these social institutional cages, women were viewed as desired objects of pleasure rather than desiring subjects. The objectification of women translated man’s desire to have a self-effaced and sexless wife. Woman had to stick to the nineteenth-century ideal of the domestic paragon and be a mere non-responsive and inactive sexual partner. Thus her moral perfection resulted in her asexuality. Elizabeth Allen draws on the idea that “womanliness came to mean sexlessness and in the 1840s and later fiction relied on this

conviction whenever it presented an ideal woman”²⁶. Nineteenth-century woman should follow the type of the Virgin Mary, “the sexless maternal figure”²⁷, in order to enter the realm of perfection under the rule of a patriarchal Father who kept incessantly molding a whole ideology of sexual hierarchy.

In her essay “The Paradigmatic Angel in the House: The Virgin Mary and Victorian Anglicans”, Carol Marie Engelhardt presents the bipolar Victorian view of the Virgin Mary. Although she was defined by her role as mother and was “the only woman able to satisfy the contradictory demands of the angelic myth that woman be both virgin and mother”²⁸, Mary stands as the antithesis of the Angel in the House given that her celibacy contrasts with the Victorian family values that repudiate woman’s eternal virginity. For Victorians, “female virginity was highly valued, but only until marriage”; it was rejected as “a life-long choice”²⁸. The instructor should take the student back to the history of the Victorian society when he embarks on the analysis of the theme of marriage in James’s novel. As an opposition to the Victorian ideals, James dealt with the Virgin Mary motif in terms of long life celibacy; his fiction is full of single female characters as confirmed bachelors, not to consider spinsters and widows. The politics of celibacy followed by James through his characterization of female figures aims at celebrating individual freedom and sexual self-sufficiency.

The Image of the Modern Woman: There was a special progress in the status of the American woman for the argument that new nations give new freedoms. New England Transcendentalism contributed to the redefinition of woman as free and independent yet innocent and individualistic. In *Dimity Convictions*, Barbara Welter exposes the quandary of the American girl who had to “show the superiority of freedom linked to moral purity. . . to be both bold and innocent.”²⁶ According to Allen, in some of James’s novels, the American girl is pictured as “independent, moral, free, innocent and her attractiveness is either ‘delicate’ or of a pale and rather asexual kind. . . She is of course, always unmarried”²⁶. The asexuality of James’s characters is not meant here to be a sign of passivity but rather a sign of independence of the male sex and of disobedience to social rules. Daisy Miller, in his novella *Daisy Miller* (1878), for example, although not asexual, functions as a vehicle of the clash of American incorruptibility and naturalness with European decorum and ritual. Her flirtatiousness and vulgarity do not annihilate her spontaneity and innocence. She is a model of the American coquettish girl who follows her reflexes and acts on her feeling. Her boldness is shown first through her refusal to obey the rules of European society and second through her acceptance of death if ever she gets the Roman fever, which she does contract.

As a reaction to the negative relationship between women and the ruling political circles in the nineteenth-century American society, feminist figures insisted on attaining public visibility and political contribution. After succeeding in launching a series

of reform movements in the nineteenth century, including political reform and the suffrage movements, social reform (like the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act); health reform (like the 1886 Contagious Act); moral reform (including the victimization of prostitutes, joining Christian benevolent associations, leading anti-slavery movements...); economic reform (like the first industrial strikes led by women in the United States that occurred in 1835), active feminists provided evidence about their political and social maturation. Woman's development conditioned the overthrow of the patriarchal parameters of True Womanhood. Nineteenth-century women took part in education and prison reform and contributed to the abolitionist movement during the pre-civil war period through their mobilizing public orations.

Another example from James's fiction which requires the reference to the cultural conditions of his era is his representation of the emerging habit of theater-going and the ascendancy of actresses to the stage. The reasons behind James's concern for female performance in his fiction were historical and cultural, especially that the contemporary era was one of extravagant staging with a new emphasis on the actor as celebrity and the director as a theatrical professional. Technological innovations on stage in the 1800s, 1820s and by mid-century contributed to the rise of theater and the proliferation of dramatic material. James's obsession with the theater made him develop a network of friendships and acquaintances with actresses, playwrights and actor managers. This personal detail is crucial for the Jamesian reader first because of the influence of drama on his fiction, and second due to his reproduction of real friends and acquaintances in his narratives. His connections included Elizabeth Robins, Ellen Terry, Fanny Kemble, G.B. Shaw, A.W. Pinero, William Arker, George Alexander, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Edward Compton, Augustin Daly, and Harley Granville-Baker²⁰. His care for female genius on the stage made him admire and befriend the famous actress Fanny Kemble who had made her first *début* in 1829, fourteen years before his birth. He was fascinated with her art and fond of her as a person; he describes her as "one of the consolations of [his] life"²⁹. After her death in 1893, he wrote a tribute to his dear friend, in a letter to her daughter Sarah: "She went when she could, at last, without a pang; she was very touching in her infirmity all these last months . . . and yet with her wonderful air of smouldering embers under ashes, she leaves a great image . . . a great memory"²⁹. The appealing images of actresses in his fictional works were inspired by his female acquaintances in the domain of theater.

James's deep interest in the theater made him an expert critic and efficient observer where his devoted play-going almost to the end of his life resulted in an adept spectatorship. He often theorizes about stagecraft and acting; he for example thinks that the architectural changes of the stage are necessary to sustain the illusion of reality: "if the illusion on the stage was perfectly maintained, the acting was good"³⁰. His study of contemporary

theater gave birth to "a body of dramatic theory"³¹, as suggested by Wade who collected James's essays on theater in a book entitled *The Scenic Art*. As a critic and theorist, he wrote thirty two essays on the English, French and American theater and on actors and playwrights from 1872 to 1901.

As a reformer, James asks actresses for more enthusiasm, audacity and liberation for the representation of their own sex. This idea is made clear when he says: "The actresses are classically bad, though usually pretty, and the actors are much addicted to taking liberties"¹¹. In his works, James may have aimed at creating the ideal actress through his portrait of Miriam Rooth, in his lengthy novel *The Tragic Muse*, as a successful public performer and complete artist. He also appears to condemn performers' destructive weakness and lack of determination when he makes the feeble Verena, in *The Bostonians*, bury by her own hands her oratorical gifts and performative power and consequently let her feminine charm be submerged with the flood of conventions.

The Impact of the Theatre on James's Fiction

James's dramatic criticism affected his fictional work not solely in the choice of characters' occupations and structuring of their psychology, but also in the general use of the dramatic form in his novels (which often function as comedies and tragedies) and the specific use of the scenic method within his texts. James's introduction of the "dramatic scene" in the novel as related to the emotional development of the character is, according to Stephen Spender, a revolution with which "the novel has, of course, in the presentations of passions, never broken quite away from the tradition of the theater . . . in the description, we see the alignment of characters; in the scenes we witness the release of emotions, the expression of passion"³². The theater permitted to James also to deal with "the self as performance, to give himself up to what he called 'different experiences of consciousness'³³. These details could be captured outside of the fictional text by being open to James the critic, essayist and dramatist and by consulting historical works about the theatre and popular drama in the nineteenth century.

James's constant theater-going during his lifetime is a useful personal detail to get more grasp of his fiction. His critical works on theater and drama and his dramatic experiments offer a relevant context to understand the scenic form of his novels and the inclusion of themes related to drama and acting in his fiction. The man's faithfulness to the world of theater made him cling to it despite the difficulties that encountered him. His life was turning around the theater; he extremely enjoyed the friendship of actors, dramatists and managers that he molded many of his fictional characters upon real figures of his acquaintances. His influence by theater is easily detectable in his works of fiction through characterization, themes and form; he is the creator of the dramatic novel which breaks with the classical literary tradition.

The theatre affects James's mode of writing and makes him blur the boundaries between drama and fiction. In *The Bostonians*, many big scenes mark the development of the action climaxing in the big theatrical scene of the conclusion set up in a theater while arousing the same theatrical emotional effect. In *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*, Perosa describes these scenes as "sensational, melodramatic scenes –*coups de théâtre* – rather than dramatic scenes"⁵. Likewise, *The Tragic Muse* contains intense and compressed scenes, articulating sequences and showing actions through dialogues. James says about it that "the whole thing has visibly, from the first, to get itself dare in dramatic, or at least in scenic conditions"³⁴. He uses the dramatic method within the framework of the pictorial style; in *The Literature of the American People*, Clarence Gohdes describes the work as "a series of rich prose pictures of scenes"⁵.

In the novels of the following decade, the narrative method will rely more and more on dramatic presentations of little actions and minor events. While preserving the dramatic style, James relies on the march of action through the application of limited point of view and scenic form aiming at "synthetic compression"⁵. *The Awkward Age* (1899), for instance, is one of his avant-garde novel of that period; it is theatrically structured around dialogues and triologues. It is modeled upon the play script where each of the "acts" is divided into numbered units or "scenes" which are evenly distributed among the ten-character-named books of the novel. James is so tempted by drama that he loses the genre motif in his writings and establishes what he calls a "contact with the DRAMA, with the divine little difficult, artistic, ingenious, architectural FORM that makes old pulses throb and old tears rise again"²⁰.

Foundations of schools of acting by women marked the evolutionary spirit of the era as promoted by the Fabian Society where they progressively changed from simple trainees to managers and dramatists, then to expert trainers and masters of art. Sarah Thorne not only ran the Margate Theatre Royal between 1867 and 1899, but also pioneered in the establishment of a respected school of acting to attract the "ladies and gentlemen" wishing to enter the theatrical profession³⁵. He got inspired by such real women while crafting his fictional characters; Thorne is a reminder of James's character Madame Carré, the French acting coach in *The Tragic Muse* who stands for that type of female leader and director of individual talents.

Nonetheless, the confusion between the stereotype of the actress and the courtesan was held in an agitated societal atmosphere, not seeing the political side but imbued with feelings of disdain for these female performers. Like prostitution, theatrical activity was seen as a profession granting a primary source income in return for the physical selling of the self. The association of the theater with prostitution was even more firmly established in the United States where the nation's puritanical origins influenced the perception of performance and its entailing immorality and associated theater with sexual display. The American theater

was criticized for offering the space for crimes of exhibitionism and prostitution. Both occupations often overlapped to give birth to the theatrical tradition of the actress- courtesan. Lora Pearl, a famous London courtesan of nineteenth-century demi-monde embarked on a theatrical carrier. The opposite also happened when performers turned into courtesans like the alteration of Lola Montez, the eastern American dancer and performer (1851), into a recognized courtesan. In fiction, the first type is, for example, reproduced by Zola in his character Nana, and the second type is seen, for instance, in Dreiser's protagonist Carrie. This moral transformation was a historical result of the rise of prostitution in the nineteenth century where 84 out of 168 had become prostitutes³⁶.

Conclusion

Henry James's fiction cannot be appropriately understood in isolation; the reader needs an openness to the extrinsic elements of the text so as to fathom its underlying point of view. A number of historical facts, cultural conditions and authorial details can serve a more fruitful reading of James's fiction. It is, for instance, recommended to refer to the political turmoil of the *fin de siècle* that can justify James's choice of certain political themes like violence and anarchism. The rise of capitalism is easily detected in James's novels through the focus on the ascending bourgeoisie, the emergence of the department store and the market ideology, the commercialization of the cultural, the rise of the spectacle, etc. Likewise, the socio-cultural background of the nineteenth century should be studied in order to facilitate the assimilation of the setting, characters and themes.

Hence James's feminism can be extracted in the light of a good understanding of the social conditions of woman, first by exposing her suffering from the patriarchal system and second through the creation of a positive image of the New Woman, including the figure of the public performer. Biographical data can also help seize the stylistic innovation of James, namely the scenic method and the stream-of-consciousness technique, and the typology of his characters which appear to be the byproduct of the author's daily contact with the world of theatre and the result of his pensive critical essays on drama.

Fiction, therefore, may not be properly studied without a reference to the period of time in which it was written and to the personal life of the lurking mind which fashioned it. According to many critics, theorists, and academics, the strategy of isolating the text and alienating it from its outer context in fiction can be an invalid idea which binds the work to its intrinsic texture and places it in a self-sufficient circuit which thwarts the act of reading within the textual space.

It limits the freedom of the reader and undermines the interaction between history and literature, reality and imagination. James's fiction is a mere example that shows the necessity of reading about the characteristics of the nineteenth

century and the meaninglessness of putting aside biographical and historical data in the critical performance. An equal reliance on the historical context and linguistic context can produce an effective reading of the author's position.

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