INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI®
RICE UNIVERSITY

Of Kings and the Common Touch:
An Answer to
The Question of James and the Educated Lay Reader

by

Ronald Carson Samples

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Walter Isle, Professor of English, Chair

David L. Minter, Professor of English

James R. Pomerantz, Professor of Psychology

HOUSTON, TEXAS

APRIL, 2001
April, 2001

ABSTRACT

Of Kings and the Common Touch:

an Answer to

The Question of James and the Educated Lay Reader

by

Ronald Carson Samples

"Of Kings and the Common Touch" asserts that James is accessible and likeable in ways consistent with the fundamental interests of common readers. *The American* depicts a transcendentally American Christopher Newman who models legitimate cultural identity, Europeans and expatriate Americans who are pathologically motivated, and European "legitimists" who are anachronistic and "dead." *The Bostonians* portrays a deterministic democratic impulse embodied by Miss Birdseye and all else in the novel, with Olive Chancellor too self-contradictory to be a genuine feminist and Basil Ransom an ironically rightful advocate of the fundamentality of male-female relationships despite undeniable shortcomings. Through John Marcher's failures in "The Beast in the Jungle" James condemns the exclusivity of manners and elitist society and endorses the common that May Bartram represents, while concerns in the "The Real Thing" -- with the artist's
attempt to maintain rapport with an underappreciative audience while also maintaining fidelity to his craft, the change of eras from the aristocratic to the democratic, and the accusative depiction of boredom as the pathological motive for both characters and readers – parallel the concerns in a work as popular and accessible as Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game.” Finally, a la Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” *The Sacred Fount* amusingly depicts a significantly nameless narrator's self-victimization as he foregoes actual heterosexual penetration to participate in an engaging drama of intellectual penetration that ultimately renders him unmanned, emasculated, and penetrated rather than penetrating.
For

Papa, the late Reverend Carson Robert McKinney, my grandfather who sold his house to go to seminary school and thus made possible the work that I have done; my mother, Browning McKinney Samples, my hero and favorite outlaw, to whom I most apologize for my tardiness in completing this work; my father, the late Eugene Samples, who died before my fifth birthday yet managed to teach me the possibility of success and historically significant achievement in the face of severely limited educational, economic, and social opportunity; “my wife of many years,” Dr. Gwendolyn Hale Samples, for her love and support and companionship and genuine friendship, for her role as the most reliable of my “educated lay readers,” for being my partner in life, and for being so easy and pleasing for me to love; my two sons, Carson Robert and Garrett McKinney in the hope that my accomplishments will motivate or in some other way facilitate theirs; my “Aunt Eunice,” Eunice G. Weston, who has since my freshman year gently intimidated me to my academic benefit with the burden of her tacit expectations: the late Herbert J. Provost, my former tennis coach at Texas Southern University, for teaching the lesson of intensity in all things; the late Dr. Lewis R. Morris for believing with me in the priority of the obligation of fathers to sons and wives and mothers in our community; the late Dr. J.A. Ward for not only believing in me but for showing respect enough to disagree to the end of prompting the sharpening of my ideas; Dr. J. Marie McCleary, Yvonne P. McCree, Dr. Nell S. Cline, Dr. Barbara Eliot, “J.J.,” A.J.,” “D.K.,” and all other past and present members of the close-knit fraternity that is the Department of English at Texas
Southern University; and everyone else in the village that it in some way always takes to raise a child, to write a dissertation, or to accomplish anything of significance in this life.

I am "the grandson." I am the pygmy atop the shoulders of giants.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Why I Went to the Woods, or the Jungle, As It Were ................................1

CHAPTER TWO

The Cultural Imperative and Cultural Identity: The American et. al. in

The American ................................................................................................................13

Part I: The Question of Oedipus ...............................................................13

Part II: The Destructive Element ...............................................................25

Part III: The Fruits of Transcendence ..........................................................41

Part IV: The European Oedipus .................................................................53

Part V: The Primacy of the Oracle ...............................................................62

CHAPTER THREE

James and Democracy: A Different Look at The Bostonians and the

Question of Justice Therein .............................................................................73

Part I: Miss Birdseye ...................................................................................76

Part II: Olive .................................................................................................88

Part III: Basil Ransom ..................................................................................106
CHAPTER FOUR

The Beast and the Jungle in “The Beast in the Jungle” .................................................115

CHAPTER FIVE

Mr. Connell and Mr. James, Odd Peas in the Same Pod: Art, Eras,

and Motives in “The Most Dangerous Game” and “The Real Thing” ...............135

CHAPTER SIX

Sex in James: The Drama of Penetration in The Sacred Fount...............................................159

Part I: Absent Lancelot When the Devil is a Gentleman or

“My wife said if I go hunting or fishing or camping just one more
time, she’s gonna leave. My God, I’m gonna miss her” ..................162

Part II: Enter Geoffrey Crayon and Emmy Lou Hays.................................188

Part III: E=mc^2: :Use:Loss – Beware: Do Not Read This Poem...............206

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: The Circle within which They Happily Appear to Do So................227
I

Why I Went to the Woods

or

The Jungle, As It Were

When I applied to the N. E. H. Faculty Graduate Study Program for Historically Black Colleges and Universities for the grant that has funded completion of much of this study, one of the questions that I was required to answer was that of "the relevance of the choice [of topics] for present and future teaching assignments." As the program's application materials state, "the Faculty Graduate Study Program is designed to strengthen the teaching of the humanities at historically black colleges and universities."

In addition, I teach English mostly to freshmen and sophomores at a primarily undergraduate open admissions institution and in a department wherein (1) long fiction is rarely addressed, (2) James is infrequently addressed even when his short works appear in the departmentally selected anthologies, (3) a seminar in James is out of the question even at the graduate level, and (4) the emphasis is on the development of basic skills rather than skills in the interpretive appreciation of literature and on the preparation of public school teachers rather than potential scholars. And, finally, the subject of this study is Henry James. Hence, though clearly appropriate, the question of relevance, of use, of possible appropriation is in this case a particularly formidable one. As my subtitle is largely intended to indicate, the question of use is, in fact, the main question that this treatment will address.
The Faculty Graduate Study Program's requirement that I answer the question of James' relevance was not, however, the provocation for my consideration of the issue. Sometime early in 1987, one of my co-workers who knew that I was working on James for the dissertation placed in my office mailbox a copy of the January 4, 1987 issue of the New York Times Book Review in which the late Anatole Broyard had published a review of The Ambassadors. Though generally favorable, Broyard's view that "taking on [the later] James is a heroic act," that "James [stands] like an ultimatum, forbidding us to fall short, to disappoint great expectations," that "he seize[s] on . . . middleclass men and women behaving like gods," that "Strether carries politeness to the pitch of mysticism," and that "our difficulty with James stems from the fact that we can't stand to see mere human creatures -- who are not in dire circumstances -- shown so much patience and given so much importance" (10) struck me quite a bit the wrong way because such a view contributes too much to the errant but popular view that James is difficult to the point of being elitist, that James' concerns are largely if not totally irrelevant to those who are in more pressing circumstances, that James' writing is indeed only what he himself called "the mere twaddle of graciousness," that James is more a romanticist than a realist or even a naturalist, and that James lacks and even eschews the common touch, his lifelong desire and effort to achieve popularity notwithstanding.

Needless to say, an eight paragraph review in a weekly newsprint magazine whose primary task almost must be to sell well does not constitute a major source. But a major source is precisely what is not needed here. The very fact of the source, intent, and slightness of Broyard's review is testimony to its value as an indication of the most
representative, popular or common, contemporary and saleable views regarding James, an indication not of the last word on the meaning of Henry James but of a particular meaning of James, a product of the congress between a particular set of readers and the read. In any case, such a view is, in fact, echoed by equally popular and contemporary sources like both the 1974 and 1985 editions of McMichaels’ The Concise Anthology of American Literature, wherein James is explicitly characterized as one who wrote for the leisure class rather than the common reader and who wrote as well as if others had as much time to read as he had to write. Additionally, according to one of my former graduate school classmates, the list of “works that students were advised to read for preliminary exams for the doctorate but didn’t” is topped by “anything by James,” a view which contributes further to the general disfavor with which James is received (even before he is read) by the average undergraduate whom, upon graduation, these graduate students teach. Finally, “rounding out” the “four corners” of this survey of views is the view of one of this country’s very popular, very earthy, but also rather socially and academically elite presidents, Theodore Roosevelt who, as Louis Auchincloss reports, once angrily remarked that “James’s ‘snobbish little tales’ about upper-class life in Europe made him ashamed that their author ‘had once been’ an American” (73).

Of course, one might expect to find some relief from more formal and substantial sources and from critics who are more accomplished and well read in James. However, to cite a particularly relevant case in point, a pro-Jamesian critic like Lyall Powers may well be more generous, but a work like Powers’ Henry James and the Naturalist Movement still not only badly misses the point but also badly misses the common reader
(and thus the common touch) when it claims that James' chief debt to the naturalists is for technique rather than content, especially since it is in content if anything that the common student is most interested, since it is content that he is most prepared to appreciate, and since it is naturalistic content in particular that is so compatible with the interests of most common and disadvantaged audiences. Powers misses as well when he claims that James went beyond the naturalists’ achievements and on to success with the naturalists’ wish chiefly by abandoning the “menu people” to focus on “finer sensibilities and more complex psyches” (179). Whether better or worse, better because they alert or worse because they alienate, still inadequate are works like Maxwell Geismar’s *Henry James and the Jacobites* and Auchincloss’ *Reading Henry James*, both of which focus on common or layman’s values in James but do so pejoratively to the end of sanctioning the average student’s rejection of James as a source of useful reading.

Views of James as a difficult writer who does not reward his reader for the trouble that he takes – a view which one of my most respected colleagues has expressed in those very terms – tend not only to imply an incognizance of the very pragmatic messages to be discerned in James’ works, messages which this treatment is primarily intended to address, but also to ignore the fact that, especially for the disadvantaged reader, “the journey is part of the gift”; the trouble itself, such trouble as it is, is one of the chief sources of reward. Many readers dislike reading James for much the same reason that many college students dislike college level classes in literature; they dislike doing the work that drawing meaning from a text, that reading and writing and thinking about literature at the college level requires. Hence, reading James, which admittedly requires
that the reader expend far greater than average effort in detection and data manipulation, is considered an unenjoyable task, while the particular values or meanings on which critics usually focus are such as to convince the common reader that the effort earns very little reward as well. Yet, lest we forget, for the most common and disadvantaged reader, reading itself, and reading difficult material in particular, is a subversive, socio-economically and politically activist or even militant act, especially given that competence in detection of subtly implied meanings is a prerequisite to avoidance of exploitation. Indeed, as my chapter on the brutality of manners in “The Beast in the Jungle” is partly intended to establish, what one may regard as needlessly fine and subtle meaning or, to reuse James’ own phrase, “the mere twaddle of graciousness,” is all too often quite vicious. As far as the task of acquiring these skills in data manipulation and detection is concerned, there is no better instructor than Henry James. Ever the realist and not the romanticist that Broyard and others such as Geismar and Edwin M. Snell would make of him, James does not let the reader escape from his fundamental task and thus does not let him forego the fundamental benefits to be derived from accomplishing that fundamental task.

Although the more informal comments just reviewed convinced me afresh that my thesis of a common touch in Henry James has practical value as well as currency, I had since my belated introduction to James in graduate school – the belated start to my “prolonged sojourn in the jungle” (see Jean Blackall 35) – been motivated not to render James relevant to those whose interests were more earthy and even pressing but to point out how James needed no such apology, how he had rendered himself thusly relevant.
Moreover, until James is amelioratively popularized — or achieves popularity — on the basis of the values that he implicitly endorses, values exclusive of the value of the effort that it takes to read him, the additional fruits to be derived from the labor of reading him will never be fully enjoyed by common readers. The particular effort that reading Henry James requires will continue to be seen as inadequately rewarded, while the effort itself will be discouraged. The primary task involved in popularizing James is therefore an interpretive one leading to an identification of the values in question, which, according to the thesis operating here, is necessarily to consider James in a way that differs from the way he is treated by others. To summarize them, these values are (1) a Jeffersonianly democratic valuation of intelligence and a recognition of the socially leveling impotence and impossibility of knowledge and the equally leveling universality of mistake, (2) an implicit assertion of a cultural imperative that mimics the behavioral ideals of the most nationalistic power minorities (blacks and women included), (3) a sensitivity and humor in the treatment of such popular issues as sex and women's rights that were far ahead of their time, (4) a recognition of manners and polite society as the beast and the jungle, respectively, with a coincident and pro-American depiction of the primitive, natural, and informal as heroic, (5) a depiction of the reality and impact of poverty against the background of a glittering but corrupt high society, (6) a "sociological" and philosophically naturalistic/deterministic view of his fictional world that is highly sympathetic to disadvantaged classes of people, and (7) a general treatment of such earthy issues with a fineness of touch and intelligence that tend to raise them in status as well.
Not all of the values identified above are pointedly addressed in the treatment that follows. The original scheme for not discovering but uncovering these values in James' work called for a three-book, eleven chapter treatment of a broad and numerous selection of James' works, among them, not surprisingly, well-known works such as The Ambassadors, The Golden Bowl, The Wings of the Dove, The Portrait of a Lady, The Europeans, The Spoils of Poynton, What Maisie Knew, The Awkward Age, Roderick Hudson, The Tragic Muse, and "Daisy Miller," along with decidedly lesser texts like The Sense of the Past, The Reverberator, Confidence, Watch and Ward, "An International Episode," "A London Life," and "Hugh Merrow." Accomplishing such a task with any sufficient degree of finis or completion within the framework of a mere dissertation or any single volume work is nearly impossible, especially in service of the audience to which this treatment is directed. Tackling such a task, though pleasant to contemplate, thus proved overly ambitious. The only record of my understanding, support, and summary validation of such a thesis on the scale and of the scope that was originally planned lies in my original prospectus for this treatment. Plans and schemes for what, as I recall, Jack Ward teased as "The Grand Opus" having failed and the need to have done with graduate school having pressed upon me, I was brought to my senses and reduced to development of the same thesis on a smaller, more economical, and perhaps more appropriate and effective scale, using, as the chapter titles of this treatment indicate, The American, The Bostonians, "The Beast in the Jungle," "The Real Thing," and The Sacred Fount as texts in which illustration of the alleged values could profitably be discerned. Additionally, as the chapter that compares James in "The Real Thing" to Connell in "The
Most Dangerous Game” demonstrates, the original thesis for this treatment did not prove to be a Procrustean Bed from which I could not extricate myself. On the contrary, not only was a chapter on “The Real Thing” not even in the original plans, but the particular insights presented within that chapter are direct outgrowths of my sophomore-level teaching experience with open admissions students. Brief though it clearly is, in no way could the chapter on “The Real Thing” be more relevant to an accomplishment of the goals of this treatment. Also, demonstrating the way in which the writing process in this instance proved fortunately and refreshingly to be a discovery process is the chapter on The Bostonians, which was originally intended to address the issues of determinism, the treatment of women, and the gender imperative but developed instead with a life of its own into a consideration of democracy as a deterministic force. Focusing for the most part on single works, these chapters proved lengthy enough. Heaven forbid had I time, energy, and sustained intelligence to do more.

Finally, something more pointed needs to be said about the nature and amount of secondary source material to which I have referred in this treatment. In the end, this treatment both intends and needs to be about the business of teaching. And the business of teaching is about the business of bridging gaps, gaps between where the student is and where the teacher wants him to be. There are no such gaps at the best of American universities or, at least, such gaps are fewer and smaller, and the interests of students at such universities are already generally well-served by the abundance of more esoteric or simply more sophisticated criticism that is already on the shelves. Indeed, there is reason and validity behind the proverbial assertion that “the best schools do the worst job.” To
that end, it does no good for me to demonstrate the facility with which I can negotiate appropriation of such concepts as the Derridian self, Lacanian desire, and the concept of knowledge and is-ness as these assist in the deeper understanding of particular texts. Others of my works have already demonstrated such as much and as intelligently as ever I believe I shall, at least in this life. On the contrary, although I find such exercise not only engaging and fun and appropriate at certain levels of consideration, and although I personally regard it as significant in an ameliorative way that James affords such opportunity for development of more sophisticated views, the level of consideration at which this treatment aims, while fully responsible, is decidedly different, being more introductory and earthy. The goal of this treatment, again, is to present James as considerably more accessible and likeable than he is usually projected to be. In the interest of maintaining consistency with that goal, and in the interest as well of avoiding the error against which Blackall warns, that being the error of “committing the fallacy of unnecessary complexity in an inductive inquiry” (53), I have intentionally restricted my considerations more to what I perceive to be more fundamentalist interpretive criticism and even to less recent views. This is not to say that I have made no use of the “cute” stuff of criticism. Rather, in an effort to teach as well the important lessons of the occasion of fun that literary analysis provides, the breadth in definition of what constitutes a secondary source or relevant allusion, and the value of humor and confidence in one’s experiential background when writing literary criticism, I have even gone so far as to include in my secondary source material such informal things as proverbs, bumper stickers, and allusions to George Strait songs. James’ understanding,
the understanding that he tries to communicate to his readers, regardless of level of sophistication, is no more sophisticated than theirs.

This decision to abstain from the use of more involved criticism is not to insult the student at an open admissions college or university. Indeed, on the contrary, this decision to proceed in different manner but argues the value of such universities. My wife and I both attended such a school and I would be insulting both of us and a couple of good graduate schools as well if I were to suggest that students from such environments simply cannot handle esoteric material. What I am arguing, however, is that many such students – as well as many students from the best of schools – simply do not address such material for the reason of the gap between James and their general level of understanding. There is a gap in the criticism as well. One notes that there are very few apologists for James – and an apologist for James is what my honest interpretive views make of me – who do not also interpret him in a way that makes him unattractive for many lay readers. As I point out in the chapter on James and Connell, literature itself took this same aesthetic turn, this same turn to the aesthete, a turn toward the more obscure and difficult, as if authors were angry at audiences for their inadequacies as readers, as if they held audiences in contempt and expressed that contempt through the distance that they tried to create – by way of the esoteric difficulty of their work – between themselves and their intellectually less elite audiences. More and more at the turn of the previous century – or is it the previous turn of the century? – poetry and the novel became obscure and difficult. And so, significantly, after James' own The Sacred Fount we have James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, all of whom require texts to read their texts; and these
three are followed by the taxing likes of Proust, Pynchon, Faulkner, Robbe-Grillet, and even (as far as the readers in question are concerned) Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Lay readers do not enjoy these texts at all; they decipher. One reads Terri McMillan; one deciphers Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison, the deserved darling of the literary establishment, wins the Pulitzer Prize; Terri McMillan, whom Lucy Fultz of Rice University doubts is really even a novelist, wins the hearts and minds of the lay readership, so much so that the only occasion on which I have ever entered a classroom as a teacher to find that students had read more than I was the occasion on which the assigned text was by Terri McMillan, and which text by McMillan would not have mattered. We cannot deny facts like these and consider ourselves adequate teachers.

And yet, we cannot continue to deny access – because we deny effective instruction – to students who, because they are untutored in same, find James and Morrison and Eliot and Pound and Proust and Pynchon and Faulkner and Gabriel Marquez and Joyce and Ellison and Robbe-Grillet inaccessible and excessively difficult. The Jeffersonian democracy and meritocracy of the exclusion or inclusion notwithstanding, educators worthy of the name cannot continue to allow the exclusion of the readers in question from the enjoyment and benefits of all that reading James has to offer. Focusing as it does on James’ more earthy concerns and ending as it does with a consideration of The Sacred Fount as a prelude to the reader’s consideration of the more difficult writers of the twentieth century, the purpose of this treatment, as with the purpose of any genuine and sincere instruction, is to bridge that gap or even to show how that gap need not be considered unbridged in the first place. The purpose of this treatment is to show, in short, how James walked among
kings and yet did not lose the common touch, and how we, as sincere educators
attempting to teach and even to recommend James to deserving but befuddled students,
might do and might need to do more of the same.
II

The Cultural Imperative and Cultural Identity:

The American et. al. in The American

I: The Question of Oedipus

For any class or cultural group that is considered an underclass and that is trying to achieve or regain recognition from other classes or cultures as well as genuine respect within its own ranks, one of the chief concerns is with the appropriate and effective behavioral ethic or, expressed differently, the issue of one's cultural identity, the need and value of embracing it, and even the inevitability of its assertion. If movements familiar in history are any indication, such concern is well justified, the usual problem being "the presence of Oedipus" and the need to avoid the self-hatred and the love-hate relationship and imitative behavior that characterize the socially Oedipal condition. One is reminded in this regard of Renaissance England's rather Oedipal jealousy and imitative behavior regarding the French, whom they both loved and hated for their greater cultural and material wealth and military strength. French revolutionists themselves became quite as dictatorial and high-handed as the expelled aristocracy had been, while colonial Americans arguably did little more than exchange new overbearing kings for old in their own intolerance of dissent and establishment of rigid church hierarchies and covenants. If one considers what Michel St. John de Crevecoeur writes in the third of his Letters from an American Farmer one notes that Americans in general did not begin to become Americans and did not cease being Europeans until sometime during the age of Ben
Franklin, while eighteenth and even nineteenth century Americans were often imitative of the very English from whom they had tried violently to wrest both independence and respect.

Even more popular movements by groups within American culture would also express these same concerns and manifest these same problems. Echoing the more global problem of Latin America in its relationship with “Los Collossus del Norte,” the Latin American community within the United States would, beginning in the sixties, move toward integration at the risk of abandoning its cultural identity; serving notice that the problem is not one of nationality or ethnicity in its essence, America’s women’s movement on one front would witness “liberated” women enter the corporate world only too frequently to imitate men in both behavior and dress; on another front the jealousy and imitative behavior of the *nouveu riche* (of which Edith Wharton gives us an excellent picture) would continue to show itself unrestricted to time or place. Echoing in their own right the global relationship between contemporary Africa and the cultural West from which it works for cultural and political independence, Afro-Americans from slavery to the late 1960’s would often imitate the same Anglo-Americans whom they had vehemently decried.

This presence of Oedipus, which Frantz Fanon would more provocatively identify as the wish on the part of the native to sleep with the settler’s wife, is, in short, so common as almost to be unworthy of mention and points clearly to the aforementioned importance of recognizing one’s cultural identity, the need and value of embracing it, and even the inevitability of its assertion. Hence, looking at one of the earthiest “have not to
have” movements since the one that led to the establishment of the United States, one notes that in The Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison’s titular hero finally comes to an anxiety free embrace of the fact that “I yam what I yam”; Afro-American militants of the sixties not only asserted the need for the embrace of one’s cultural or racial identity but also followed up those assertions with scathing criticism of those who disagreed or behaved otherwise; and the sense of culture’s imperative survives even among the untutored in the Afro-American colloquial reminder that being black and dying are the only two things that a black person has to do in this life.

One would hardly expect consideration of such an earthy and fundamental issue from a writer so allegedly aloof and apparently expatriate as James; and to expect consideration of an issue relevant to blacks from an American author who has less than a handful of them in his entire sizeable canon – and those only peripherally or by allusion – seems even further out of the question. Moreover, S. Gorley Putt argues that “the Trans-Atlantic balance has shifted so radically in the last hundred years or so that the manners and attitudes of James’s . . . pilgrims may sometimes seem to be those of some distant millennium” and that “even some of the plots seem false to us” (51). Further discouraging such expectations is James’ usual characterization as a psychological realist who not only advocates the exercise of free will but also denies the ascendancy of deterministic forces, the idea of a cultural imperative being a fairly deterministic notion. Additionally, according to Lyall H. Powers, the particular charge against The American is that even if one considers it to be James’ “initial venture into the Naturalist mode” it is at best “a false start” (Henry James and the Naturalist Movement 44), while Louis
Auchincloss seconds this charge in asserting that "The American is certainly not a deterministic novel" (43). Yet, what one gets from James is not only consideration but support, illustrated support, of a cultural imperative of timeless relevance that persists in his work from the beginning to the end of his career.

James' first treatment of this thesis of a cultural imperative is in The American, and within that novel the treatment of the issue begins very early, with the first description of the novel's hero, Christopher Newman, and of how he has come to be. Of course, Newman at least seems to have come to Europe primarily for a wife, and in that he initially seems to promise to be a same old and very American song, a very typical Oedipus, one of Frantz Fanon's "natives" who, again, wants to sleep with the settler's wife or, in this case, to increase his status by marrying a European woman, the symbol of beauty for the pathological American who, ignoring his own cultural identity and holding his cultural heritage in contempt, continues to capitulate to European standards. That Newman seems, as R.W. Butterfield characterizes him, "dazzled . . . by all things European" (25) and attracted to the beautiful as judged by European standards - or, rather, to the symbols of that beauty - is further suggested by his ignorant apparent attraction to the paintings in the Louvre (where we first find him even before we learn of his wish to find a wife), by his interest in learning, and by his even more explicit attraction to the flirty French adventuress and fraudulent copyist, Noemie, about whom he knows nothing except that she is "uncommonly taking" and French. That is, to the native, almost any one of the settler's wives will do; as with Oedipus, the king's wife is but another of the king's possessions. Nor is this unflattering interpretation discouraged
by what Newman says he wants in a wife, for, much as Leon Edel aptly notes (NCE 421), “the best article in the market” is simply that, an article, an object; and as an article or object is precisely how Oedipus and the Fanonian native regard all of the king’s or settler’s possessions, including his “wife.”

Even were this interpretation correct, it would have acquitted the novel of the charge, made in an early review entitled “The American Novel – with Samples,” that it is “a book without a positive effect, . . . without an aim [and failing] to inculcate any lesson of morals” (407). Specifically, it would have identified the novel as what I generally characterize as a problem model (rather than a solution model) and, especially given the way the novel ends (with Newman’s failure to achieve his desired end), thus as an excellent lesson, albeit a rather typical one, in the negative consequences of a neglected awareness and embrace of one’s own cultural identity and heritage. However, in addition to the fact that this interpretation is based on a rather loose reading of the facts in the case, treatment of the typical in this regard is, as Naomi Lebowitz suggests (13, 14, and elsewhere), rarely typical in James and is even less to be expected in a novel that even early reviewers recognized as having broken new ground. (See The Nation 14 in NCE 389 and The North America Review 125 in NCE 405). James hints, in fact, at a promised frustration of any anticipation of the typical (except as the typical is to be here redefined) via the specifics that he gives regarding each of these apparent attractions. Specifically (and a great deal needs to be said about what Newman is not), as he literally lounges “with his head thrown back and his legs outstretched,” Newman’s posture is not the mannered posture of an Oedipus who has in any way bowed out of inordinate respect to
European gods via a pretence at learned scrutiny of the displayed art work. On the contrary, as even Maxwell Geismar admits, and Geismar is no apologist for James, Newman "cares not a fig for European 'race' or culture" (22). His posture in particular is rather that of one who not only cares little for such airs but who also shows that he cares little by apparently knowing little about such proper "manners." His posture, that is, shows what Oscar Cargill contends is "an indifference to society" and what we should recognize as a function of his democratic identity (NCE 432). Newman is, as J. A. Ward asserts, "perfectly content with himself [and] has no desire to emerge a European" (Imagination of Disaster 41). Perhaps even more indicative of the absence of Oedipus here is the fact that Newman at the Louvre is not enjoying "Murillo's beautiful moon-borne Madonna" at which he is only apparently staring; he is engaged, rather, only "in profound enjoyment of his posture." And, as Butterfield would alert us, Newman's posture is actually one of his several distinctive gestures, gestures that "are in the most literal sense spacious and expansive, in contrast with a Europe that is confined and enclosed" (6).

As far as his attraction to Noemie is concerned, we find that although he finds her "uncommonly taking" and is apparently unable to avoid the typical error of "confounding the merit of the artist with that of his work" (merit which in this case is physical or aesthetic rather than moral or intellectual), he is yet quite able to separate his aesthetic response from his emotional one. That is, he is quite capable of appreciating Noemie's good looks without wanting to become involved with her in any more intimate way. His appreciation of Noemie is itself merely aesthetic. Hence, although he "approached the
young lady” with what may at first seem but a lame means of beginning a flirtation, his “avidity of patronage” turns out not to be the “very old story” of a foreigner’s flirtation that Noemie wants it to be or at least “desires to treat” it as being. In addition, when she hints to him that he has been too forward with her via his request for her address card, he is so far from having intended such forwardness as to be totally oblivious to her meaning; “his powers of divination” in this regard “were at fault.” Born of the disinterestedness of his intended sponsorship of Noemie, his incognizance of the sexual or romantic question in his relationship with her reveals itself again when her father, knowing from his daughter’s dress that her intentions are more romantic and sexual, “beseech[es Newman] to respect the innocence of Mademoiselle Nioche” and Newman, indicating again the absence of any intention or even thought of doing otherwise, “had wondered what was coming.” Later in the novel - shortly past the midpoint, in fact – this disinterestedness will be regarded as such a fait accompli, so much not to be altered, as to constitute grounds for Noemie’s complaint that “He [meaning Valentin] is very much interested in me; . . . He is a contrast to you. . . . You didn’t care for me.”

Even so, when Noemie asks “What led you, by the way, to make me such a queer offer?,” echoing her earlier question of “What made you speak to me the other day in the Salon Carre?,” her question may admittedly continue to be the reader’s question as well. In this matter, one also admits that Newman’s incognizance of the sexual question vis a vis his relationship with Noemie is indeed merely incognizance and not absence or non-existence. That is, especially in the fact that “It is something, at any rate, [for Noemie] to have made [him] angry” not only here but also on at least two other important occasions,
and in his claim to Valentin that “[S]he is not beautiful. I don’t even think her pretty” and that “The girl is nothing to me. In fact, I rather dislike her” when he had initially “thought the young lady uncommonly taking” and will later protest to her that “Oh yes, I did” care for her, there is more than a hint that Newman is much more interested in Noemie than he is willing or even able to admit to certain others. Yet, Newman’s interest in Noemie is not in what she represents; his interest is rather in what she clearly is – a very provocatively and even seductively attractive woman whose “charms,” as evidenced by her ability to attract Europeans as well as Americans, transcend cultural boundaries and therefore are not attractions only in the mind of Oedipus. As even one early reviewer noted, James was careful “to show us what she is by the impression that she makes on others” (“Current Literature” in NCE 396); and the impression that she makes on others, regardless of their cultural identities, is substantial, alas, in one key instance, even fatal.

Newman’s motives for learning French are similarly non-Oedipal. In fact, although Noemie’s father tries to entice him into purchasing lessons by offering to teach him the French “of the best society” and by flatteringly characterizing him as “an admirer of beauty in every form,” Newman clearly (though, significantly, not defensively) indicates that he is not interested in such things in their functions as symbols, that he in fact has some contempt for the idea of “chattering French” and for what he regards as “simply a matter of a good deal of unwonted and rather ridiculous muscular effort on his part,” and that his interest in the language, to the extent that he has any, is, as with his interest in any language, more pragmatic, more materialistic, more democratic, and therefore essentially more American. His interest is purely in use and it is the thought of
such use that sells him on the value of learning the language: "I suppose it would help me a great deal, knocking about Paris," he says after a second thought, "to know the language." And, in keeping with this interest primarily in use, he wants not to know the French "of the best society" but "How much French [he] can . . . learn in a month." Indeed, the French "of the best society," especially in its function as a symbol of the beautiful and as a status symbol, is so little the selling point with Newman that Noemie's father expects it to be — and the father's expectations seem based on the usual reality for Americans in Paris — that he even had "a relish for ungrammatical conversation" and "notions . . . about talking with the natives."

But the chief question of Oedipus as far as consideration of Newman is concerned has to do with his often noted and much discussed desire "to marry a wife," to use his own rather redundant and illogical phrasing. The idea of anyone's *shopping* for a wife, which needless to say is what Newman's utterance mainly conveys, is, of course, provocative of criticism. And, as the example of the anonymous early review in *Catholic World* testifies, for an American implicitly to feel it necessary to shop elsewhere than at home, which Newman here appears to do, provokes even stronger criticism not only from Americans but from other-cultural critics as well ("The American Novel — With Samples" 331-334). The criticism, of course, is directed toward the "shopper's" motive, which motive, if he is "shopping," is clearly not love, not the "grand passion" that an American generally expects to be the basis of a legitimate marriage and might even be the material interest that one would expect to find in more European marriages (such as the one which Noemie desires and such as the two which Claire's mother and brother
consider in the one instance and promote in the other). Ignoring the possibility that expression of passion by males might well have been considered unmanly by most Americans of the depicted time and failing to note as well the possibility noted later by Edel that “Newman [in his American pragmatism] merely recognizes the realities before him” and as “a good American, a shrewd businessman, does not indulge in waste effort” (NCE 421), several early reviews, in fact, register this complaint about Newman’s lack of passion and the novel’s failure to convince us of that passion (“Two New Novels” 391, 392; George Parsons Lathrop 393; “Culture and Progress: The American” 399; “Contemporary Literature” 423). However, while the additional evidence that is needed for ease in fair assessment is – perhaps by design – withheld until several pages later, not even here has James allowed the question of motive to go unaddressed. In particular, Newman’s confession of a wish “to marry a wife” is not made without firm, heavy, and emphasized qualification, which qualification is specifically “if [and we might with justice take that to mean only if] the fancy takes me” (emphasis mine). Indeed, James W. Tuttleton implicitly acknowledges that Newman did not go to Europe primarily to find a wife when he identifies Newman as “a young American millionaire who goes to Paris to cultivate himself and falls in love with the daughter of an aristocratic family” (NCE 448). Newman, who “wants to marry well,” does believe, in short, in “the grand passion” which “takes” and in its importance to a sound marriage, clumsy and materialistic though he may be in expressing this and other beliefs.

Moreover, in contrast to Butterfield’s indictment of Newman for his use of “the language of money” and his sense that the failure of the marriage is “a necessary penalty
... exacted ... for earlier omnivorous acquisitiveness" expressed by way of Newman’s choice of words (17), even the materialistic language of his expression of such things is a point somewhat in his favor. He will later, for example, explain that he wants in a wife "the best article in the market," which resurrects the just-buried charge that he is "shopping." Additionally, he repeats the use of materialistic language to the point of near redundancy in his assertion that "it is time" for him to marry (as if marriage is something to be scheduled like a business appointment in ignorance of love) and in his nearly explicit assertion that "a great woman" as a wife is "like a statue on a monument" to be "perched on the pile" of his earned riches as if she were an object to be "possess[ed]" and hopefully to be admired by others in a way that flatters and pleases her husband. Yet, even if it is the indication that Newman’s "approach to the world has been entirely pecuniary" that Butterfield would assert (17) and even if it is as Ward asserts "not accidental" (Imagination of Disaster 40), such language is — and, as the near redundancy indicates, is intended by James to be — consistent with Newman's embraced cultural identity, as is his previously remarked interest only in the use to which he can put a knowledge of the language and as is his having come "to Europe" simply or primarily "to get the best out of it [that he] can." As Benjamin Whorf would more explicitly instruct in 1956, language is culture; self-raised in the marketplace that is a large part of the American cultural signature, Newman thus expresses himself in the language of the marketplace. Moreover, although his expressions understandably offend the ears and feelings of cultural others and provoke legitimate questions, language is also largely
metaphor, and Newman’s intentions are thus not always so literally and unmetaphorically to be read from his choice of words.

Finally, Newman will not only marry only “if the fancy takes [him]” (my emphasis again), but he also is explicitly not Oedipus looking for a European wife in particular. Indeed, Mrs. Tristram’s actual question to him is “Do you have any objection to a foreigner,” which means any foreigner of any cultural identity, not simply a European, or which at least – and the least here would mean even more – is significantly taken by Newman to mean any foreigner. Answering Mrs. Tristram’s question “After meditating for awhile” and thereby indicating the care he has taken for the accuracy of his answer, Newman says “I have no prejudices,” not even the one against the Irish that the Catholic World reviewer in 1878 wrongly, even irresponsibly, and almost inexplicably attributed to him (NCE 408). (The “No Irish need apply” utterance is Tom Tristram’s; and, notwithstanding the comment’s currency as a joke, James clearly intends for us to consider the source, while Newman’s response to the joke is to exhibit his disapproval by not responding to it except with an extended moment of articulate silence.) And, he “would marry a Japanese,” meaning someone as “foreign” and as culturally other as someone from the other side of the world, “if she pleased [him].” Indeed, Claire is apparently not to Newman a symbol of European beauty or, more relevantly, a trophy of some conquest of aristocratic or even general European society. Rather, as Cargill notes, “Newman is indifferent to society and wishes only the hand of Claire,” who does not to him represent that society (NCE 432). When, in response to the “marry a Japanese” comment, Mrs. Tristram advises that “We had better confine
ourselves to Europe,” he indicates that his only reason for agreeing to confine his search thusly, and for thus exhibiting even that slight hint of a preference or “prejudice” in favor of the European would, again, be the pragmatic one of his and his prospective wife’s needing “to speak the same language.” This same pragmatic concern is a large part of what inclines him to say that “I won’t deny that, other things being equal, I would prefer one of my own countrywomen,” which thus also indicates not only that he has not ruled out an American as a choice but confesses as well his even stronger prejudice in favor of the American – if, that is, one wants to speak of prejudices. Hence, it cannot be said that he is guilty of the Eldridge Cleaver act of rejecting his own countrywomen for the foreign and “exotic.” Indeed, his “other things being equal” comment is a legitimate and even laudable qualification, for one could not respect him for accepting a woman of his “country, right or wrong”; and being “afraid of a foreigner,” which Newman is not, is as much the sign of Oedipus and the Fanonian native as wanting one merely for the sake of her foreignness.

II: The Destructive Element

At this point there has certainly been enough said in defense of Newman against one very formidable charge and in explanation of one thematically very important thing that he is not. There is even a felt risk involved in making such an extended comment on a matter that for some readers may be rather obvious. Yet all of this consideration of the Oedipus that Newman is not has a large bearing on the more important question that is still to be addressed, which is the question of what Newman is. To put it briefly,
Newman is not the American Oedipus but the transcendent American who has not only
gotten beyond his native culture without severing his connection with that culture but has
done so precisely by way of the native route. In this he is parallel to the ideal author of
even James’ occasional view, which view, as Tuttleton reports, is that “the American
writer must be tethered in native pastures” (NCE 446). Indeed, he is arguably in this
respect essentially the American that, as confessed by what Tuttleton reports as James’
advise to his brother William on raising his sons, James somewhat self-regrettably was
not (NCE 446).

One of the best illustrations of Newman’s transcendence of the merely American
and of his use of the native route to achieve that transcendence lies in the details
surrounding his eschewance of violence, which, somewhat contrary to Cargill’s
assessment (NCE 432), is more than a mere attempt to distinguish Newman from Dumas
fils’ Clarkson who, in L’Etrangere, uses violence to impress others. This eschewance of
violence is first remarked very early in the novel when James writes of Newman that
“though he could manage a fight, when need be, Newman heartily disliked the business.”
The note is echoed later, with greater weight, in the scene of Newman’s attempt to
persuade Valentin, to whom he is by then a fast friend, not to go through with
arrangements for a duel with the son of a German brewer over an interest in the worthless
and inconstant Noemie. In both of those instances, Newman’s superior competence, his
capacity for success in violent confrontations, is clearly noted. Specifically, he was
successful in the American Civil War to the extent that he acquired the rank of “brevet of
brigadier general” and did so not by “European” means of pre-war socio-economic,
political, or "inherited" status (recall, in his context, the significant difference in the way Valentin says he would become an officer in the army), but, significantly, by the native American, democratic and meritocratic means of actual battlefield performance or "hard work" that is available to all Americans. As James remarks further, the acquired rank was "an honor which in this case" particularly (and therefore significantly) "had lighted upon shoulders amply competent to bear it." Then, in the second instance, Newman's superior competence in waging "war" is remarked, this time more subtly but thus more forcefully, by the quiet confidence that he shows in considering means by which to save Valentin from possible death via the upcoming duel.

Newman had put on his hat: he pushed it back, gently scratching his forehead high up. "I wish it were pistols," he said. "I could show you how to lodge a bullet!"

Newman, James suggests, is competent enough to instruct the unskilled and to have confidence in his ability to do so.

Newman's demonstrated and experientially acquired competence in the use of violence is an index to his having embraced the native experiential reality, particularly the Civil War from which many Americans shied but also the more general climate of violence in America that, as Cargill suggests, may have been exaggerated in the stereotypical notion "that Americans took human lives lightly and found gunplay a sport" but that nevertheless was a substantial reality during the time in which the novel is set (NCE 432). One does not achieve or demonstrate such competence or acquire such honor either by half-hearted address or - the pragmatic concerns of war being what they
are—by excessive love of the task. Yet, as James informs us, "his four years in the
army," significantly successful and embraced though they were, "had left him with an
angry, bitter sense," a healthy sense, one might add, "of the waste of precious things."
That is, it is precisely this clearly noted competence in the use of violence that has led to
Newman's eschewance of such violence. It is precisely Newman's having followed the
advice of Conrad's Stein to Lord Jim, his self-immersion in the destructive element of the
American Civil War, his embrace of the unpleasant but inescapable American reality
before him in a way that James himself did not, that has led to his transcendence of the
impulse to use such violence. And, it is this resulting transcendence that, in turn, is a
large part of what ultimately makes Newman "better" than others in the novel, including
Valentin. However ironic it may seem, the lesson here—and James in The American is
far more prescriptive than the author of the Catholic Worlds' early review acknowledges
—is that the way up is down. The way to transcendence of one's culture is not through
expatriation and snobbish repudiation but through embrace of and immersion in the very
native culture that one is really quite undeliberately to transcend.

A similar illustration of Newman's transcendence and of his use of the native
route to that transcendence lies in the significance of his earthiest experiences in the
American West, which were not "swapping tales" with the "cowboys" of Irving Howe's
significantly flawed characterization (NCE 443) but were "[sitting] with Western
humorists in knots, round cast-iron stoves, [where he saw] 'tall' tales grow taller without
topping over" and where he acquired the skill that enables him to "prove," in Edel's
estimation, that "he can indulge in give and take" with the likes of the French elite (NCE
These tellers of tall tales are clearly reminiscent of many characters from Mark Twain – Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, the King and the Duke, and the bargemen in *Life on the Mississippi* – as well as characters from Willard Thorpe’s much anthologized and representative “The Big Bear of Arkansas.” Newman’s apparently fond and comfortable observance of and rapport with such figures, his inclusion of contact with them among the experiences that have made him what he is, suggest in him a synthesis and reconciliation of the conflict between Twain and James orientations in nineteenth century American fiction, a conflict which Twain implicitly thought impossible to resolve, with which William Dean Howells (as editor for both writers) had to contend, and which Howe in his analysis of *The American* apparently missed and even thought impossible. “Whole aspects of American experience,” Howe wrote, “were closed to James, most conspicuously that aspect associated with the name of Mark Twain. But then,” he continued, “James’ ignorance of the pioneer west was matched by Twain’s ignorance of ‘international society’” (*NCE* 442). Yet the point that James makes here and by Newman’s later use of the skill that he acquired by such earthy experiences is that such alleged ignorance not only need not be but also will be seen as fiction or myth if we but see that the essential skill involved in both genuine repartee and telling tall tales is the same, that preparation in the one is preparation in the other, that one can bring oneself to par with Europeans in this matter of what *The Awkward Age* designates as “good talk” simply by steeping oneself in the intensely American activity of telling tall tales.

To be sure, as James reports, Newman “had little of the small change of conversation, and his stock of ready-made phrases was the scantiest.” However, such a
report only testifies more forcefully to Newman’s skill at genuine repartee and
conversation in general, the specific content of which is spontaneous and original rather
than studied and “stocked,” and requires that one pay that “plenty of attention” that
Newman “had . . . to bestow.” In addition, although Claire’s “visitors, coming in often
while Newman sat there, found a lean, tall, silent man in a half-lounging attitude,”
(emphasis added) and “though, in general, he was no great talker,” and although,
furthermore, “he was . . . perfectly without words” upon “the large number” of “subjects
upon which he was without ideas,” although, in sum, he was all of this, “he talked much”
during his visits to Claire, “and he succeeded perfectly in making her say many things.”
“He told Madame de Cintre a hundred long stories” and “judging by the sequel, she was
interested.” As Edel notes (NCE 424-25), Newman demonstrates his natively acquired
capacity for his particular but effective brand of repartee or at least the quick witted
response on several occasions. Moreover, his success in such repartee is soundly attested
by those in the novel who are best qualified to judge. For example, Urbain and the other
Bellegardes may really expect or at least hope that Newman will pull a revolver from his
pocket, but they have to “frankly confess” with the mother of the family that Newman
has “been . . . less, less peculiar than [they] expected” and that they “expect of [Newman]
to act like a clever man. . . . [He had] shown [him]self as that already,” while Claire
herself tells him earlier that

“I take no pleasure in you. You never give me a chance to
scold you, to correct you. I bargained for that; I expected
to enjoy it. But you won’t do anything dreadful; you are
dismally inoffensive.”

Needless to say, that these two assessments are from Claire and Urbain, two of the most
perfectly practiced French aristocrats in the novel, testifies to their reliability.

Of course, the chief trait for which one looks in a character who claims status as a
transcendently American American is an embrace of that democratic spirit that certainly
distinguished the United States much more in Newman’s time than it does now.

Although Butterfield argues that Newman’s “egalitarianism” and the “genuinely
democratic assumptions” of this “great strapping democrat” are tainted in that the
egalitarianism in question is largely “an egalitarianism for the already privileged” shown
merely in “an easy affability toward servants and waiters” (18), one of the chief ways in
which Newman expresses his embrace of this important spirit is in the fact that, as Cargill
notes, he “is consistently tolerant” (NCF 434) and particularly in the fact of his easy
tolerance of the cultural other, which has already been noted in his unselfconscious
willingness to consider a “foreigner” as a wife and in his more or less “as is” acceptance
of Valentin as a friend in spite of the latter’s aristocratic and implicitly anti-democratic
heritage, as well as in his willingness, expressed late in the novel, to have been one of old
Madame de Bellegarde’s greatest admirers in spite of her extreme otherness in both
culture and basic “niceness.” We have also noted Newman’s democratic tolerance, his
willingness to accept men as common as cowboys and “western humorists” as his tutors
as well and to do so apparently outside of his identity as a member of “the already
privileged.” Newman is, uncharacteristically, not one to reject that which he does not understand simply because he does not understand it.

However, the test for transcendence deserves more subtlety. Newman’s democratic nature manifests itself in ways that suggest much more thoroughness than a mere tolerance of other-cultural people can indicate. As Newman himself protests very early in the novel — and his protest is an announcement of part of his thesis — he does not “turn up [his] nose . . . at anyone, or anything” (emphasis added), and midway through the novel he is still “prepared to like everyone and everything” (emphasis again added). We then see several examples of the proof of this thesis: first, in the nearly complete absence of “taste” — read discrimination — that he exhibits in having “looked with an impartial eye upon great monuments and small [with a] perception of the difference between good architecture and bad [that] was not acute”; second, in his ability to recognize and acknowledge “a very rich and beautiful world that had not all been made by railroad men and stock brokers”; third, in his having had “no taste for upholstery [and] even no very exquisite sense of comfort or convenience”; and, fourth, in his having “never been a man of strong personal aversions.”

Indeed, Newman even travels “democratically” and, additionally, as his guiltlessly cheerful report to Noemie implies, he thinks unsnobbishly little of the fact that he

went to Switzerland — to Geneva, and Zermatt, and Zurich,

and all those places, you know; and down to Venice, and
all through Germany, and down the Rhine, and into Holland and Belgium.

In short, much as he further says, he has “made the [democratically] regular round” (emphasis added). In illustration of just how far this thesis of the democratic can be seen to go, Newman has been announced as early as the novel’s second page as a man who is democratically “committed to nothing in particular.” Hence, as we see much later, he has no preference regarding where he and Claire will live following their planned marriage, notwithstanding the fact that their finding a place to live is, as James himself comments, a huge and even insurmountable task (Tuttleton in NCE 456). His democratic nature is so pervasive that Americans who, like his significantly “New England” (i.e., residually but shabbily still European and Oedipal) traveling partner, Babcock, have not totally embraced this most distinctive Americanism would find it intolerable that “he liked everything, he accepted everything, he found amusement in everything; he was not discriminating, he had not a high tone.” This is not only the pejorative assessment that Babcock makes of him (and Butterfield and Ward make this same essential assessment of Babcock [12 and 13-14, 21-22, respectively]); it is also the ameliorative assessment that he makes of himself. “Well, everything interests me,” he tells Urbain. “I am not particular. . . . I can’t say that I have had any specialty.” Except in his being in a class by himself, Newman is simply and democratically not “exclusive.”

It is fitting that Newman’s manners are as relaxed as his taste, especially given that manners, like tastes, are largely designed to keep things “out” — or, as John Marcher of “The Beast in the Jungle” muses, “down” — in much the same way that Urbain de
Bellegarde intends in the chapter XII dinner table scene and elsewhere. Yet this is
definitely not to say that Newman is not equally well mannered. Indeed, as we have
seen, Claire and Urbain admit as much. The difference between Newman on the one
hand and Urbain on the other is that Urbain’s manners are carefully studied, deliberately
cultivated, and really unnatural and artificial, while Newman’s are an organic outgrowth
of his pragmatic bent and of his much remarked and democratic goodwill. It is for this
reason that Tuttleton can plausibly (though somewhat inaccurately) refer to Newman’s
ability to distinguish “between the special intention and the habit of good manners” (NCE
454) and that Butterfield can argue to Newman’s credit that “his manners are genial
rather than genteel!” (12).

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of Newman’s transcendence via immersion
in the “destructive” native element – and the extent to which it is obvious is attested by
the number of extended quotes that I am about to use – lies in his experience with the
vulgar money grabbing involved in American “business.” That he has been involved in
money making in its most vulgar forms he himself admits. As James reports,

he sometimes thought of his past life and the long array of
years . . . during which he had had nothing in his head but
“enterprise.” . . . [A] thousand forgotten episodes came
trooping back into his memory. Some of them he looked
complacently enough in the face; [but] from some he
averted his head. . . . Some of them, as he looked at them,
he felt decidedly proud of. . . . Of certain other
achievements it would be going too far to say that he was 
ashamed of them. . . . But none the less some of his 
memories seemed to wear at present a rather graceless and 
sordid mien, and it struck him that if he had never done 
anything very ugly, he had never, on the other hand, done 
anything particularly beautiful.

Yet, as we discover in the episode of his “conversion experience” account to Tom 
Tristram upon meeting him at the Louvre, it is precisely at the moment of his deepest 
immersion in the most sordid business activity of which he is personally capable, the 
moment at which he considers the use of money and business as a means of effecting 
personal and mean spirited revenge in the most cutthroat of ways, that he comes to rise 
above all impulse to engage in business and to consider the possibility – if not yet to 
realize – that there are other and perhaps more important things in life. In quoting 
Newman’s response to Tom Tristram’s questions of “What are you up to, anyway? . . . 
Are you going to write a book?,” I quote at length a passage with which any reader of the 
novel in question is undoubtably already well acquainted.

. . . [A]t last he made an answer. “One day, a couple of 
months ago, something very curious happened to me. I had 
come on to New York on some important business; it was 
rather a long story—a question of getting ahead of another 
party, in a certain particular way, in the stock market. This 
other party had once played me a very mean trick. I owed
him a grudge, I felt awfully savage at the time, and I vowed
that, when I got the chance, I would, figuratively speaking,
put his nose out of joint. There was a matter of sixty
thousand dollars at stake. If I put it out of his way, it was a
blow the fellow would feel, and he really deserved no
quarter. I jumped into a hack and went about my business,
and it was in this hack – this immortal, historical hack –
that the curious thing I speak of occurred. It was a hack
like any other, only a trifle dirtier, with a greasy line along
the top of the drab cushions, as if it had been used for a
great many Irish funerals. It is possible I took a nap; I had
been traveling all night, and though I was excited with my
errand, I felt the want of sleep. At all events I woke up
suddenly, from a sleep or from a kind of reverie, with the
most extraordinary feeling in the world – a mortal disgust
for the thing I was going to do. It came upon me like that!”
– and he snapped his fingers – “as abruptly as an old wound
that begins to ache. I couldn’t tell the meaning of it; I only
felt that I loathed the whole business and wanted to wash
my hands of it. The idea of losing that sixty thousand
dollars, of letting it utterly slide and scuttle and never
hearing of it again, seemed the sweetest thing in the world.”
Here again, and this time most obviously, the way out has been down; the road to transcendence has been through embrace.

The question of usefulness is an important one in a consideration of Newman's status as a transcendent American. We learn from colonial American literature that the utilitarian bent was one of the chief traits in the early American personality profile and that this trait was largely dictated by the exigencies of the early American setting which, at least for the New England colonists, was demonstrably harsh, with nearly fifty percent of the colonists perishing within the first year in at least two of the most important colonies. That this dictation of the utilitarian continued to Newman's fictional time and place and was a relatively permanent and salient feature of the American is suggested by the example of Newman himself, whose physique is marked by "that kind of health and strength which," in contrast to Valentin who has to work hard to maintain his much less impressive physique, "are the more impressive" because they are "the physical capital which the owner does nothing to keep up. If he [Newman] was a muscular Christian, it was quite without knowing it. . . . [H]e had never known himself to the exercise." Yet exercise he does. Newman maintains his physical well being, that is, by mere existence and function as an American. The American socio-economic atmosphere, to say nothing of its spacious geography, emphasizes and fosters the pragmatic attitude to the point that it even does something in the pragmatic line for the body as well, encouraging a man to do something and to make himself feel useful. Yet the point to be made here is more concrete. Newman's embrace and personification of the would-be ugly useful, utilitarian, and pragmatic has been total. And it is this total embrace, reflected in a total
personification of the natively dictated utilitarian that, however ironically, has enabled him to earn his way to a transcendence of the merely utilitarian and to enter a world where use for him is tied more to wish than to need.

From Newman's inadvertent good health to the significant unconsciousness of his transcendence is neither a very big nor a merely tangential step. Newman may very well have "never known himself to exercise" (emphasis added); but he does exercise, and his browned complexion testifies not only to the extent of his outdoor activity but also to the superiority of the mindless approach. Perhaps of even more importance, however, is what Newman's unconsciousness implies about the totality of his embrace of the native American. If we grant, for example, that total embrace necessarily involves unconsciousness and an absence of intention, then it is significant that although Newman is demonstrably American to his very fingertips, "he had never been a very conscious patriot" and, as Edel notes, "does not wave the stars and stripes belligerently" (NCE 419). Like Valentin, his European counterpart, all that he is he is by instinct and not by theory. No less a critic than Cargill may argue that "nothing depends on [Newman's] understanding" and may judge that the book is therefore inferior to others by James. However, while nothing may depend on Newman's understanding, a great deal to the book's credit depends on Newman's lack of understanding and particularly his being unconsciously American, which only bespeaks the extent to which he has internalized and not merely studied native American values. The Adamic myth or thesis notwithstanding, the unconsciousness itself is not peculiarly American. Rather, the person who is really American, or French, or English, or whatever is simply and
unselfconsciously and unprotestingly what he is without thinking about it or making a conscious effort to be it. Indeed, popular sources of early American literature such as Crevecoeur’s much anthologized *Letters to an American Farmer* inform us that the unselfconscious and organic type of American that Newman is was really the new American of the period and arguably even the first American.

Additional illustration of Newman’s thematically significant unconsciousness and its beneficial operation are numerous. We have already noted the unconsciousness, the absence of intention in his use of the language of the marketplace. We have noted as well the spontaneity and unaffectedness of his use of his particular, organically American brand of repartee. Indicating his blind assumption of the democratic possibility of perpetual self-making and his non-elitist attitude toward his own status as a self-made man, he tells Noemie’s father “Oh, never fear, you’ll get on your legs again,” totally unconscious of the possibility that to M. Nioche his comment may well be construed as “an unfeeling jest.” Newman is also not at all conscious of what, to Mrs. Tristram, he “represents,” even though he represents to her a very unique, unusually American American. Contrary to assertions by both Butterfield (6, 8, 9) and Edel (*NCE* 424), Newman’s unconsciousness is in fact the key to his nearly total success in Europe, both among ambitious opportunists to whom Americans were vulnerable and in the Faubourg where other Americans were promised failure. Early in the novel, for example, rather than being the sign of inadequacy that Edel seems to see in it (*NCE* 424), incognizance is Newman’s chief defense against the likes of Noemie and her father. In the passage just noted between Newman and M. Nioche, Newman’s comic incognizance of M. Nioche’s
intended meaning is equally comic but effective proof against the latter's thinly disguised appeal to Newman's charity. Similarly, although it is true that on one occasion "he had understood [Noemie] better than he confessed," even then he does not understand her totally or even sufficiently, seeing as he does only the "frank coquetry" in her response and none of that honest consternation at the naïve imperturbability in him that eventually provokes both her anger and what is arguably her novel-length attempt to achieve the revenge of a woman scorned. In addition and more substantially, however, his incognizance of Noemie as, initially, a possible sexual conquest and, later, as someone whom he has apparently affected deeply is proof against any chance she may have to bend him to her very remarkable and formidable will.

On the Faubourg side of the matter, the situation is much as Edel notes in writing that in "the scenes between Newman and the aristocrats . . . the exchange of wit is constant [but] quite often it contains also an element of mockery of which Newman is unaware." Edel goes on to say that Newman "is wholly unaware that between the lines they are laughing at him" (NCE 424). However, in addition to the fact that the "joke" may well in the end be on the aristocracy that thinks Newman is so amusing, here too Newman's unconsciousness is proof against damage from assault and James may very well intend even this early in his career to suggest "the apotheosis of Adam," the power of Adamic innocence or even ignorance, even cultivated ignorance, that he depicts more fully in his last great novel, The Golden Bowl. Specifically, knowledge obligates one to do, to act on the basis of that knowledge; and for Newman to have known that he was being mocked would have obligated him to do something that may well have ruined his
chances for the success — albeit limited success — that he does enjoy. Valentin can be seen to anticipate the power of Newman’s unconsciousness at the very start of the latter’s courtship of Claire, specifically by way of his observation that “Your best chance for success will be precisely in being, to her mind, unusual, unexpected, original,” which one can hardly be in a conscious way. Only ten pages later, in a debate with Newman over whether Claire’s lukewarm reception of his proposal was “a great triumph,” Mrs. Tristram suggests the same value in Newman’s unconsciousness. In reply to Mrs. Tristram’s assertion that he has achieved a great triumph, Newman says “I don’t see that.” But, in Mrs. Tristram’s view, this incognizance is precisely to Newman’s advantage: “Of course you don’t,” she replies. “Heaven forbid that you should!” Midway through the novel, James writes that “it is probable that on the whole she liked him only the better for his absence of embarrassed scruples,” his absence of consciousness, his refreshingly uncultured spontaneity. Given that it is what James writes of Claire, who with James must be regarded as the chief judge in the matter, this last view is the proof of the pudding.

III: The Fruits of Transcendence

Needless to say, for all of Newman’s transcendence of the merely American and the relative mindlessness with which he achieves both that transcendence and his success on the European scene, there is little question that it is still accurate to refer to that success as considerably less than total. Not to be included in the list of his failures, however, are his relationships with Valentin and, arguably, even with Claire. Somewhat
like Newman— I say somewhat because James has not fleshed out his supporting cast as much as he has Newman— Valentin is a transcendently thorough product of his native culture. James describes Valentin as being “a Frenchman to his very fingertips” who is what he is “by instinct and not by theory” in the same way that he describes Newman as “a powerful specimen of an American” and writes of “the almost ideal completeness with which he filled out the national mould.” James notes additionally that “Valentin was what is called in France a gentilhomme, of the purest source” and that “the amiability of his character was so great that certain of the aristocratic virtues, which in some aspects [such as Urbain’s] seemed rather brittle and trenchant, acquired in his application of them an extreme geniality.” And yet, James informs us, “the honor of the [family] name,” which is for the true aristocrat a family’s most treasured possession, “was safer in his hands than in those of some of its members,” members whom we later find to be, specifically, Urbain and the elder Madame de Bellegarde.

Valentin most demonstrates his allegiance to the aristocratic code of honor and hence his status as a genuine aristocrat not so much by his participation in the duel in which he is killed and which could be dismissed as a fatal over indulgence in storybook romance but by his literally painful disappointment at merely hearing the news that his mother and brother have violated that code in breaking their promise regarding Newman’s courtship of Claire. Hearing the news, which Newman had intended to provoke him to cling to life, instead virtually kills him with embarrassment.

“Don’t tell me any more,” he said at last; “I’m ashamed.”
Valentin groaned and turned away his head. . . . "It’s very bad – very bad. When my people – when my race – come to that, it is time for me to withdraw. . . . I apologize," he said. "Do you understand? Here on my deathbed. I apologize for my family. For my mother. For my brother. For the ancient house of Bellegarde. Viola!"

There is nothing but sincerity in this testimony, and the testimony is primarily of just how genuinely and unpretentiously aristocratic Valentin really is. If it is true that "there are no atheists in foxholes" then Valentin’s claimed allegiance to the aristocratic code can be taken as an article of near religious faith. After witnessing the effect of this news on Valentin, one’s further presumption has to be that knowing the even more dishonorable thing that his mother and brother had done in murdering his father would also literally and perhaps even more certainly have killed him. Indeed, if we seek a reason for his near deliberate ignorance on the subject – his insistence that Newman get the details from Mrs. Bread and Mrs. Bread’s own testimony are proof of his reluctance – such reason perhaps lies in the implication that he is so genuinely aristocratic that he would have found such knowledge unbearable.

Yet it is precisely because he is so genuinely and comfortably aristocratic that he is able to be more than merely aristocratic. Being unselfconsciously and unprotestingly aristocratic enables him, in fact, to develop a thoroughly Parisian personality as well, by which he becomes not the exclusive Ultramontane longing for a lost past but the inclusive Frenchman who is much more (though not perfectly) a man of his time. It is more a
positive than a negative trait, for example, that Valentin is rather democratically indiscriminate in his taste in women. As indicated by his own deathbed and therefore presumably reliable confession, as well as demonstrated by the affair itself that he has with Noemie, he has the capacity to adore and to appreciate someone whom he, as an aristocrat in general and as a Bellegarde in particular, cannot marry, whereas we can in no way think of his brother as having any such capacity. Indeed, we think of Urbain as having a rather opposite capacity, the capacity to marry someone whom he clearly can in no way adore or appreciate. Although the manifestation of the trait in question apparently has more to do with Newman than it does with him, Valentin’s thoroughly aristocratic nature and comfort with himself also enables him to be generous enough to envy Newman and to do so without jealousy. Significantly, Valentin envies Newman not for what he has “done”: “As a general thing,” he says to Newman just prior to admitting his envy, “I confess, I don’t like successful people, and I find clever people who have made great fortunes very offensive.” He goes on to say that

“... What I envy you is your liberty, ... your wide range, your freedom to come and go, your not having a lot of people, who take themselves awfully seriously, expecting something of you. I live, ... beneath the eyes of my admirable mother.”

Valentin’s further explication of the consequences of his status as an aristocrat and of the reasons for his envy is worth quoting at length. Responding to Newman’s rhetorical
question of “what is to hinder you ranging?” Valentin essentially explicates what Auchincloss characterizes as “the anachronism of his hopeless social position” (44):

“Ah, but your poverty was your capital. Being an American, it was impossible that you should remain what you were born, and being born poor – do I understand it? – it was therefore inevitable that you should become rich. You were in a position that makes one’s mouth water: you looked round you and saw a world full of things you had only to step up and take hold of. When I was twenty, I looked around me and saw a world with everything ticketed ‘Hands off!’ and the deuce of it was that the ticket seemed meant only for me. I couldn’t go into business; I couldn’t make money, because I was a Bellegarde. I couldn’t go into politics, because I was a Bellegarde – the Bellegardes don’t recognize the Bonapartes. I couldn’t go into literature, because I was dunce. I couldn’t marry a rich roturier, and it was not proper that I should begin. . . . I could do nothing! I am supposed to amuse myself, and, to tell the truth, I have amused myself. . . . But you can’t keep it up forever. I am good for another five years, perhaps, . . . Then what shall I do?”
To continue, however, the most important effect of Valentin's transcendence is his ability to meet in friendship with Newman in that great good place that is beyond culture and family and beyond even the need for understanding. About this transcendent friendship Valentin explains that "We are very different, I'm sure. . . . But I rather think that we shall get on, for there is such a thing as being too different to quarrel," while, speaking of another matter, Valentin even tells Newman that while cultural differences make it so that "It's no use attempting to explain everything; you don't understand me," their relationship is such that "after all, I don't see why you need: it's no great loss," and James himself explains that while "no two companions could be more different[;] . . . their differences made a capital basis for a friendship of which the distinctive characteristic was that it was extremely amusing to each."

Putt observes that "often in a scene of high emotional force the affectation so accurately conveyed seems to have no relevance to the sex of the character" (56). Taking, if necessary, a clue from this observation, we note that what Newman's transcendent friendship with Valentin suggests is what some Jamesians, most notably Edel (NCE 422), would deny, and that is that "marriage" in James, as that term can be meant either literally or metaphorically, is possible. Yet it must be a marriage that insists on union, the union of two equals who thus bring doubled enrichment to the relationship, rather than one that insists on penetration, for penetration subordinates one partner to the other. Valentin and Newman are just such an enriched and undiminished pair, and their status as such is due to their equality in transcendence. Understanding between them is unnecessary. Indeed, in the absence of understanding lies the promise of greater
enlargement and enrichment. And the same is true of the relationship between Newman and Claire. Claire even points out that

"When I used to think, as a girl, of what I should do if I were to marry freely by my own choice, I thought of a very different man from you. . . . Your being so different, which at first seemed a difficulty, a trouble, began one day to seem to me a pleasure, a great pleasure. I was glad you were so different. And yet, if I had said so, no one would have understood me; I don't mean simply to my family. . . . They would have said I could never be happy with you - you were too different; and I would have said it was just because you were so different that I might by happy."

The similarity in motive here is not accidental. James has made it clear that Claire and Valentin are a pair. Their twinship especially in their possession of a genuinely aristocratic nature is particularly manifest in their mutual intolerance of negative and therefore ill mannered publicity. In addition to Valentin's report that "To be unhappy [and therefore also to complain] is to be disagreeable, which for [Claire], is out of the question," there is also his report of her conduct as M. de Cintre's widow.

"[A]fter [M. de Cintre's] death his family pounced on his money, brought a lawsuit against his widow, and pushed things very hard. . . . In the course of the suit some revelations were made as to his private history which my
sister found so displeasing that she ceased to defend herself and washed her hands of the property. This required some pluck, for she was between two fires, her husband’s family opposing her and her own family forcing her. My mother and brother wished her to cleave to what they regarded as her rights. But she resisted firmly, and at last bought her freedom – obtained my mother’s assent to dropping the suit at the price of a promise . . . [t]o do anything else, for the next ten years, that was asked of her – anything, that is, but marry."

This passage, in which Claire’s aristocratic intolerance for such ill-mannered publicity is made explicit, carries the further significance of giving confirmation to the hint regarding her motive for avoiding awareness of her mother’s and brother’s earlier crime against her father. The hint in question is contained in the lengthy exchange that occurs between Newman and Mrs. Bread. Speaking of a much younger Claire, and primarily of how much Claire knew of the extent of her mother’s malevolent scheming to marry her to M. de Cintre, Mrs. Bread says that

“you don’t know what Mademoiselle was in those days, sir; she was the sweetest young creature in France, and knew as little of what was going on around her as the lamb does of the butcher.”
At the same time, however, Mrs. Bread also reports that “Mademoiselle Claire and the viscount – that was Mr. Valentin, you know – were both in the house” and, six pages later that

“The medical gentleman from Paris was much more accommodating, and he hushed up the other. But for all he could do Mr. Valentin and Mademoiselle heard something; they knew their father’s death was somehow against nature.

... Mr. Valentin used to look at me sometimes, and his eyes seemed to shine, as if he were thinking of asking me something. I was dreadfully afraid he would speak, and I always looked away and went about my business. If I were to tell him, I was sure he would hate me afterwards. ...

Once I went up to him and took a great liberty; I kissed him, as I had kissed him when he was a child. ‘You oughtn’t look so sad, sir,’ I said; ‘believe your poor old Bread. Such a gallant, handsome young man can have nothing to be sad about.’ And I think he understood me; he understood that I was begging off, and made up his mind in his own way. He went about with his unasked question in his mind, as I did with my untold tale; we were both afraid of bringing dishonor on a great house. And it was the same
with Mademoiselle. She didn’t know what had happened; she wouldn’t know.”

Indeed, what we have in this passage is more than a mere hint. The indication of Claire’s genuinely aristocratic attitude toward publicity and particularly of its twinness with Valentin’s own attitude is explicit.

Claire’s twinship with Valentin in their possession of a genuinely aristocratic nature is further bespoken by her similar capacity for friendship with members of the underclass, notably Mrs. Tristram whom, in some considerable apparent defiance of her mother, she still had not totally given up, and by her similarly exhibiting a capacity to find genuine amusement in other-cultural anecdotes and expressions, as, by James’ report, she does when Newman “told [her] hundreds of long stories” and when, “judging by the sequel, she was interested” and as she particularly shows in her response to the telegrams from Newman’s friends in America.

Newman knew that the Marquise disliked his telegrams, though he could see no sufficient reason for it. Madame de Cintre, on the other hand, liked them; and, most of them being of a humorous cast, laughed at them immoderately, and inquired into the character of their authors.

Of course, like Valentin, Claire is also a transcendent French aristocrat, the very personification of all of that for which her culture claims to stand, comfortable with who and what she is and in no need of protesting that she is anything else or of trying to be something more. Newman says quite early that “my wife must be a magnificent
woman,” that “I want a great woman,” that “I want to possess, in a word, the best article in the market,” and perhaps most importantly that “When I say beautiful, I mean beautiful in mind and manners, as well as in person,” whereupon, after getting him to “confine [himself] to Europe,” Mrs. Tristram offers Claire de Cintre – and it is she who initiates here – as the woman most qualified to meet Newman’s requirements. In addition, as Mrs. Tristram’s further explanation clearly implies, the world of which Claire’s mind and manners” “tops the basket” is the very exclusive Legitimist or Ultramontane “monde [whose members are] all mounted upon stilts a mile high, and with pedigrees long in proportion.” Moreover, and this recommends Claire as a woman who is beyond the merely European, “Among all the women [that Mrs. Tristram has] known,” and thus among all the women of her world as well, “she stands alone.” On his very first visit to Claire’s “apartment” in the Hotel de Bellegarde, Newman’s impression of her is that “She was a beautiful woman, and it was very easy to get on with her.” (Note this co-location of “beauty” with “ease of manner”; it suggests that she fits the bill of being beautiful in mind and manner as Newman had required.) But his impression of her also leads him to ask himself “Was she a countess, marquise, a kind of historical formation?” Later, on the day following his announcement to Valentin of his intentions regarding Claire, Newman visits her and registers for us an impression that further confirms her status as the embodiment of the best of French aristocratic culture. Specifically,

Madame de Cintre gave Newman the sense of an elaborate education, of her having passed through mysterious ceremonies and processes of culture in her youth, of her
having been fashioned and made flexible to certain exalted social needs.

So perfect is her embodiment of these "processes of culture" that

Looking at the matter with an eye to private felicity,

Newman wondered where, in so exquisite a composition, nature and art showed their dividing line. Where did the special intention separate from the habit of good manners?

Still later in the novel, Newman testifies that his expectations have not been disappointed when he tells Claire not only "how exactly [she is] what [he] coveted" but also and more significantly that

"you have a high spirit, a high standard; but with you it's all natural and unaffected; you don't seem to have stuck your head into a vice, as if you were sitting for the photograph of propriety."

The comment, of course, echoes what Newman had earlier observed of Valentin and not only supports the claim of Claire's twinniness with her brother but also, the source notwithstanding, clearly indicates the ease with which she too carries her aristocratic bearing. It indicates that Claire, too, is a transcendent product of her culture. And, as was true in her brother's case, it is this transcendence, particularly by way of a total personification of her culture's values, that enables Claire to find in Newman a possible partner in marriage.
IV: The European Oedipus

Again, marriage in James is possible, provided that it brings enrichment by way of combination or union rather than diminution or reduction by way of subordination of one spouse to another, provided that "regardless of . . . intentions [it] respect the freedom of others" in a way that, according to Ward, "is nearly an inflexible rule in James" (Imagination of Disaster 25). Given such enrichment and union as a requirement, the promise is increased by an increase in difference between prospective mates, such as that difference which exists between Newman and Claire de Cintre. Congruently, however, it is the absence of transcendence and all that accompanies it (confidence, in particular) that precludes such cross-cultural "marriage" between either lovers or would-be friends, and nothing illustrates this point more clearly and convincingly than the examples of Urbain, his mother, and Noemie Nioche. The three of them are all too busy jealously, fearfully, and ambitiously clutching their aristocratic and quasi-aristocratic possessions and possibilities to entertain the possibility of "marriage" to someone who, in their anxious minds, would dilute their achievements or their chances for upward mobility.

Funnily, the failure of the last of these "European Conquest" projects, which one might be inclined to regard as the most modest, is arguably the most interesting. Less than three pages into the novel, Newman begins to undertake the project of sponsoring Noemie and of establishing himself as a positive influence in her life, apparently convinced that Noemie as a member of the lower socio-economic class is sufficiently "democratic" to appreciate such sponsorship. Specifically, responding not on the basis of "routine pictures [that he] ignorantly admires" (Putt 56) but to the complaint about the
limitations in marriage and thus, unfortunately, in life for any European girl with a small “dot,” convinced by Noemie’s father that the danger is to Noemie’s actual rather than reputed virtue, and yet believing with a democrat’s mentality in the importance of self-making or earning one’s place in life (even, chauvinist that he is, for women), Newman commissions Noemie to produce several paintings for him and offers to pay enough for her to earn what, if M. Nicohe’s exuberant response is any indication, even her father considers a respectable, generous, and fairly large dowry for a European girl of her socio-economic background. Indeed, the hint is that he offers to pay her according to the Puritan standard of effort spent rather than quality produced. Yet Noemie neglects to produce the paintings and thus implicitly rejects the offer as well. A short time later, Newman is still trying to influence Noemie and particularly to save her from the supposed fate of a pretty but poor European girl by confronting her with her father’s accusation that she is a “franche coquette.” However, Noemie, apparently concerned not with her moral status but with the social status that she is by then beginning to acquire through the attention she is paid by members of the aristocracy, implicitly rejects Newman on this occasion as well. So far is Newman from success in influencing Noemie that when she tells him that “You were not galant: you were not what you could have been,” he has to confess that he had had “no idea [that he] had been shabby.”

Of course, it is difficult to know that which is not. The fifteen thousand francs that he had offered for the six drawings mentioned earlier – Noemie says here that it was six thousand, earlier that it was twelve, and on still another occasion it is identified as only six while one wonders whether James had forgotten the original amount or someone
had planned to pocket the difference – was hardly shabby, as Noemie implicitly admits just prior to accusing Newman. But the point is that he really does have little or no understanding of Noemie’s real motives. Unlike Newman’s, Noemie’s aims are primarily social and essentially aristocratic rather than economic and democratic, improvement in economic status being at best but a means to her aristocratic ends and at worst but a temporary palliative. Indeed, as Valentin remarks, “her painting,” if one can call it that, “of course, is a mere trick to gain time.” The passage in which Valentin makes this observation characterizes and anticipates Noemie exactly and is worth quoting at some length.

“She has taken the measure of life, and she has determined to be something at any cost. Her painting, of course, is a mere trick to gain time. She is waiting her chance; she wishes to launch herself, and to do it well. She knows her Paris. She is one of fifty thousand, so far as mere ambition goes; but I am very sure that in the way of resolution and capacity she is a rarity. And in one gift – perfect heartlessness – I will warrant she is unsurpassed. . . . Yes, she is one of the celebrities of the future.”

Moreover, on just what Noemie does and does not plan to hang her celebrity hat is anticipated by an earlier speech from Valentin, the speech in which he laments in general the burden of expectations that accompany his status as a Bellegarde and that preclude his indulgence in any common or Bonapartian enterprise such as money making, politics,
marrying for money, or, indeed, anything that would constitute "doing." That is, Noemie does not plan to "do" anything except as doing nothing constitutes doing something, for to "do" something for money is necessarily to contradict one's claim to merit as measured by the aristocratic standard to which she is implicitly pledged.

What is more important, however, is that these are not the expectations of the aristocracy alone. They are primarily, in fact, the expectations of the underclass of which Noemie and her father are representative members. Noemie's actions thus serve as well to comment on the nature of the European social contract, which sees the aristocracy and such things as the aristocratic position regarding professional life or working for a living exist and sustain themselves not only by way of the haughtiness, "the art of taking oneself seriously" that Urbain so personifies, but also and more significantly with the support and sanction of the very underclass toward which the aristocracy is so exclusive. That this position of implicit support for the aristocracy is Noemie's position as well is evident in her accusation that Newman has not been sufficiently aristocratic in his relationship with her, that he has not been "galant," as well as in her early exhortation to her father to "remember what you are — what you have been!" There is also a strong hint of evidence in M. Nioche's own frequently exhibited nostalgia for what he has been, as well and even more particularly in his inclination to speak French with considerably more perfection than Blanche de Bellegarde who, as far as main characters are concerned, is by birth the most aristocratic, the most vielle roche or talon rouge of the novel's aristocrats. The evaluative standard which Noemie and her father not only use but in which they also firmly believe is, in short, ironically the standard of the pre-revolutionary past, the
Legitimists, the largely deposed aristocracy; and against such a standard and such beliefs the reclamation projects of Christopher Newman, whose standards are those of the democratic "new man," stand little chance.

With these representatives from the French underclass James has, in fact, illustrated the operation of the cultural imperative on still another front. As Valentin anticipates and Newman verifies on three occasions, Noemie does end up being "one of the celebrities of the future"; she does eventually succeed in imitating the look of a rather aristocratic personage. Indeed, so remarkable is her achievement in this regard that "her present self-possession and aplomb struck Newman as really infernal," and even Valentin's later painful confession is that he "had had an idea that [her manners] were already formed, after the best models." Yet, the point of both of these attestations is that Noemie's imitation of an aristocratic manner is in the end just that, an imitation; and, as Frederick Sheldon writes about such matters as early as 1878, "imitations are always failures; . . . it is much better form to be an American [or whatever one is] and to have a national [read sexual, cultural, racial, or similar] identity of one's own than to offer to foreign eyes a pale imitation of European [or other] models" (NCE 355). In proof of this theorem, Noemie and her father try to imitate something other — and, in their minds, better — than what they are and they violate the imperative of culture that would have one achieve transcendence by way of an embrace of one's social, racial, sexual, or cultural identity. The reasonably clear consequence of this effort at imitation is that they end up being something considerably less than they were.
James’ depiction, on this additional front, of the operation of Oedipus and the violation of the cultural imperative that such operation involves does not end with these examples from the underclass. Note from the passage quoted earlier that Valentin accurately assesses Noemie’s distinctive “perfect heartlessness” as well in a way that, judging from his repeated appeals to her moral sense, Newman apparently does not. Valentin’s ability to assess Noemie with such accuracy is certainly due in part to the fact that he too “knows his Paris,” the fact that he too is “thoroughly Parisian,” the fact that he is “a foreigner to his very fingertips” and is so “by instinct and not by theory.” It is also no doubt due to his familiarity with the females of Paris, about whom he expostulates so garrulously even from the very first of his friendship with Newman. However, an additional and perhaps even greater source of his acuity regarding Noemie is the fact that he lives in the same house with the younger Madame de Bellegarde, who “reminded Newman of his friend, Mademoiselle Nioche; this,” Newman muses, “was what that much-obstructed young lady would have liked to be.” But, an even more provocative possibility is the example of Valentin’s mother, the elder Madame de Bellegarde who, only one page away, admits without the slightest embarrassment and even with a bit of bravado that she too is “very ambitious” and who is later revealed to be a much more perfect match to Noemie in the “perfect heartlessness” that so distinguishes the former as well as in the fact that she has actually married into class essentially in the exact way that Noemie aspires to do so. Of all the French characters in the novel, Mademoiselle Nioche and the elder Madame de Bellegarde, the two most distant in social class, are arguably the most perfectly matched social pair.
Indeed, Madame de Bellegarde is murderously ambitious, for, James’ 1907 revisions and Auchincloss’ errant assessment of the role of the murder (44) notwithstanding, it is ambition, the ambition of the social climber, that prompts her to kill her husband when he objects too strongly to her plan to marry a much younger Claire to an impossibly old, abusive, and generally odious Monsieur de Cintre strictly for social gain. There is even a hint of this same ambition in her motive for having initially married into French society. Early in the novel, we learn from Mrs. Tristram that Claire de Cintre is “French by her father, English by her mother” and that, although “Her family, on both sides, is of fabulous antiquity” and therefore of “enviable” respectability, “her mother is the daughter of an English Catholic earl,” an English Catholic earl hardly being the equivalent of a French Catholic marquis. In addition, as Valentin later reveals to Newman, his mother’s family is only “so-so” old; “it is on my father’s side,” he tells Newman, “that we go back – back, back, back.” Given that the English of her time were still enamoured of all things French, Madame de Bellegarde’s marriage thus fulfilled a large part of her social ambition. However, by way of the rather indiscriminate philandering of which he stands convicted even by Mrs. Bread’s apparently guarded and sympathetic testimony, as well as again by way of his resistance to his wife’s plan for marrying his daughter, the Marquis de Bellegarde threatened to undo much of that achievement and to prevent realization of his wife’s further social goals. In fact, in a way that brings us full circle to the start of this treatment, the evidence suggests that the charge of Oedipus, once levied at Newman, is much more plausibly made against the likes of Madame de Bellegarde and Mademoiselle Nioche, both of whom abandon their
own original identities – the one as a British aristocrat of modest social status in a predominantly Protestant country and the other as a French commoner – in murderously heartless attempts to acquire the possessions, the symbols of power, even the identity of the French “king.”

We should add Urbain de Bellegarde to this list of European Oedipuses. We should not, for example, overlook the fact that although the younger Madame de Bellegarde considers herself “a ferocious democrat . . ., a revolutionist, a radical, a child of the age” who “want[s] to belong to [her] time,” her family “pedigree” is “much better than [that of] the Bellegardes.” Moreso than the family into which she has married, Blanche de Bellegarde has every right to boast of being “a daughter of the crusaders, heiress of six centuries of glories and traditions.” Hence, however, by marrying her, Urbain has improved his own formal status as an aristocrat. That the Oedipal social climber’s ambition is the motive for this marriage is supported by the fact that, likeably democratic though she may be, Blanche de Bellegarde is clearly an air head who may well remind Newman of what Noemie Nioche would like to become but who clearly is no match for her as far as intelligence is concerned. Of course, it may be argued that the younger Madame de Bellegarde is, after all, “young and pretty.” But, in addition to the fact that she is not as pretty as her sister-in-law, the absence of any signs of intimacy between Urbain and his wife – indeed the presence of numerous signs to the contrary – and the absence as well of any particular signs of his having inherited something of his father’s interest in women in general strongly suggest that his interest in his wife and in women in general lies elsewhere than in their appearance. One might argue that the
absence of the emotional tie marks not only the Oedipal motive but the motivation of the pragmatist in his attempt to acquire the coin of the realm. Yet the coin of the realm is clearly not what the bankrupt Bellegardes are seeking. All indications are that the French aristocracy of James’ novel are not only without integrity but also without real power and without money. Indeed, they are altogether without “currency” in every sense of the word.

Another sign of the Oedipal in Urbain is his fundamentally imitative rather than original behavior, particularly as illustrated by his inordinate interest in manners. Unable to keep his tone altogether free of facetiousness and other tokens of “mental reservation,” Valentin, of course, tells Newman that “he [Urbain] has the best manners in France.” That this interest in manners is essentially imitative, however, is arguably betokened by the nature and subject of Urbain’s research as well as by the implied basis of his presumed learnedness. Specifically, like Theodorus, the historian in Plato’s The Theatetus who can follow an interpretive or creative line but has absolutely no capacity to generate one, Urbain’s concern is with the established past rather than the ever-becoming future or even the present.

Additionally, as subtly implied by Valentin’s juxtaposition of the two qualities and especially by his “indeed,” Urbain’s “cleverness,” – cleverness being, when genuine, more or less spontaneous – resides chiefly in his “learnedness,” which in turn is grounded in narrow historical subjects (he is writing of “The Princesses of France who never married”) and is therefore revealed primarily in a mastery of “the small change of polite conversation” and “the common formulas of politeness” but not at all in any capacity for
original expression. Urbain, in fact, is demonstrably terrified and incompetent in the presence of the original. As Newman observes during the dinner table scene,

The Marquis appeared to have decided that the fine arts offered a safe subject of conversation, as not leading to startling personal revelations. . . . His manners seemed to indicate a fine nervous dread that something disagreeable might happen if the atmosphere were not purified by allusions of a thoroughly superior cast. "What under the sun is the man afraid of?" Newman asked himself. "Does he think I am going to offer to swap jackknives with him?"

As we see in the scene where Newman confronts Urbain and his mother with his knowledge of their conspiracy to murder, Urbain in the face of a truly original situation finds his excellently "mannered" expression to be useless and reveals himself to be incapable of any genuinely clever or quick-witted response. He is in fact in this scene terrified, far too terrified to contemplate "marriage" to anyone as other as Newman.

V: The Primacy of the Oracle

Consideration of "The European Oedipus" and its discovery in the likes of Urbain de Bellegarde, the elder Madame de Bellegarde, the treacherous Noemie Nioche, and her pitiful prostitute of a father appears to testify with a vengeance that a large part of the novel’s intent is as Ward contends, "to indict the French aristocracy," and that James may well expose himself to the charge that he is Oedipal, that he is involved in an Oedipal
love-hate relationship with the very aristocracy that he condemns, and that he is desirous of both condemning that aristocracy and seeking its approval. Such a charge may at least appear to gain some support when James in his preface quite pointedly announces that the novel depicts

The situation in another country and an aristocratic society, of some robust, but . . . cruelly wronged, compatriot: the point being in especial that he should suffer at the hands of persons pretending to represent the highest possible civilization. . . . He would arrive at his just vindication and he would fail of . . . vulgarly enjoying it. . . . All he would have at the end would be therefore just the moral convenience, indeed the moral necessity, of his practical, but quite unappreciated, magnanimity. (The Art of the Novel 22)

Adding credence to this charge is Cargill's correct observation that, the above assertion by James being true,

James consciously began The American with the idea that his hero's native traits should be thrown into sharp and functional contrast with those of another society; he deliberately dedicated himself to the defense of the salient virtues of his countrymen. (NCE 427)
The question still to be asked, however, is essentially the question of audience; the question is "to whom" this defense is addressed. It is critical to note whether the novel is primarily concerned with expressing anger toward the French aristocracy and with changing the minds of Europeans toward Americans, thus reflecting an Oedipal wish to express anger toward and to gain approval from the father figure in this scenario, or with pursing the psychologically far more wholesome goal of changing for the better Americans' attitude toward themselves and illustrating not only that which is best in them but also how that which is best can be used to transcend to that which is better.

Apropos of this question, Cargill is also, as usual, convincing if not fully compelling in his observation not only of the parallels between Turgenev's earlier A Nest of Gentlefolks (written in 1858) and The American (written in 1877) but also of The American as a rather pointed — indeed, perhaps too pointed and even pathologically pointed — retort to the 1876 staging of Alexandre Dumas fils' L'Etrangere and its derogation of Americans and American culture. In Cargill's characterization, The American, in short, was born of "a surge of patriotic indignation" (NCE 431) and in it James makes an attempt at "justifying American ways against a European caricature of them" (NCE 432). Indeed, although it may be flattering to the overall thesis of this entire treatment to do so, Cargill's characterization essentially reduces The American to the status of a protest novel, every bit as much as Native Son, Go Tell It on the Mountain, Invisible Man, or any of a number of other mid-century Afro-American novels, with all of the "border war" limitations thereof and few if any of the pressing necessities that make such limitations excusable. (One is reminded, in this context, of Butterfield's claim
that Newman’s is “the egalitarianism of the already privileged” [18], that Newman as typical capitalist simply “justifies and celebrates his [money making] activity by insistent reference to the work ethic” [16], that “the real working classes are invisible” in this and most others of James’ novels [13], and that the conflict in the book is essentially “an argument conducted solely between those whose interests are ultimately . . . the same: between aspirant, aggressive bourgeois and entrenched, defensive aristocracy; between ‘progressive’ entrepreneur and ‘conservative’ landowner; between new money and old blood” [14].

Testifying further to the worthiness of the charge is the substantial evidence of the novel’s autobiographical element. The fortuitous “carriage scene” ride in “an American horse-car” taken by both James (upon deciding on the idea of the novel) and Newman (upon deciding on the new direction of his life and career) contributes more than a little to this autobiographical element. Moreover, in the self-confrontational moment of the scene in question, Newman decides to forego the enjoyment of sure revenge against those who have wronged him, declining at this point in his life to build his success on the undoing or derogation of others. In contrast, however, James appears to choose the opposite. When James established residence in Paris in late November of 1875 he did so, Edel informs us, with the hope of “achieving entrance into [the world of] the Faubourg’s old aristocratic families” (NCE 418). Although an effective argument can be made to the contrary, the general inclination is to agree with Tuttleton that “Jame’s decision to settle in Paris was an unwise one” (NCE 447). As Tuttleton goes on to observe, however,
Although [James] was boasting to Howells in May of 1876 that he was "turning into an old, and very contented, Parisian" who felt as if he had "struck roots into the Parisian soil, and were likely to let them grow tangled and tenacious there," before long he was complaining that he really saw nothing of Parisian society. No one introduced him; he had no entrée into the exclusive drawing rooms of the Faubourg St. Germain. He felt cut off from the aristocracy, which gave tone to the civilization he wished to portray. His situation was not much better than it had been earlier when he complained that "the waiters at the restaurants are as yet my chief society." (NCE 448)

To this exclusion from and by exclusive French aristocratic society James took offense, more substantively so, I would argue, than he did upon auditing Dumas' L'Etrangere. The American is, in large part, James' pointed and effective act of revenge against an aristocratic society that wrongly regarded him as unworthy of its company when the evidence suggested that the inadequacy was more on the other side, that French aristocratic society itself was the more truly barbaric, provincial, contemptible, and, as Butterfield notes, "ignoble" (6). In this, the novel more than "reflects . . . some of Henry's frustration at not achieving entrance into this world . . . in which . . . Henry felt himself, in his imagination, to be initiate" (Edel in NCE 418), and James' "story of Christopher Newman" is also more than "symbolic of his own stepping forth into the
world" (Edel in NCE 425). Additionally, the novel is far from being what Butterfield argues is an attempt to expiate "the intense guilt felt by the expatriate novice" (29) and it is far closer to being an attempt to "take possession of the old world" and to "appropriate it," to make the use of it that James promises in his letter of November 1, 1975 and that, under James' direction, Newman himself intends.

It may yet seem from the foregoing review that a case of Oedipus might well be made or at least attempted against a James who appears angry to the point of vengeance toward a French aristocracy that chose to exclude him. However, if James exhibited wisdom sufficient to depict Newman as having foregone revenge and to have shown him achieving what Butterfield admits is a "self-release from the limitations of an avenger's psychology" (8), then certainly he was wise enough to realize that the same should hold true for Newman's creator. Certainly, James realized that an American "Legitimist" cannot build his success and identity on the ruin of others. Nor can that identity be established on mere approval by others. Regarding this issue, it is important to note, first, that The American was from the start apparently composed as an American novel addressed to American audiences. As Edel reports, James originally very much wanted to publish the novel in The Galaxy, an American publication. Moreover, the question of readership, if there was one, being what it may, James' chief and clearly confessed concern was not with readership but with payment for monthly installments of the novel; and when The Galaxy balked at agreeing to remunerate James at a rate that would meet his financial needs, he ordered that the manuscript be forwarded to his good friend William Dean Howells of The Atlantic, where the novel was published in monthly
installments (NCE 415-17). The literal audience to which The American is directed is, in a word, the American.

Important though this question of audience may be, it is even more important to note that James’ indictment of the French and French aristocracy is far from indiscriminate. Specifically, while Urbain, his mother, Noemie Nioche, and her father receive the brunt of James’ indictment, his treatment of others of their circle is more sympathetic. While Urbain, the elder Madame de Bellegarde, Noemie Nioche, and her father are consciously and actively treacherous and exclusive, others in their circle are significantly only passively and unconsciously so, provoking not our contempt but our pity. Describing the social peers of the Bellegardes Tuttleton writes that among [them] are some of “the best preserved specimens” of “the Legitimists and the Ultramontanes.” They admit no changes, no intrusions of the modern. . . . The gentlemen in [the Bellegarde] drawing rooms perpetuate the wig and carry of the “profuse white neck cloth of the fashion of 1820.” They do not go out; they do not know Paris. Few of them have ever seen an American, although the city is crawling with them; and only a few remember having seen the great Dr. Franklin. To the American Mrs. Tristram, they are “mounted upon stilts a mile high, and with pedigrees long in proportion.” (NCE 451)
Unlike Urbain, the elder Madame de Bellegarde, Noemie, and her father, all of whom are social climbers, these other members of the Bellegarde circle are, like the younger Madame de Bellegarde, *vieille roche, talon rouge*, in a word, "the real thing" and, like Newman, quite comfortable with who they are and not interested in becoming anything else: hence, their significantly more favorable reception of Newman. (And, contrary to the notion that Newman is most out of place and commits his greatest missteps during the gathering at which he meets other members of the Bellegarde circle, it may even be this more favorable reception, which is the opposite of that on which the elder Madame de Bellegarde was counting, that decides her on the need for more direct and thus vulgar action.) Ironically, however, and this is where the joke may be on them rather than Newman, those who are "the real thing" have not as much excluded others from their circle as they have excluded themselves from the world in such a way that, given a world that is increasingly more democratic and favorable to the working man, renders them essentially "good for nothing." As in the case in "The Real Thing," written fifteen years later, James, again, and in some contrast to Ward’s view, does not indict these more genuinely aristocratic types as much as he simply pities them. Appropriately described as "preserved specimens," they are fixed and dead, anachronistic, literally and comically ignorant, harmless, powerless in any matter of real consequence, irrelevant, real but romantic, and, like "The Princesses of France Who Never Married" who are the revealing focus of Urbain de Bellegarde’s narrow academic studies, they have no future and make no contribution to the ongoing world. (See also Butterfield 28.) This is the circle to which Urbain and his mother would like to gain entrance and within which they would
like to enclose and permanently entomb themselves as fully vested members. For this reason, however, there is no reason for Newman to waste effort in exacting revenge upon them. As members of an exclusive, inward-turning, anachronistic class or “race” that is a throwback to a far more romantic and now irrelevant era, they are not, as Ward sees the matter, “partly redeemed by their adherence to an ancient system” (Imagination of Disaster 43). Rather, they are already dead or effectively pursuing death. There is no need to waste a bullet on them, and there is no need, as Malcolm X may have said, to spend effort on securing a slice of the pie that they control. There is no need because the pie is rotten.

Even so, there is something else and perhaps more poignant that The American is about. To wit, in spite of the warmth of their friendship – which, in the broad reach of the marriage metaphor, constitutes something of a marriage – Valentin in the end is unable to coach or in any other way assist Newman to success in his courtship of Claire. Moreover, in spite of his reciprocation of that friendship, Newman is equally unable to save Valentin, while in spite of his love for Claire, her favorable inclination toward him, and all that is good and right and promising in marriage to her, Newman is unable to save Claire as well. Much as Butterfield asserts, “The American is . . . too complex and pessimistic for such a simple escape” (26) as that which marriage would allow. Again, marriage in the novel is possible and desirable. Marriage to Newman would give Claire an opportunity to live and would save her from the self-entombment to which she commits herself at the novel’s end. “Marriage” to Newman, in the form of friendship, would save Valentin from the death to which he commits himself by engaging in a duel
over the worthless Noemie and an anachronistic concept of “honor,” a duel which is every bit as primitive as any stereotypical gunfight in the old American West. As an expansive rather than reductive institution, however, marriage is not divorce. While it is true that one should never marry in order to please a third party, as Claire does in her horribly failed first marriage, it is also true that when one marries one marries an entire family as well. Almost regrettably it can be said that Claire and Newman are quite a bit like Romeo and Juliet in that, as individuals, they may very well marry and enjoy happiness in marriage. However, the specifics of Newman’s culture sanction such individualism and Odyssean, explorative, Columbian, “pushing man,” “new man” behavior, perpetual and ahistorical self-renewal, “Westward-stepping” (as Butterfield asserts [5]) and living on the edge, all of which makes Newman the only “free fish” in the novel, the only character who has the freedom to marry as an individual. Claire, in contrast, but also similarly in that the specifics of her culture also dictate as much, can only marry with the consent of her family and her social circle; and in this context it is worthy of note that the Newman-de Cintre marriage fully remains a possibility until consent from the Bellegardes is withdrawn. Claire carries with her cultural baggage of which she cannot be rid. Claire, after all, is Claire de Cintre, a name that may, as Butterfield asserts, suggest the light that she brings to Newman’s life and the curve of her return to the dictates of her culture but that also suggests that she is both “clear” and “the center,” clear and colorless – and Butterfield himself sees the significance of this colorlessness (26) – and acquiescently without identity or personality except that which is conferred on her by her accepted role as the otherwise personless, fully representative,
almost mathematically absolute center of French aristocratic society that is as
masturbatively inward-turning as Poe’s self-destructive and doomed House of Usher.
Valentin, too, is French to his very fingertips and must obey, as we have seen, the cultural
siren. Marriage and transcendence of culture are, indeed, possible, demonstrably so. But
marriage, again, is not divorce and transcendence is not escape. Both Claire and Valentin
are well grounded – Butterfield would say “trapped” (26) – in culture and already
“married,” Claire primarily to her family and to the anachronistic and dying social circle
into which that family extends, and Valentin to his culture’s fatal sense of “honor.” In
the end, both Valentin and Claire choose not to divorce themselves from that culture. But
in doing so, because of the nature of that culture, as Butterfield notes, they choose death,
if indeed, as genuine members of the aristocracy, they are not already dead (25-27).
III

James and Democracy:

A Different Look at The Bostonians

and the

Question of Justice Therein

One might expect the case of a cultural imperative to be fairly easily made regarding a work entitled The American: that is, if there is such a thing as the American, then there must also be some deterministic force capable of creating such. One might argue, in addition and even more compellingly, that The American is one of James' earliest and simplest novels and that the radical thesis of a cultural imperative, which would militate against the popular notion that James is an anti-deterministic advocate of the free will, would hardly hold its validity if applied to later works wherein James exhibits considerably more of his fabled complexity of manner. The perceivable truth regarding a work like The Bostonians, however, argues otherwise. In addition to having been intended as a very American novel – perhaps even more American than The American, which, after all, is a novel neither solely nor primarily about the American but is rather an international novel about cultures in conflict – The Bostonians is firmly a work from James' mature so-called “middle” period and is possessed of a stubbornness and complexity that provoke no one less than Daniel Mark Fogel, then editor of The Henry James Review, to note how much critics are “disquieted by the unresolved thematic tensions of James’ story” (78). Nor is this complexity the mark of a novel that
either does not speak to common interests or is not accessible to common readers, for especially in this particular novel, written by a James who had enough felt maturity to attempt the composition of the relatively centerless Dickensian "social problem" novel, the moral center upon which all else hangs is a very American concern that virtually no common man has been disinclined to find interesting in the last three hundred years.

Contrary to the view that informs most recent criticism of the novel, the moral and interpretive center of The Bostonians is neither one particular character nor a cluster of characters or their relationships; it is neither Olive Chancellor, nor Basil Ransom, nor Verena Tarrant, nor the conflict between the first two for the last, although these are the figures to whom criticism most attends. Nor, for that matter, is the elusive center of the novel the feminist movement in post-Civil War Boston, although this is ostensibly the central concern. Rather, the case in The Bostonians is much in its essence as it is in Driesser’s Sister Carrie, wherein Lacanian desire motivates the intellectually inadequate titular heroine in the clear absence of consciousness. The case is also much as Cargill inadvertently hints and comes close to realizing when he warns that "we should be slow to accept The Bostonians as James’s repudiation of reform" (The Noels of Henry James 131) and goes on to see Miss Birdseye as "a most memorable image of the aftermath of the heroic age, the ebb-tide of all those humanitarian impulses" (The Novels of Henry James 132). The case in The Bostonians is that the moral and interpretive center, of which the feminist movement is but one of several expressions, is a fairly deterministic, cultural force that argues James’ continuing interest in such a thesis; it is the impersonal, faceless, American impulse toward democracy. And it is understanding the novel in
these very commonly accessible terms that enables one to reconcile the stubborn thematic tensions that plague many of its readers and that may even prompt those same readers to wonder why, upon its serial publication in The Century, the novel “appeared so little to interest . . . readers” (Cargill 133).

Along with the troublesome and seemingly even brutal ending and the uncharacteristically severe fallibility of his leading characters, locating the novel’s center in a faceless movement as James does has much to do with the anxiety that the novel causes, particularly for feminists and others who favor the allowance of full civil rights for women. Man has always had a tendency to cast God in his own image and to become anxious when the forces that control the universe appear in more general and amorphous or non-human and thus more distant and indifferent guises. No less unsettling, when one thinks of it, is the fact that the novel’s chief representative of this faceless, naturalistic, controlling socio-historical force is appropriately none other than the equally and congruently impersonal and anonymous Miss Birdseye. It is fairly well known that, as Putt and others report, the initial reception of Miss Birdseye was very unfavorable, with “brother William and other intimates [leveling] the charge that in his presentation of . . . Miss Birdseye . . . he had (in Leon Edel’s summarizing words) ‘lampooned a much respected Boston reformer, Miss Elizabeth Peabody, the elderly sister-in-law of Hawthorne’” (34). Additionally, apparently taking the validity and favorable reception of his assessment for granted, Putt himself regards Miss Birdseye as a “structurally ‘minor’ character” who is fashioned by a “sharp satirical eye” that James primarily used “first to identify, and then to forgive, certain social types who are immediately amusing and
ultimately pitiable” (30). Nor, in the view of Auchincloss (8), Ward (Imagination of Disaster 25-26), Cargill (The Novels of Henry James 128), and Sergio Perosa (20-21), did the novel as a whole or anything in it escape this same satirical eye, least of all Basil Ransom who, despite his status as the victor in the end, is clearly seen by James as inadequate and flawed. How, readers will apparently ask, can someone like Miss Birdseye possibly be the moral and intellectual center of any important fictional world? And how can a world thusly the subject of satire be considered important? In truth, it is difficult to imagine that they would consider the question at all; and therein, again, lies much of the interpretive problem.

I: Miss Birdseye

James himself denied that there was a substantial single biographical source for Miss Birdseye, and Putt allows that the portrait may have been “a patchwork figure [drawn] from the observation of several examples of a general type” (35). Still, James’ reservations about Miss Birdseye, his sense of her considerable and even comical foibles, indiscretions, and shortcomings in general, are clear. It is the same oft-quoted passage that Putt cites and that introduces Miss Birdseye that most clearly reveals most of these reservations. As others have found, the passage deserves to be quoted at full length, if for no other reason than to refresh the reader’s memory:

She was a little old lady, with an enormous head; that was the first thing Ransom noticed – the vast, fair, protuberant, candid, ungarnished brow, surmounting a pair of weak,
kind, tired-looking eyes, and ineffectually balanced in the
rear by a cap which had the air of falling backward, and
which Miss Birdseye suddenly felt for while she talked,
with unsuccessful, irrelevant movements. She had a sad,
soft, pale face, which (and it was the effect of her whole
head) looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made
vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent. The long
practice of philanthropy had not given accent to her
features; it had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings.
The waves of sympathy, of enthusiasm, had wrought upon
them in the same way in which the waves of time finally
modify the surface of old marble busts, gradually washing
away their sharpness, their details. In her large
countenance her dim little smile scarcely showed. It was a
mere sketch of a smile, a kind of installment, or payment
on account; it seemed to say that she would smile more if
she had time, but that you could see, without this, that she
was gentle and easy to beguile.

She always dressed in the same way: she wore a loose
black jacket, with deep pockets, which were stuffed with
papers, memoranda of a voluminous correspondence; and
from beneath her jacket depended a short stuff dress. The
brevity of this simple garment was the one device by which Miss Birdseye managed to suggest that she was woman of business, that she wished to be free for action. She belonged to the Short Skirts League, as a matter of course; for she belonged to any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever. This did not prevent her being a confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman, whose charity began at home and ended nowhere, whose credulity kept pace with it, and who knew less about her fellow creatures, if possible, after fifty years of humanitarian zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements. Basil Ransom knew very little about such a life as hers, but she seemed to him a revelation of a class, and a multitude of socialistic figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of, grouped themselves behind her. . . . She talked continually, in a voice of which the spring seemed broken, like that of an over-worked bell-wire; and when Miss Chancellor explained that she had brought Mr. Ransom because he was so anxious to meet Mrs. Farrinder, she gave the young man a delicate, dirty, democratic little hand, looking at him kindly, as she could
not help doing, but without the slightest discrimination as against others who might not have the good fortune (which involved, possibly, an injustice), to be present on such an occasion. She struck him as very poor, but it was only afterward that he learned she had never had a penny in her life. No one had an idea how she lived; whenever money was given her she gave it away to a Negro or a refugee. No woman could be less invidious, but on the whole she preferred those two classes of the human race. Since the Civil War much of her occupation was gone; for before that her best hours had been spent in fancying that she was helping some Southern slave to escape. It would have been a nice question whether, in her heart of hearts, for the sake of this excitement, she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage. She had suffered in the same way by the relaxation of many European despoticisms, for in former years much of the romance of her life had been in smoothing the pillow of exile for banished conspirators.

Her refugees had been very precious to her; she was always trying to raise money for some cadaverous Pole, to obtain lessons for some shirtless Italian. There was a legend that an Hungarian had once possessed himself of her affections,
and had disappeared after robbing her of everything she possessed. This, however, was apocryphal, for she had never possessed anything, and it was open to grave doubt that she could have entertained a sentiment so personal.

She was in love, even in those days, only with causes, and she languished only for emancipations. But they had been the happiest days, for when causes were embodied in foreigners (what else were the Africans?), they were certainly more appealing. (25-26)

The "what else were the Africans?" is, tellingly, of course, not James' but Miss Birdseye's; and what it tells is of the perverse excesses of her democratic impulse, an impulse that, among other things, inclines her to create opportunities when none exist. So clear are James' implications that one risks belaboring the obvious in noting these excesses as well in a redundant ("She always dressed the same way"), inordinately Jeffersonian plainness and formlessness in dress that not only reduces all choices in clothing to the same choice and disguises individual traits but also ensures that no one can be thought beneath her on the basis of his clothing. One notes the same democratic excess in the evidence of "a voluminous correspondence" by which she is shown to be in touch with everyone and exclusive of communication with no one. One notes -- in the fact that "she was easy to beguile" and in the fact of a "credulity that kept pace" with a "charity [that] began at home and ended nowhere" -- an impulse that, like democracy itself, allows for inclusion of the undeserving as well as the deserving. One notes the
excess of democratic concern in her lament for the absence of “others who might not have had the good fortune to be present on such an occasion” and in her concurrent refusal to distinguish those who were present by the nature of her handshake. One notes the philanthropic excess that she exhibits in giving away all of her money. One notes especially the perverse excess not only of “the romance of her life” and her delight in the exotic but also of her probable Tom Sawyerish “wish [to have] the blacks back in bondage” just “for the sake of the excitement.”

In a way that bespeaks the strong influence of Henry James, Sr. as the author, Hymars review of American Literature characterizes his views on democracy, but also as Putt (20) and others depict his apparent views on child rearing, Miss Birdseye, in short, is democracy run amok, so much so that she has become the thing in which she believes, so much so that even the hand she extends is “a delicate, dirty, democratic little hand” that depends from her democratic person, so much so that she “seem[s] to [Ransom]a revelation of a class, and a multitude of socialistic figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of, grouped themselves behind her,” so much so that “the long practice of philanthropy had [phrenologically] not given accent to her features [but] had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings,” “the waves of [democratic] sympathy . . . had . . . gradually wash[ed] away their sharpness, their details, and her “enormous head,” her “vast, protuberant, candid, ungarnished brow” and “sad, soft, pale face” both “looked as if [they] had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolver.” This slow dissolver is, again, the democratic impulse, which does strive to
dissolve distinctions, which does do much to encourage inclusion of not only the mediocre but the sub-par as well, and which underlies all of these excesses.

But, James’ reservations about Miss Birdseye, his awareness of her shortcomings, her human and realistic failings, should not be taken as an indication that he ultimately holds her in contempt. Putt (35) and others acknowledge that the intent of the passage is not altogether unsympathetic; but much more important and telling than the view of any critic outside the novel is the fact that the unassuming Miss Birdseye’s status as the central and leading figure in the novel’s feminist movement is obviously not achieved by way of self-appointment. Rather, the characters themselves, those who constitute the “demokratos,” accord her this status. What they see in her is apparently what we, too, and, as observers outside the novel, even more readily should see in her, and that is her essence, an essence that lies in every excess and human frailty that James identifies in the passage that introduces her. Additionally, we should see that Miss Birdseye is but the word made flesh; she is but the earthly embodiment of a flawless ideal that must express itself through imperfect men. Her shortcomings are thus fitting.

The symbolism that James employs in depicting Miss Birdseye is also indicative of his intent. The protuberant forehead, already noted, the ironically weak eyes, and the furtive and ineffectual reach for the ever-falling cap may be comic in their initial impression, but upon more careful and substantive consideration they seem to suggest the extent to which Miss Birdseye has become so blindly consumed and preoccupied with pursuit of the democratic ideal that she has lost interest in and sight of any earthly or physical concerns. This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that “she had never had a
penny in her life" and, thus, "no one had an idea how she lived," as if she lived on nothing in a way that befits the earthly embodiment of a philosophical idea. Ransom notes the impression that she gives of being representative of a "class, . . . a multitude of socialistic figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of," and her apparent agelessness, her centrality to a whole history of movements, is also suggestive of some identity that approaches the impersonally monumental and institutional and therefore goes beyond the merely individual.

Perhaps most significant, however, is the imagery that James employs at the Buzzard Bay scene of Miss Birdseye's last days. That scene is at the sparsely furnished cottage that Olive has rented for herself, Verena, the dying Miss Birdseye, and Dr. Prance, who attends to Birdseye medically. The neighborhood in general is constituted of

low, rusty, crooked, distended houses, with dry, cracked faces and the dim eyes of small-paned, stiffly-sliding windows . . . [and with] little dooryards [that] bristled with rank, old-fashioned flowers, mostly yellow.

Attached to the particular cottage that Olive has rented,

There was a verandah, in fact, to which a wide, horizontal trellis, covered with an ancient vine, formed a kind of extension. Beyond the trellis was a small, lonely garden; beyond the garden was a large, vague, woody space, where a few piles of old timber were disposed, and which
[Ransom] afterwards learned to be a relic of the
shipbuilding era...; and still beyond this again was the
charming lake-like estuary he had already admired. ...

[T]he chequers of sun, in the interstices of the vine-leaves,
fell upon a bright coloured rug spread out on the ground.
The floor of the roughly constructed verandah was so low
that there was virtually no difference in the level.

A few pages later, the implications are even clearer when James writes again of

The bristling garden, [the] gap in the old fence which
enclosed the further side of it, [and] the ancient shipyard
which lay beyond, and which was now a mere vague, grass
grown approach to the waterside, bestrewn with a few
remnants of supererogatory timber.

The images in these passages speak loudly, almost heavy-handedly of the encroachment
of the ultimate democracy, the great leveling process of death wherein all things blend
into each other and all distinctions – between things and other things, between people and
other people, between people and things – are erased and all becomes equal. The actual
moment of Miss Birdseye’s death, reported by Dr. Prance, speaks to this same issue not
only in that she seems ‘the incarnation of a well-earned rest’ but also in that “she had just
melted away,” yielding passively and appropriately to the ultimate democratic impulse.

Notwithstanding the evidence that Birdseye is so totally democratic in her essence
as to be the earthly incarnation of the democratic impulse, there is one feature of her
democratic character that is perhaps most important and that is her inclusiveness. Inclusive to the point of exhibiting absolutely no ability to discriminate, no ability to make distinctions, Birdseye most significantly reveals this impulse to inclusion primarily in her indiscriminate advocacy of civil rights and liberal movements of every kind — abolitionism, feminism, refugee rights movements, even the fakery of mesmerism which, not so incidentally, is, in Selah Tarrant’s case, a function of his Pennsylvania Quaker background. The significance of Selah’s Quaker background is that, according to Vernon L. Parrington, it bespeaks the impulse toward “inspiration” and a belief in “the doctrine of the inner light” that essentially inform Tarrant’s mesmerism. As advocates of such a doctrine and of the collateral idea of “the priesthood of all believers,” the Quakers held to a doctrine that allowed a more direct, individual, and “democratic” access to communion with God than the rigidity and exclusivity of, say, Puritan doctrine tolerated. The Quaker heritage behind Selah Tarrant’s mesmerism thus makes Selah and his mesmerism not the pitiable aberrations or perversions that Putt (38-39), Ward (Imagination of Disaster 27), Lionel Trilling (via Cargill 130), Cargill himself (134) and doubtless others generally perceive them to be but expressions — albeit, again, imperfect expressions — of the democratic impulse that are fully of a piece with Miss Birdseye’s indiscriminately democratic inclusiveness.

Additionally, since the Quakers were also noted for their abolitionist bent, Selah’s Quaker background is also compatible with his wife’s abolitionist heritage, which makes their original marriage more appropriate and less the betrayal of respectable family values, less the betrayal of Abraham Greenstreet’s legacy, less the inexplicable and
irresponsible elopement merely "for love" that it otherwise seems implicitly to be. This understanding of Selah and his wife serves as a corrective to the generally accepted critical view of them, which is fairly well represented by Putt. Beginning with a comparison of James' depiction of the Tarrants with that of "the odious figure of Matthias Pardon" (39), Putt writes that

Vernera's parents, Selah Tarrant and his wife, are presented with equally vivid distaste; but [James] . . . was prepared to give them the benefit of several doubts, and in his later sociological judgements came near to complete forgiveness. The Tarrants are a dismally insincere couple whose daughter Verena attracted to their company many Bostonians who would otherwise have spurned them. . . . Verena's mother is undeniably a comic figure . . . but via her Abolitionist parents and her 'mesmeric healer' husband Selah, she represents the more ludicrous side of many serious causes. It then comes as no surprise that the domineering Olive Chancellor (quire apart from her first barely recognizable emotional infatuation with the girl) is prepared to buy Verena from these unworthy parents and make a serious and civilized feminist nest for her. (38-39)

Putt ends by writing that there is
[O]ne small contributory factor in the make-up of the Tarrant couple which connects them . . . with the odious figure of Matthias Pardon . . ., and that is their devotion to the cheap information that is provided by popular newspapers. . . . [P]eople like the Tarrants, absurd though they may be, are pitiable rather than despicable. (39)

Putt's views are clearly respectable; most readers see the Tarrants in much the same way and see James as seeing them thusly also. However, while what the Tarrants are on their surface may validate such views, what they are in their essence is decidedly different. Unless the man who was said, by no less an intellect than T.S. Eliot, to have been the most intelligent man of his time and who was so inclined to explore subtle implications as to have become tiresome for many readers, unless that man was inexplicably incognizant of the implications of his own created details in this instance, James ultimately did not view the Tarrants with distaste and did more than simply give them the benefit of several doubts or even complete forgiveness, since forgiveness implies initial blame. In their conscious realities, the Tarrants are dismally insincere, but their actions, both conscious and unconscious, still work in the service of the democratic impulse that motivates - nay, unconsciously drives - them. It is true as well that Verena attracts to them many Bostonians who would otherwise have spurned them, but those who would - and do - spurn them are, like the Burrages, not only themselves even more "dismally insincere" but are also hardly of the lot that is essential to the most immediate fulfillment of the novel's and the nation's all-important democratic ideal. Additionally, in their
essence, the Tarrants are neither undeniably comic, nor ludicrous, nor unworthy, nor even pitiable. Albeit all unconsciously in the most complete way, they are rather essential and contributive to the larger national cause, and Mrs. Tarrant’s abolitionist heritage and Selah’ mesmerist profession are not traits that represent the ludicrous as much as they are traits that point to the more important common denominator that lies beneath them and all of the other movements to which the novel refers. While one may not at this point be quite prepared to excuse Matthias Pardon, even their interest in the newspaper, although motivated in ways that reveal their moral and intellectual shallowness, is an interest that serves the development and maturation of the most popular and democratic communications medium of the time. In a word, in their essence, the Tarrants are, like Miss Birdseye and like the feminist movement itself, imperfect expressions of the impulse to democracy and contributors to democracy’s Whitmanian “passage to India.” And, especially, in their unconsciousness of this role, the Tarrants and others illustrate how, as Claude Levi-Strauss has said, it is not so much that men think in myths and other ideas think themselves in men.

II: Olive

In addition to serving as a corrective to the generally received view and establishing Selah and his wife as thematically significant characters who, somewhat contrary to Perosa’s view that they and others form “a host of minor characters” (22), perhaps deserve to be considered as more than minor in their status, this understanding of the Tarrants serves the much more important function of greatly facilitating the difficult
task of placing Olive Chancellor, the novel’s would-be center of consciousness. Olive’s contempt for the Tarrants, who, again, are more appropriately affiliated with the feminist movement than is immediately apparent, is made explicit by her offering them money in exchange for control over their daughter, which offer bespeaks a hypocritical conception of women as purchasable property. However, Olive’s worthiness as a feminist mentor is also in considerable question. As noted earlier, Putt asserts that Olive “buys Verena from [her] unworthy parents [in order to] make a serious and civilized feminist nest for her” (39). But, in addition to the fact that the Tarrants are not as unworthy as Putt would have them, Olive as an alternative is hardly as worthy as Putt implies, his acknowledgement of her “at first barely recognizable emotional infatuation with the girl” notwithstanding (38-39). Specifically, not only does Olive commit the anti-feminist offense of trampling on the dignity of women by buying Verena, but she also ends the novel in doubly contradictory reliance on the highly uncivilized brute strength of a most crudely and stereotypically masculine police officer to guard the backstage door against Ransom’s final approach, while Ransom, in contrast, behaves in a decidedly quiet, patient, tactful, politic, and civilized way. The thesis of Olive’s particular feminist program, which calls for the exclusion of men, is contradicted on at least two additional points as well, first, as Manfred MacKenzie at least implicitly observes (41), when she tries to sell Verena in marriage to Henry Burrage in a desperate attempt to keep (not save) her from Ransom and a second time when she reveals, again at the novel’s end, that she has apparently all along had to employ a decidedly male agent, Mr. Filer, “the man who runs Miss Chancellor... just the same as she [tellingly] runs Miss Tarrant” and who, when
Matthias Pardon asks about his whereabouts, is “at the door, counting the money” in the way that he who controls the purse controls the power. However, while such observations point to the inadequacy of Putt’s assessment of Olive’s motive for holding the Tarrants in contempt they also point to the inadequacy of Olive’s particular feminist program. Olive’s feminist program is, in a word, a fraud, a fraud more grand than that of which she accuses the Tarrants. And Verena is the chief victim on whom this fraud is practiced.

More important than Olive’s suspect worthiness as a mentor, however, is the source of her felt motive for holding the Tarrants in contempt. Olive no doubt thinks – or thinks that she thinks – that the apparent fakery of Selah’s mesmerism compromises the integrity of the feminist movement, and the text at several points supports this view. Olive notes more than once the pain “she had suffered already for the idea that he laid his hands upon her to make her speak” and notes as well what, to her, is “the wonder of such people being Verena’s progenitors at all.” Olive’s view is even given some appearance of legitimacy by being echoed to a large extent by both Mrs. Farrinder, who initially objects to the competition for power that Verena represents, and Ransom, who is Olive’s chief adversary for the duration of the book. Mrs. Farrinder, in particular, was perceptibly irritated; she appeared to have made up her mind . . . that the Tarrant family were fantastical and compromising. . . . [S]he might have regarded them all as a company of mountebanks[,] while
Ransom simply loathed him, from the moment he opened his mouth; he was intensely familiar — that is, his type was; he was simply the detested carpet-bagger. He was false, cunning, vulgar, ignoble; the cheapest kind of human product. That he should be the father of a delicate, pretty girl, who was apparently clever too, whether she had a gift or no, this was an annoying, disconcerting fact. . . . He grew more impatient at last, not of the delay of the edifying voice . . ., but of Tarrant’s grotesque manipulations, which he resented as much as if he himself had felt their touch, and which seemed a dishonor to the passive maiden.

Yet, in each of these cases, the supporting voter is more generous and/or tolerant than Olive. As Ransom notes at the conclusion of Verena’s speech at Miss Birdseye’s, Mrs. Farrinder “was a woman with a policy; . . . it was perceptible to him that she saw she [Verena] would be effective, would help the cause.” Being the aggressive, opportunistic, bottom-line person that she is, Farrinder ultimately regards Verena’s parents as irrelevant and reduces the question of Verena’s legitimacy to a question of her usefulness. And Ransom, in his turn, admits that

Afterwards . . . he asked himself wherein [the Tarrants and Selah’s “grotesque manipulations] concerned him, and whether even a carpet-bagger hadn’t a right to do what he pleased with his daughter.
Hence, while the content of their objection to the Tarrants seems to be essentially the same, the particular stridency of Olive’s objection seems to suggest a different source.

Cargill writes that “the most neglected point about The Bostonians is the pains which James took to establish the environment that produced Olive Chancellor and made the contest for Verena possible” (137). However, contrary to Perosa’s notion that “New England feminism . . . breeds ‘monsters’ like Olive” (23), and even granting, as I am unwilling to do, that Olive is a monster, James gives the reader abundant reason to suspect that the above referenced source is Olive’s cultural background, the explication of which is provided within the novel’s very first few pages. “Very honest” and “full of rectitude,” and possessed of a tendency to “take things hard,” Olive Chancellor is a Bostonian, a product of “the city of reform,” an “unprevaricating city” wherein “nobody tells fibs,” least of all Olive Chancellor. As such, she is a daughter of the Puritans whose straight and narrow drawing room reveals as much about her as the selection of heavy oak Jonathan Winthrop bedroom furniture reveals about the repressed sexuality of Homer Simpson in Nathanael West’s stylistically lighter The Day of the Locust. The significance of this Puritan background as far as Olive’s contempt for the Tarrants is concerned is a matter of near historical fact, for the more direct, individual, and “democratic” communion with God that the Quaker doctrines of the inner light and the priesthood of all believers and their demonstrative belief in the possibility of “inspiration” allowed was sharply at odds with that which the rigidity and attendant exclusivity of Puritan tolerated. Moreover, equally intolerant were the Puritans themselves, whose culturally inspired contempt for the Quakers and their beliefs was
matched in severity only by the severity of their persecution of them. Also to be considered is the Puritan discouragement of the sensual and the Quaker encouragement of the same. With the Puritan’s middle-class constituency in its contrast to the lower socio-economic class status of most Quakers, the further suggestion emerges that Olive’s Puritan heritage inclines her to reject the Tarrants on socio-economic grounds as well, an idea that draws considerable support from the fact that Olive had long been preoccupied with the romance of the people. She had an immense desire to know intimately some very poor girl [but] had found that they always ended up by being obiously mixed up with Charlie. . . . They cared far more about Charlie than about the ballot. . . . In her researches among her young townswomen she had always found this intrusive swain planted in her path, and she grew at last to dislike him extremely. It filled her with exasperation to think that he should be necessary to the happiness of his victims (she had learned that whatever they might talk about with her, it was of him and him only that they discoursed among themselves) . . . .

Olive’s “some” and her “very” strongly suggest that her impulse “to know some very poor girl” is but the typical, contemptible upper middle class impulse toward “slumming” and toward regarding the poor as nameless, faceless, “invisible” men and women who are not individuals and are rather to be identified primarily in terms of their socio-economic
status. That is, Olive simply wants to know “some” – meaning “any” – poor girl; and it is
critical to Olive that the girl be “very” poor, definitively poor. In either case, to Olive,
the girl’s individual identity does not matter.

The passage just cited also indicates that, primarily as a descendant of the
Puritans, who distrusted the sensual as much as the Quakers trusted and encouraged it,
Olive, whom Auchincloss (81), Kenneth Graham (92-92, 97), Ward (Imagination of
Disaster 26), MacKenzie (38-40, 42), Perosa (21), and, arguably, Sicker (160) note for
her sexual repression or some such similar pathology, has a sharp distaste for the very
natural sexual lure that “Charlie” offers and that, in Olive’s “researched” view, is
particularly attractive among the “very poor.” That Olive is possessed of this distaste for
the sexual lure may seem to bespeak her much discussed, much debated latent
lesbianism. But, to subscribe to that thinking may well be to ignore the “first cause”
logic that Olive is not only a product of a Puritan background but is also and congruently,
even consequently (given the attitude of the Puritans toward women) a victim of the
tyrranny or prisonhouse of gender and society’s conception thereof and that her essential
lesbianism – for it is at least that – is itself a function of that victim’s status. (See
Blackall’s reported comment that politics determine sexuality rather than vice versa
[Long 78]) The plausibility that such a concept is in operation in The Bostonians is
evident, first of all, in the fact that the novel is about the feminist movement in post-Civil
War Boston and, more generally, in the fact of James’ reputation as a writer concerned
with such questions. The thesis moves beyond the merely plausible, however, when the
facts of the case regarding Olive are considered. On the same early pages that explicate
Olive’s cultural background, James alerts the reader as well to a number of the
differences between Olive and her sister, Mrs. Luna. At least in the present context, the
most articulate of these differences are physical. Specifically, while Adeline Luna is
“plump,” sensuous, confident, apparently eager for her next marriage, and, as Basil
Ransom soon observes, “sufficiently pretty” (as if women must be so in order to be
adequate), Olive is physically straight and narrow, sexless, timid and not only unmarried
but, as Ransom also observes (albeit later), “unmarried by every implication of her
being.” Ransom’s observation of Olive’s essential spinsterhood and celibacy is
particularly significant. He is explicit in his assessment that Olive is “unmarried [neither]
by accident . . . [nor] by option” and that her identity as “a signal old maid . . . was her
quality, her destiny.” In a world that allowed only marriage, community school teaching,
saloon-girl prostitution, or independent wealth via inheritance from one’s father as viable
or real career options for women, Olive’s physical unattractiveness, her sexlessness, and
her tendency to “take things so hard” make her, as MacKenzie can at least be seen to hint
(38-40), a prisoner of her gender, a woman who has been required to chose only from the
roles that her society allows and who yet is denied by biology any real opportunity to fill
any of those roles.

Moreover, Olive’s disadvantage is exacerbated by the fact that she is also
possessed of a mind that is characterized by a Bostonian bent toward an exacting personal
morality, which makes her unaccommodating in a way that most men of the time would
have regarded as unattractive in a woman. Of course, an attractive woman with a mind,
even a mind possessed of strong and narrow personal views, might have been acceptable
to a sufficient number of marriageable men of the time; a mind, after all, is an asset and would have been perceived as such by some of Olive’s more genuinely intelligent male contemporaries. James himself depicts several such cases: for instance, in the examples of Kate Croy, Angela Vivian, Betsy Alden, and even Isabel Archer, who is not unattractive to men but, at least arguably, simply marries the wrong man. In short, for an attractive woman, anything might be allowed. But, Olive, with her physical unattractiveness, simply does not bring enough to the table to compensate for or even to complement her unattractively strong and independent mind. Even Ransom, who at least momentarily considers that Olive’s independent wealth might relieve him of the “millstone of debt round his neck” and serve him as “an aid to achievement” and who, later in the novel, more than momentarily considers marriage to Mrs. Luna for the purpose of gaining the same financial relief (a fact that also further argues that Olive’s biology is her fate), concludes at the last that “nothing would induce him to make love to such a type as that.”

To be sure, Olive’s identity as a Bostonian and thus as a product of a Puritan heritage has a lot to do with her observed moral seriousness or tendency to “take things so hard” and always to be on the lookout for duties as well as with the moral narrowness that she exhibits by way of her eschewance of prevarication even in the interest of good manners and even with the physical narrowness of her drawing room. Indeed, as is the case with The American, the fact that it carries the title of The Bostonians, which Auchincloss regards as an agreement error (79), may seem to suggest that the novel’s controlling force is cultural environment or cultural heritage rather than gender. And, to
the extent that the Bostonian/Puritan influence has shaped the American personality
profile more than any other, so it is. Ransom, who can hardly be aware of the titular
concerns of a novel in which he is a character, even considers this possibility that Olive is
primarily a product of her cultural environment. Speaking to Mrs. Luna, he asks

“Do you mean to say your sister’s a roaring radical?” “A
radical? She’s a female Jacobin – she’s a nihilist.
Whatever is, is wrong, and all that sort of thing. . . .

“Oh, murder!” murmured the young man vaguely,
sinking back in his chair with his arms folded. . . . “Well, I
suppose I might have known that,” he continued at last.

“You might have known what?”

“She was brought up in the city of reform.”

But, eager though she may already have shown herself to indict the city for its
unprevaricating – read Puritanical – nature, Mrs. Luna is quick to correct Ransom’s
misassessment. “Oh, it isn’t the city,” she replies, and her tone is detached and certain;
“it’s just Olive Chancellor.”

It is important to note that Ransom and Mrs. Luna are referring here more or less
specifically to Olive’s alleged nihilism, her extremism, and her reformist bent in general.
It has already been noted that Olive’s particular feminist program is seriously lacking in
functional validity. However, also noteworthy is the fact that her program goes well
beyond that of others in the movement and that she is “just Olive” in this regard also. For
example, as a married woman, Mrs. Farrinder is obviously not inclined to exclude men
from the movement and, in spite of her sense that their presence is possibly compromising, would not even exclude the likes of the Tarrants provided that they are useful. Miss Birdseye, in her turn, is not only even more tolerant of people like the Tarrants but is also fully inclined to include men. It is not altogether the sign of hypocrisy and self-contradiction that Dr. Prance implies it to be that Miss Birdseye thinks that Ransom will "be a great addition," or that women in the movement generally "are a great deal more pleased when a man joins than when a woman does," or that Birdseye is so eager to include a southerner like Ransom that she allows herself to be duped by him. Birdseye simply recognizes — or at least acts according to — the imperative of inclusion, the imperative that men be included and that the most opposed of men be included above all. And Verena's speech, which Ransom accuses of being short on logic and detail, yet has logic and detail enough to specify an appeal that men allow women to enter with them in a cooperative, inclusive relationship that will benefit men and women alike.

Perhaps more important than either of these positions, however, is their apparently unqualified acceptance by the democratic masses of other women in the movement, women who listen in rapt attention to Verena as she speaks not only "all about the gentleness and goodness of women," not only about "the rights and wrongs of women" but also about

the equality of the sexes, the hysterics of conventions, the

further stultification of the suffrage, the prospect of

conscript mothers in the Senate

and about the idea that
"if this is the best [men] can do by themselves, they had
better let [women] come in a little and see what [they] can
do. . . . Why shouldn’t tenderness come in?"

They listen, in short, to Verena’s depiction of women in fairly conventional terms, terms
that characterize women as essentially “feminine” and possessed of a nearly
stereotypically “feminine” touch, terms that also imply the acceptance of women as they
are, terms that do not make the error, which later feminists would make, of implying that
women must emulate men in order to claim equality with men. They listen as well, here
and later, to Verena’s appeal for a cooperative rather than adversarial relationship with
men and to her argument that such a cooperative rather than competitive male-female
relationship is closer to the functionally ideal. They listen, they are visibly impressed,
and, more importantly, both their silence and their applause are their consent.

Verena’s later speech, given at Mrs. Burrage’s before the guests of the
Wednesday Club and worth quoting at considerable length, reveals even more clearly the
conciliatory character of her wishes for the movement. Addressing momentarily the
males in her audience, she says

“You strike me as men who are starving to death while they
have a cupboard at home, all full of bread and meat and
wine; or as blind, demented beings who let themselves be
cast into a debtor’s prison, while in their pocket they have
the key of vaults and treasure-chests heaped up with gold
and silver. The meat and wine, the gold and silver . . . are
simply the suppressed and wasted force, the precious
sovereign remedy, of which society insanely deprives itself
– the genius, the intelligence, the inspiration of women. . . .
I am not here to recriminate, nor to deepen the gulf that
already yawns between the sexes, and I don’t accept the
doctrine that they are natural enemies, since my plea is for
a union far more intimate – provided it be equal – than any
that the sages and philosophers of former times have ever
dreamed of. . . . Good gentlemen all, if I could make you
believe how much brighter and fairer and sweeter the
garden of life would be for you, if you would only let us
help you keep it in order. . . . Pray, who shall judge what
we require if not we ourselves?"

Verena’s appeal here is not only conciliatory and non-militant in its tone but is also
addressed to the relatively unsympathetic because relatively insincere “society” crowd
that is constituted by the Wednesday Club. Yet these women too are held in rapt
attention by Verena’s speech, apparently – for James indicates nothing to the contrary –
not only because of its music but also because of its message as well. In her difference
from these women, who are also more of her socio-economic class, and in her difference
from Mrs. Farrinder, Miss Birdseye, and, especially, the women from the earlier
audience, who are not only more representative of the democratic masses but who are
also, like Olive, Bostonians, Olive is alone and therefore again “just Olive.”
Yet Olive, while she disagrees intellectually with Verena’s argument, sits on both occasions in attention at least as rapt as that of anyone else in the audience. What this indicates is that the differences between Olive and the other women in the movement are, in large part, only intellectual or philosophical and that there is yet to be considered the question of what Olive feels. What Olive feels indicates her strong and unacknowledged agreement with what Verena proposes, which, again, is not that men and women divorce themselves from one another but that they work toward a more perfect union. In addition to being revealed on the two occasions when Verena speaks before an audience, Olive’s feelings are revealed on the occasion of her first encounter with Basil Ransom, where, in her living room

she had instantly seated herself, and while Mrs. Luna talked
she kept her eyes on the ground, glancing even less toward
Basil Ransom than toward that woman of many words.

The young man was therefore free to look at her; a contemplation, which showed him that she was agitated and trying to conceal it. He wondered why she was agitated, not foreseeing that he was destined to discover, later, that her nature was like a skiff in a stormy sea. Even after her sister had passed out of her room she sat there with her eyes turned away, as if there had been a spell upon her which forbade her to raise them. Miss Olive Chancellor . . . was subject to fits of tragic shyness, during
which she was unable to meet even her own eyes in the mirror. One of these fits had suddenly seized her now, without any obvious cause, though, indeed, Mrs. Luna had made it worse by becoming instantly so personal.

Although one might initially speculate that Mrs. Luna’s excessive familiarity might be the cause of Olive’s fit of shyness, the last note in this passage clearly indicates that this is not the case, as does the chariot scene on the way to the feminist gathering at Miss Birdseye’s, wherein, in spite of her thinking that men didn’t care for the truth, especially the new kinds, in proportion as they were good-looking,

and in spite of the fact that it had already been a comfort to her, on occasions of acute feeling, that she hated men as a class, anyway,

Olive still has to confess to herself that Her second thought with regard to having asked him [to accompany her to Miss Birdseye’s] had deepened with the elapsing moments into an unreasoned terror of the effect of his presence.

Lending authority to the assessment of the source of this terror are the observations of Graham and Mackenzie. Writing in 1975, Graham observes that Julia Darrow of The Tragic Muse
shrinks as Olive shrank, more than once, from Basil

Ransom's assertive masculinity; but from disbelief in Nick

[Dormer's] love more than from sexual shame. (96)

Examining this implied thesis of Olive's sexual shame more thoroughly, Mackenzie, who also cites the chapter 1 living room scene for support, explains that Olive is "a reactionary daughter of New England" and that

suffering from the most acute sexual shame and doubt,

Olive has determined to master her abjection only to feel,

when it actually comes to a debut before the hero, all the more exposed. . . . In Olive's case the compulsion to conceal self has long entered an ideological phase.

Identifying this ideology as "reactionary feminism," Mackenzie goes on to observe that the fact that Olive is originally a sexual reactionary leads one to ask whether she is not, following her fever-chilled debut, in love with the hero, in love in a perverse way that is, tragically, the only way open to one whom "no one could help" (I, 13). . . . That is, while Olive deeply desires to establish herself with the manly hero, she also wants to establish herself negatively, even revengefully, for fear of not being able to do so. She might be anticipating the tormented heroine of "A London Life" who "wanted to marry but . . . wanted also not to want it, and, above all, not
to appear to.” Thus her surprising feeling for Ransom even as she insists, in her ideological role as female emancipationist, that he cannot genuinely care for humanity in general. . . .

On this view, Olive’s subsequently attaching herself to Verena Tarrant, the heroine who will eventually marry the hero, amounts to a tragically perverse consummation of her own susceptibility to the hero. . . . [S]he would seek to live and love vicariously, through a surrogate sexual self, while at the same time protecting herself from further exposure before the hero by means of this same surrogate. (40)

One might object fairly strenuously to Mackenzie’s word choice in identifying Ransom as a “hero,” for, as critics since Lionel Trilling have recognized, Ransom is hardly the novel’s hero. However, the argument that the source of Olive’s fit of shyness in this instance is sexual shame and an ill-disguised attraction to Ransom argues as well that Olive’s difference from other women in the movement is in large part only philosophical or intellectual or, to use Mackenzie’s term, “ideological,” and that, more importantly, what Olive really wants – and wishes that she did not want – is what other women show that they want by their agreement with Verena and by their election of her as their champion. To wit, what they want is a healthier, more cooperative relationship with their male counterparts, but a relationship nonetheless.
Firmly refuted on several points by Mackenzie's observations and, even more importantly, by the textual evidence is Sarah B. Daugherty's claim that "potentially, Olive Chancellor is a serious feminist [who], having no sexual interest in men, . . . is determined to make them pay for their chauvinism." In addition to having sexual interests in men that, at bottom, are very much like those of other women in the novel, Olive is far from being a serious feminist not only because of the self-contradiction of her novel-length dependence on men that has already been observed but also because her feminism, such as it is, is so much motivated by her intense rejection of men that it is clearly more a moving away from men than it is a moving toward women. It depends on men for its definition; it has no independent existence or identity; men, in fact, are ultimately its authors, its *raison de être*. Similarly, even Olive's attraction to Verena, which is at least essentially lesbian in its manifestations, cannot ultimately be considered truly lesbian in its manifestations, cannot ultimately be considered truly lesbian in its original source. Somewhat contrary to Blackall's reported and, admittedly, informally expressed view, it is neither that Olive's sexual orientation grows out of her politics nor that her politics grow out of her sexual orientation (Long 78). It is rather than both her "possible lesbianism" and her politics grow out of her intense – and, again, significantly unpopular, uncommon, unshared – rejection of and, more fundamentally, rejection by men. Hence, this, too, argues that what Olive really wants or originally prefers is the same healthy heterosexual relationship that other women in the novel want. Olive turns to women only because men, in her admittedly respectable view, have shown themselves to be so inadequate, the implication being, however, that if men were not so inadequate
she would be adequately satisfied with them and with a relationship with them. Olive is thus lesbian and turns to women only in that she has been "turned"; she has been turned to homosexuality in the same way that shy, unattractive, and otherwise unbefriended young freshmen are "turned" on any contemporary college campus. Hence, as well, what she wants men to pay for is not as much their chauvinism as it is their rejection of her, which brings these considerations back to the thesis of the prisonhouse or tyranny of gender and to Olive's subjection to that tyranny.

III: Basil Ransom

It may seem to be almost needless to say that the apparent authors or at least the chief audible advocates of this prisonhouse of gender are men like Basil Ransom, who quite unembarrassedly confesses that

The women he had hitherto known had been mainly of his own soft clime, and it was not often they exhibited the tendency he detested (and cursorily deplored) in Mrs. Luna's sister. That was the way he liked them - not to think too much, not to feel any responsibility for the government of the world, such as he was sure Miss Chancellor felt. If they would only be private and passive, and have no feeling but for that, and leave publicity to the sex of tougher hide!
Of course, James immediately states that "it must be repeated that [Basil Ransom] was very provincial." Still, provincial or not—and most men of the time, whether from the South or not, were 'provincial' in this sense—the effect for women was the same. And those women who did not bring enough to the table—in the way of beauty, an inherited fortune, or some other compensatory feature—to bribe their way out were condemned to remain under the rules of their male wardens, to adopt the identity of the exile, or to turn to the inadequate alternative lifestyles into which people in prison tend to fall.

Yet, in spite of his having been the chief author or audible advocate of the problem, it is even—and perhaps particularly—the male who is like Ransom who is also frequently a victim of this same prisonhouse of gender. The example of Basil Ransom, who functions as representative of this male faction and literally in the novel is its published voice, is illustrative of this irony in that, as a male, his perceived obligation is to be a provider and protector for the women in his family even at the cost of prostituting himself in marriage to the likes of Mrs. Luna, whom he finds nearly intolerable. Additionally and more importantly, however, by setting his novel in post-Civil War America, James at least seems to indicate an awareness of the forces that lend some considerable legitimacy to the chauvinism of men like Ransom. Specifically, if it is true that, in societies that depend on the ability to wield hand held tools and weapons for their survival, maintenance, and protection, men are typically, understandably, and even necessarily given priority, then the fact of the Civil War serves in *The Bostonians* as a fresh reminder of the arguable—albeit somewhat occasional—legitimacy of male chauvinism. Interestingly, however, the fact of the Civil Way may also be seen to
suggest the legitimacy not only of the feminist movement but also of "the feminization of the age" that James alleges in that, as most major wars since the Civil War have revealed, the same mass involvement of men that is necessitated by war necessitates as well the mass involvement of women in the roles that fighting men are forced to abandon; and this is particularly true in an industrialized society such as that which obtained in the pre- and post-war North. Needless to say, women who in wartime have changed their lifestyles in an attempt to support the war effort are hardly inclined to return to their original subservient status and are inclined instead to insist on receiving the social, economic, and political parity that they feel they have earned; they are inclined, in a word, to become feminists, or "womanists," as the current word choice might have it. As the same time, the fact of a war that was "one of the biggest failures that history commemorates, the immense national fiasco" that Ransom describes tends to suggest the need for a "kinder, gentler nation" and tranquil means of resolving political differences and thus the very "feminization of the age" that Ransom laments, albeit not quite the feminization, the default and abdication of masculinity, that Trilling (via Cargill 131) notes.

Even so, while it may be amusing to think of Ransom as an unwitting contributor to authorship of the very movement that he despises, doing so does little to diminish the uneasiness that is caused by his marriage to Verena at the novel's end, where, as Ransom himself discovers,

Beneath her hood, [Verena] was in tears [and] it is to be feared that with this union, so far from brilliant, into which
she was about to enter, these were not the last that she was
destined to shed.

Given such an explicit indication of what Verena has in store for her, it is difficult to
imagine that there are "those who would see the novel as a comedy culminating in the
rightful restitution of male authority through marriage" (Martin 81), that there is in
actuality a James who is like the one whom Habegger depicts (182-229), or that "James
meant [not] to imply . . . that Verena's marriage would be an unhappy one" (Auchincloss
81). Nevertheless, the fact that Verena's promised married life is so unpleasant does not
mean that there is no coherence to her final choice. For one thing, the reason that she
marries Ransom is the same as the reason that he marries her. In spite of their
philosophical differences, which give him just as much reason not to want to marry her as
she has not to marry him, the simple truth, which is in fact proved by their differences
and the extent thereof, is that she loves him, and he, in equal spite of himself, loves her
(Mackenzie 41). It is also true that, as D.W. Jefferson notes, Verena "is . . . utterly
eligible for rescue" (43), that, as Auchincloss notes, Ransom is possessed of a "dominant
sexuality" to which Verena responds as a woman "made for love" and "a natural woman"
motivated by natural forces (see also Graham 92-93) and which, while "not a good
thing," nevertheless "mows down all before it" (80), and that, as Auchincloss also notes,
"there would have been far more [problems] in a life shared with Olive Chancellor" (81).

But, there is more. Strange though it may seem, there is also something like
"duty." Very early in the novel it is not Verena but Olive whose "nature" it is "to look
out for duties, to appeal to her conscience for tasks," whose "rule of conduct [was] that
whenever she saw a risk she was to take it,” and to whom, “of all things in the world, contention was the most sweet.” According to Ransom’s view, which at this point and on this issue is fairly reliable, it is even a sense of duty that prompts Olive to invite him to Boston:

It came over him that it was because she took things hard
she had sought his acquaintance; it was because she was strenuous, not because she was genial; she had had in her eye . . . not a pleasure, but a duty.

Additionally, at the novel’s end, Verena may hardly seem to have anything like duty on her mind when she allows herself to be abducted by Ransom. As Ransom observes at one point in the book’s closing scene, “She had evidently given up everything now – every pretense of a different conviction and of loyalty to her cause.” And, at another point only slightly later, “He saw now that she only wanted to get away, to leave everything behind her.” Yet, in addition to the fact that even this assessment hardly suggests the indifference that would be parcel to an absent sense of duty, when Verena declares

from the moment I knew you were on the other side of [the
door] I couldn’t go on – I was paralyzed. It has made me feel better to talk you – and now I could appear [,]

she indicates at least a residual dual concern, Ransom’s slightly earlier observation that she had “given up . . . every pretense . . . of loyalty to her cause” also notwithstanding. This dual concern is with fulfilling her commitment to speak publicly for the movement
on the one hand and with meeting, on the other, her obligation to face its opposition, which in this case also means facing the man she loves.

This dual concern with commitment or duty, particularly the duty to face any opponent of the movement and/or an opponent of her commitment to the movement—and Ransom is both—is not new to Verena. Nor is it more correct to identify it solely as manifestation of the conflict between public movements and the private lives of people in those movements that Putt (33, 168), Ward (in *Search for Form* 134), Perosa (41), and Graham (92-93) perceive it to be, although there are substantial elements of such in this case. Indeed, Ransom does not become a consciously private concern for Verena—and may not even be an unconsciously private concern—until the moment she realizes that “He made her nervous and restless; she was beginning to perceive that he produced a peculiar effect on her” and, even then, the fact that, moments later, her confession that “she ceased to care whether she produced any effect or not” indicates not that she has begun to attend more to his personal appeal than to his political views but simply that “She didn’t see why she should take him so seriously when he wouldn’t take her so.” Shortly after this confession, which prefaces her extended, two-chapter outing with Ransom in Central Park, her interest in Ransom becomes unquestionably and even painfully personal. It is then that she pleads with an equally distraught Olive to “take me away, take me away” because Ransom’s personal appeal for her is apparently too strong for her to resist. Prior to this moment, however, that her chief concern in conjunction with Ransom is a concern with duty is made fairly clear. When asked, for example, by a very anxious Olive “why [she] should care about” Ransom and why, in particular, she
wanted him to attend the Wednesday Club lecture that she gave at Mrs. Burrage', she
replies that "I wanted him to be there – I wanted him to hear . . . because he's so awfully
opposed!" as if she feels some obligation to address those who are opposed to the
movement. That this is, at the time, her primary conscious concern is claimed a short
while later when she says to Olive, "I confess, I am curious. . . . Well, to hear the other
side. You must remember I have never heard it. The more he should talk, the better
chance he would give me," while moments later she is nothing less than explicit in her
assertion that facing the opposition is her felt obligation:

"I must take everything that comes. I mustn't be afraid. I
thought we had agreed that we were to do our work in the
midst of the world, facing everything, keeping straight on,
always taking hold. . . . Such a course would be more
dignified than dodging it."

And, testifying to the validity of her claim is not only the fact that

Verena had by this time made up her mind that her
acquaintance with Mr. Ransom was the most episodic, most
superficial, most unimportant of all possible relations

but also the fact that, after careful consideration, Olive "believed her."

Not one to congratulate James for much of anything, Auchincloss, at the start of
his half-chapter consideration of The Bostonians, refers to "the naivete of James as a
social thinker" and to the idea that this alleged naivete "has always been somewhat
embarrassing to his devotees," which is an idea which Naomi Lebowitz presents as well
(12). Naivete or no, however, James intuits correctly about the limitations of the depicted women’s movement and does so in a way that history clearly shows would have been instructive for the American women’s movement of the second half of the twentieth century. James clearly understands that a movement based on hatred and opposition cannot long survive and that, as Cargill, citing Trilling, points out, “the vagaries of the feminist movement” that the novel depicts and that Auchincloss misconstrues as indicative of a failure of knowledge on James’ part (78, 79) “suggest conflict between men and women deeper than any quarrel over rights and inequalities.’ [Rather] it [is] a revelation of the beginnings of sexual disorientation in America” (129). Hence, suggesting a corrective, James shows us that, by facing Ransom, and even by losing in that confrontation and yielding to his demands of marriage, Verena does what Olive will not do but what the feminist movement, in order to be genuine, must do, and that is confront the problem of the relationship between men and women, Yet, even in yielding, Verena simply moves her battle from the public to the private, domestic front, where all civil rights battles must ultimately be fought, where, for example, a large part of the civil rights battle for Afro-Americans is now being fought. Moreover, it is, again, a representative battle, in that Verena and Ransom are representative figures. Meanwhile, the feminist movement itself, absent Verena, absent the venerable and democratic Miss Birdseye, essentially absent even the ineffectual Olive, whose interest in the public movement has degenerated into a private and ultimately unrequited one and whose appearance before the expectant crowd at the novel’s end promises, as Martin (85) and Mackenzie (38, 43) both perceive, more the martyrdom that she masochistically and
therefore stereotypically craves than the oratorical success, however modest, that Merla Wolk would have it (53), continues of its own and democracy’s momentum. Daugherty (42-48) and especially Martin (77-85) might well argue that the notion of a naturalistic, unconscious and irresistible democratic thrust may itself be but another romantic notion, but historical fact, it seems, argues strongly to the contrary. Hence, while The Bostonians may definitely not be a comedy culminating in the rightful restitution of male authority through marriage, and may also not be “the final defeat of Boston and of women, black and white” that Martin perceives it to be (83), it is a comedy of some sort, albeit ironically a rather dark and unsettling comedy, in that it culminates in the rightful and even imperative reunion of male and female in a setting wherein their differences can be confronted and parity for females can be established, . . . or restored.
IV

The Beast and the Jungle

in

"The Beast in the Jungle"

The general assessment of Henry James’ "The Beast in the Jungle," as represented by such critics as Leo Hamalian and Volpe (193), is that the "beast," the great thing that was to have happened to him, is as John Marcher indicates at the story's end simply "nothing." Further, if such assessments are correct, then the story, one of James' best, is a rather simple and merely anecdotal one despite its author's legendary complexity and notwithstanding the fact that "nothingness," with the terror it inspires, is a very profound and even complex (albeit highbrow and academically elitist) matter, perhaps because of its very simplicity. If such assessments are correct, then far more ear deserves to be given to an unsympathetic critic like Sean O'Faolain when, writing quite disparagingly, he goes so far as not only to assert this presumed and alleged simplicity but also to complain that "everything is presented with an air of the greatest subtlety which, since the point is not subtle, can only make the normal reader resent the masculine self-importance of the presumption that we must approach the obvious on tip-toe" (255). However, while it well may be that the whole of Marcher's "beast" is constituted by the fact "he had been the man of his time, the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" or by the simple fact of "his failure to love the lady" which O'Faolain asserts (255), and while it also well may be that the "jungle" in the story is, as Frances E. Smith
asserts, "the jungle of [Marcher’s] inaction" (245) and/or even as Fredric Wertham psychoanalytically construes, "the jungle of his consciousness" (249), there is another, deeper and yet more earthy beast in the story, and a jungle too, which together constitute the vessel in which the work’s anti-elitist statement is ferried and are constituted by the why of Marcher’s being a man to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. This "why," which is left unanswered by James in The Notebooks, this deeper and more earthy beast, fully ironic as the first, which it causes or creates, and likened, as Smith aptly notes, to a tiger, which is both beautiful and ferocious, is not some "nameless dread" as Dr. Wertham would have it (249) but is fully nameable, nameless only because unnamed, and unnamed only because unrecognized for the simple and nameable thing that it is. This nameable beast is manners, John Marcher’s excessively fine, impeccably and even narcissistically cultivated, stercile fastidious, ultimately cruel and quite beastly "good" and "beautiful" manners, in fact; and the jungle, the tangled, frequently impenetrable web of growth is the heavily mannered and heavily petiolated, highly polished, sophisticated and therefore complex, "Europeanesque" society in which John Marcher lives. It is this failure of manners to achieve desired results, this authorship by manners of Marcher’s undesired fate, that "annihilates him [and] strikes at the very root of all [his] world" (205).

Few critics even hint at the interpretive possibility that manners are the culprit in the tragedy – or simply the misfortune – that befalls John Marcher. However – and one gleans hints as one can – D.W. Jefferson in 1960 does observe that "Marcher’s egoism manifests itself in some very discreet, civilized ways [that lead to] transcend[ence of]
moralising "interpretation of character" (78). J.A. Ward, who also once informally expressed serious reservations about the validity of my thesis here, in 1961 (Imagination of Disaster) at least acknowledges the enabling quality of manners while yet not holding them sufficiently responsible when he writes that "Vanderbank (of The Awkward Age) is related to John Marcher" and that "his own [and thus Marcher's] selfishness [is] masked as high propriety" (99). Blackall, in 1965, observes significantly that "Marcher's obsession . . . remains intact because of his own pride and because of the tact and reticence of others" (169-70; emphasis mine). Philip Sicker in 1980 sees May Bartram's correspondent in The Sacred Fount, May Server, as "an innocent victim of her own beautifully refined consciousness" and thereby suggests to the critic eager for hints that the depiction of a man who is a victim of his own beautifully refined manners is also a definite possibility (119-20). Broyard essentially seconds the notion that manners can be taken too far when he accuses Lambert Strether of The Ambassadors, for example, of having "taken politeness to the pitch of mysticism" (10). And, Barton Levi St. Armand in 1987 agrees with George Monteiro that "The Beast in the Jungle" "can be read as a trenchant critique of Pater's ethic of aesthetics" (130), thereby hinting, however vaguely, that the tale's reading as a trenchant critique of etiquette is also possible. When St. Armand goes on to say that "although James was drawn to Aestheticism, he also feared the egotism, solipsism, and amoral passivity that seemed inextricable with its practice" (131), he might as easily and appropriately be indicting manners as well as aestheticism.

The paucity of hints notwithstanding, however, much of the essence of the assertion that the world of polite society is the jungle of James' tale is captured in a 1947
comment by Smith, who writes that “the delicacy of feeling and introspection displayed . . . can only be acquired by strenuous practice for which even the most sensitive people are hardly allowed time” (246). Smith further argues that James’ “characters lose what life they have in the maze of logical inference until they have more of the nature of [algebraic] propositions than of human beings” (248-49). That the world in which Marcher lives is itself this rather dense and nearly impenetrable jungle of careful considerations that Smith essentially sees in it is indicated very early in the text itself by his own grudging and even derogatory comments about his fellow visitors and “classmates” at Weatherend, who tend to “[give] themselves up to mysterious appreciations and measurements” of the fine aesthetic treasures at Weatherend, appreciations that persons outside such an elite socio-economic and intellectual class would find it difficult to penetrate but that Marcher, self-appointedly at the top of this class, holds in considerable contempt. So impenetrable is this social circle that it is difficult even for Marcher to distinguish between “those who knew too much and those who knew nothing,” while the most significant words for the story, the words that “determined the speech that so startled him” and that thereby almost literally author the ensuing tale, are “but some words spoken by himself quite without intention” and are thus suggestive of a jungle-like complexity wherein even the distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless is nearly impenetrable. Similarly, friend and foe in this world are indistinguishable, as we see when Marcher speaks of his fellow guests of several occasions as his “friends” and yet, in rather unfriendly terms, likens them to “dogs sniffing at the cupboard” who “gloat,” are “tiresome,” prevent him by way of their
ignorance from establishing a "proper relation" with the Weatherend treasures, and are "too stupid for" the kind of "penetration" of which May Bartram, in noticing the mild and subtle excess of attention that he has paid to her, has demonstrated herself to be capable. The further general impression that we get from these comments or observations is that the other members of Marcher's class are, at least in his estimation, too often too concerned with projecting an image of class and sophistication rather than being genuinely sophisticated, which in turn contributes further to the creation of that mask and jungle-like complexity and ambiguity that the outsider would undoubtably find difficult to penetrate. Smith writes that "Marcher is largely blinded to his best course by the very legalistic quibbling he indulges in his ethical thinking. His integrity is established upon a sort of moral etiquette, which like social etiquette becomes the more false the more rigorously it is insisted upon" (246). In arguing thusly, Smith implies that James' indictment is of Marcher alone. However, given that the alleged "legalistic quibbling" and hyper-etiquette are characteristics of Marcher's class and not of Marcher alone, the indictment to be understood is an indictment of an entire class. This indictment of the elite, which seconds our usual middle- or even lower-class presumptions about them, is or at least seems all the more valuable and valid because it is authored by someone who is more or less an established member of the very class that is under indictment. Writing of both "The Beast in the Jungle" and The Awkward Age, Blackall asserts that "in The Awkward Age the indictment of society is explicit and sustained" and yet, in the same sentence, declines to say more than that "in both stories the sufferings of the victims, Nanda Brookingham and May Bartram, are contemplated at close range and in some
detail" (34). Blackall fails to notice, that is, that "The Beast in the Jungle" also effects an "indictment of society" that is "explicit and sustained." Failing to see the story as an indictment of the elite, we fail as Ward also fails to see it as a tale that like "most of James's works [...] extend[s] beyond the private problem to the larger social condition" ([Imagination of Disaster] 99).

In contrast, the model of genuine class and sophistication is Marcher himself, whose actions may well have ironic results but who, contrary to much critical opinion, we need not regard as an ironic figure and who very nearly ascends to the status of a classic hero (and not of the "sordid" sort that Smith would argue [245]) on the basis of several points: specifically, his search for the beast partakes of the nature of a heroic quest (Ward in [Search for Form] 42), he achieves a kind of greatness in his cultivation of impeccable manners, and his fall from said greatness is a consequence of a relatively minor and even ironic flaw. Marcher exhibits, in particular, manners that are genuinely good and even impeccable, and although, as David Kerner suggests (250), this might not bespeak his moral goodness, it does contribute greatly to the essential "Stockholm Syndrome" that, calling it by a different name and borrowing from Wayne Booth, Blackall notes is achieved by first person narration and/or "the psychological experience of being subjected to 'a prolonged intimate view of a character.'" Such subjection, which amounts to the reader's being held hostage, "works against our capacity for judgment. The emotional distance between reader and character is narrowed, and the reader tends to yield, submit himself, to the character's point of view . . . creating sympathy in the reader for a narrator [or character] with whom James himself did not sympathize" (13).
L.C. Knights writes of Marcher's "exalted view of his own refinements" (243), but his refinements are actual and not just a figment of his exalted view of himself. To be sure, as noted above, he harbors negative thoughts of his fellow visitors at Weatherend, his "classmates," as it were. However, the purpose of manners being "to keep things down" and to ensure therefore that "nothing will happen" in a polite setting, it is at least somewhat to Marcher's credit as a model of the well-mannered class that he gives no outward indication of his dissatisfaction with others. Smith thus errs when he asserts that "Marcher commits suicide by refusing to act" (248). Marcher, first of all, does not refuse to act; rather, he acts so politely and his actions are so much constituted by his politeness that his actions are impotent, as well-mannered actions are designedly wont to be. Very much to his credit in this regard are his frequently expressed concerns with being or having been sufficiently well-mannered. It is a concern for exhibiting sufficiently good manners that first of all inclines him not to approach May with a crude "don't I know you from somewhere?" and rather to wait for some more politely subtle or "natural" occasion, the result of his wait being "the charm . . . that even before they had spoken they had practically arranged with each other to stay behind for a talk." Indeed, after all, as he observes, "in such a life as they all appeared to be for the moment one but take things as they came" and could not in observance of good manners force them to come sooner. And it is, congruently, an appreciation of the exhibition of good manners by others that enables him to recognize not only the "charm" but also the fact of May's having finally "come to him as if . . . he might, should he choose to keep the whole thing down, just take her mild attention for a part of her general business." It is likewise a capacity for
recognizing ill-mannered actions in others that enables him to recognize that "she [was] neglecting her office, [and that] from the moment he had been so clever, she had no proper right to him." Nor does he lapse into ill-mannered pique at the fact that, in a way that recalls for us a twentieth-century song by Maurice Chevalier, her recollection of their earlier meeting is almost embarrassingly more accurate than his own. He had "flattered himself [that] the illumination" of his memory "was brilliant, yet," to his credit, "he was really still more pleased on her showing him, with amusement, that in his haste to make things right he had got most things rather wrong," while being in such haste to make things right is itself an indication of his desire to avoid or at least to make amends for the offense of not having remembered her more quickly and accurately in the first place.

Additional proof, if more were needed, of Marcher’s good manners lies in such things as his having "feared the recall possibly even of some imbecile ‘offer’" or some "vulgar reminder of [some] ‘sweet’ speech" and in his self-effacing willingness nevertheless to concede that he might well have been "an ass" on the occasion of their meeting of twenty years before. Indicating as he does so that he is not, as Dr. Wertham would argue, preoccupied with or "fascinated by the past" (249), since if he had been so preoccupied he would have remembered more clearly, Marcher acknowledges as well "the graceless[ness of the] fact of his lapse of fidelity" to the recollection of their earlier meeting and thus the ill-manneredness of "his [not] having, by a remembrance, by a return of the spirit . . . so much as thanked her." Marcher is even well-mannered to the point of being almost anachronistically chivalric or even, as Richard A. Hocks notes romantic, (183), thinking as he does that "the present [occasion] would have been so
much better if the other, in the far [and thus romantic] distance, in the foreign [and thus romantic] land, hadn’t been so stupidly [and thus unromantically] meagre” and “feel[ing]” as he does “that he ought [chivalrically] have rendered her some service – saved her from some capsized boat in the Bay or at least recovered her dressing-bag, filched from her cab in the streets of Naples by a lazzorone with a stiletto. [See Carl Maves' idea of Italy as evil and typically romantic.] Or it would have been nice [and thus just as romantic] if he could have taken with fever all alone at his hotel, and she could have come to look after him, to write to his people, to drive him out in convalescence.” The further evidence on this point is nearly explicit, constituted as it is by the revelation that “He would have liked to invent something, get her to make-believe with him that some passage of a romantic [emphasis added] or critical kind [had] originally occurred. He was really almost reaching out in imagination – as against time – for something that would do . . . .”

As a key passage early in the story’s second section indicates, John Marcher’s concern with manners is both conscious and explicit.

He had thought himself, so long as nobody knew, the most disinterested person in the world, carrying his concentrated burden, his perpetual suspense, ever so quietly, holding his tongue about it, giving others no glimpse of it nor of its effect upon his life, asking of them no allowance and only making on his side all those that were asked. He hadn’t disturbed people with the queerness
of knowing a haunted man. . . . This was why he had such
good – though possibly such rather colourless – manners;
this was why, above all, he could regard himself, in a
greedy world, as decently – as in fact perhaps even a little
sublimely – unselﬁsh. Our point is accordingly that he
valued his character quite sufﬁciently to measure his
present danger of letting it lapse, against which he
promised himself to be much on his guard.

Given this fact of his character as a man of manners – note for further support the well
mannered reticence and humility of his “so long as nobody knew” – and his fear of
allowing it to lapse, given especially this use of manners as the measure of the man, it is
not surprising that, even though “the real form it [their relationship] should have taken
was the form of their marrying,” he declines to marry May not on the psychopathological
grounds that, as Robert Rogers would have it, it would have made her his surrogate
mother (258-59), but on the rather logically consistent, deﬁnitely well-mannered and
congruently chivalric grounds that “his conviction . . . wasn’t a privilege he could invite a
woman to share; . . . a man of feeling didn’t cause himself to be accompanied by a lady
on a tiger hunt,” even though, as H. Lewis Ulman reminds us, “allow himself to be
accompanied by a lady is exactly what he does” (4). In a way that argues James’ positive
attitude toward marriage and the marriage metaphor, Marcher’s neglect of marriage and
the encouragement or even authorship of that neglect by the code of manners is a large
part of his crime and the crime of the code. Marcher, after all, is punished, and James
clearly indicates that his offence is the neglect of marriage, and love, and close interpersonal relationships. Naomi Lebowitz writes that “commitment to human relationship [read marriage and its metaphors], morally sanctioned not necessarily by the laws of society but by the measure of its own strength and depth, is James’s supreme ethical concern”; and this concern is so organic and pervasive for James that “he sees it as the natural and central concern of his specific aesthetic form of expression, the novel” (18). James himself notes that Marcher is “ridden by the idea of what things may lead to, since they mostly lead to human communities . . . of experience [read marriage and], above all, in his uncertainty, he mustn’t compromise [read marry] others.” The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The punished “enemy” is Marcher; his neglected “enemy” is “marriage.” “Marriage” is thus arguably James’ “friend.”

In addition to the fact that the “man of feeling” phrase is a pointed reference to Marcher’s textbook romanticism, his arguably inordinate concern with doing the well-mannered thing continues throughout his relationship with May, as James indicates by way of a number of summary statements. He is, first of all, aware that “tense and solemn was what he imagined he too much showed for with other people” and he wants not to be so ill-mannered as to show for such with May. Moreover, he is also, more generally, “handsomely alert” [emphasis mine] to give that he didn’t expect, that he didn’t care, always to be talking about it,” especially since “such a feature in one’s outlook was really like [the] hump in one’s back” that only the most vulgar would bring up. He is equally, as we are told earlier, “careful to remember that she also had a life of her own, with things that might happen to her, things that in friendship one should likewise take account
of" in a way that suggests far less genuine friendship and far more of the merely well-mannered. Similarly, there is the "customary offering" that Marcher brings for May's birthday and there is the even more telling fact of his being "regularly careful to pay for it more than he thought he could afford," facts which mimic the customary and routine character of merely mannered expressions but which he, with his equally inordinate faith in the efficacy of good manners, takes for "proof . . . that he had not sunk into real selfishness." Additionally, James himself inform us, albeit parenthetically, that "our whole account of [Marcher] is a reference" to "the inner detachment [that] he had hitherto so successfully cultivated" and that is, again, the mark of the merely mannered man. Marcher even exhibits, in his continuing relationship with May, a fear of bluntness or candor that, though it would lead to an emancipating expression of the truth, would be ill-mannered.

He had as much as charged her with this [i.e., with being out of the problem of waiting to see the beast] in saying to her, many months before, that she even then knew something she was keeping from him. [However, and herein lies the point,] it was a point he had never since ventured to press, fearing as he did that it might become a difference, perhaps a disagreement, between them. . . . [H]e wanted not to speak the wrong word; that would make everything ugly.
And heaven forbid that anything ugly might occur. Finally, it is only “then,” after he had come “no longer to care with what ignominy or what monstrosity he might yet be associated (‘if it would only be decently proportionate’),” — after, that is, he ceases to be more concerned with his image as a man of manners — that he comes to “his frankest betrayal of [his] alarms” about the possibility of having been “‘sold.’” However, in spite of this impulse toward frankness, manners are Marcher’s chief concern even to the point of May’s death, at which time his thoughts are — may we say “callously”? — of “the distinction, the dignity, the propriety, if nothing else, of the man markedly bereaved.” It is tellingly only when he abandons the code of manners and the mask of honesty that it involves and abandons himself to an ill-mannered but honest show of strong emotion, “flinging himself with” what O’Faolain accurately but unappreciatively considers “an appalling obviousness on his silly face” (255) that he acts in any way as we think he should and in a way that might have assisted him in avoiding his dreaded fate. Manners all along are the obstacle to his having previously not acted thusly.

Most of the tale is, in fact, devoted to the characterization of Marcher as a man of manners. And, the fact that there is so much to note about his show of manners, the very fact of the density of textual reference to manners, argues, again, that mastery or penetration of the world of manners is as difficult as penetration of a literal jungle. Indeed, the text is nearly a guidebook for the young man who wants to learn what it means, at least behaviorally, to be a gentleman. Given this characterization of Marcher as a man of manners, however, and given as well the fact — or at least the rather sound presumption — that fate in a realistic world and especially in the world of a realistic novel
derives from character, it can be ought else but manners that authors Marcher’s fate and
that, in fact, constitutes the fate that he suffers. To be the particular “beast” that devours
Marcher is actually one of the primary functions of manners in that, as James himself
proposes and even seconds, the purpose of manners is to keep things down. Moreover,
appropriately, since among the things most in need of being “kept down” in polite society
are sexual things, the thing that Marcher is most successful in “keeping down” is the
chance of a consummation of his relationship with May. This, “to love her,” and thus
genuinely and fully to consummate his relationship with her, was “the escape she [had]
offered him,” an escape that he had missed primarily because he had been too
egotistically and thus cruelly well-mannered to “guess, . . . in that twilight of the cold
April when, pale, ill, wasted, but all too beautiful, and perhaps even then recoverable, she
had risen from her chair to stand before him and let him imaginably guess” that what she
was offering him, what she had in fact already given him was, totally, herself. But here,
as elsewhere throughout the text, Marcher is too egotistically, vainly, narcissistically
well-mannered to take advantage of this offer. Only Hawthorne’s Young Goodman
Brown could have been more obtuse, although it is perhaps far more titillating for James
to have rendered things as he does.

The extent to which Marcher’s relationship with May fails to progress is, however
ironically, the extent to which he, with a doubling of irony, is too selfishly well-mannered
to be “forward” with her or even to “take advantage” of or discern her forwardness with
him. One should think here, in particular, of May’s acquisition of a house very early in
the tale, which, one might note with additional thematic significance, combines with
Marcher’s apparent freedom from a poor man’s job responsibilities to allow him the opportunity for excessive self-indulgence and for meeting, albeit disasterously, “the requirements of his imagination.” Relative wealth, in short, another aspect of elite class status, is ironically almost deterministically a cause of Marcher’s problem and is thus a part of the reality that James arguably disparages. In this and other ways, the acquisition in question is hardly “just [the] trifle” that they, in their polite verbal dancing around the subject, claim it to be. The verbal dancing that well-mannered speech encourages and even demands not only precludes direct expression but also precludes even putting the real word to the real thing or discussion of the real thing at all. In contrast, the extent to which the John Marcher-May Bartram relationship even comes close to consummation is due to the extent to which May is, also ironically, unselfishly and humbly, self-effacingly and consciously ill-mannered enough to be forward with John Marcher in breach of polite society’s behavioral codes. Buying a house with the whole of one’s modest inheritance in order to acquire more privacy for visits with one’s bachelor friend and nearly exclusive companion is far more than a little forward. Indeed, it is even brazenly forward. Also particularly instructive on this point is the passage wherein, weak and demonstrably near death – her death is reported on the very next page – and yet offering herself to Marcher in a manner so explicit as to have been really rather unladylike for the time and code in question, “she rose from her chair [in] a movement she seldom risked in th[ose] days, and showed herself, all draped and soft, in her fairness and slimness [and in] almost a recovery of youth . . . [and] with her gliding step, diminished the distance between them, stood near him, close to him.” As Hocks notes, May, in this passage and elsewhere, does
“aggressively [and thus ill-manneredly] declare her love to Marcher . . . to the extent that she can [without los[ing] him instantly” (204).

Nor is this forwardness simply a something to which she has desperately come after years of tolerating Marcher’s excessive gentlemanly restraint – read dullness; for at the very beginning of the tale, not only is there the fact that “she finally drifted toward him” (emphasis added) and came to him as if . . . he might, should he choose to keep the whole thing down, just take her mild attention for a part of her general business” but there is also the fact that, even after they had apparently completed the renewal of their acquaintance, “they lingered together, she neglecting her office” in a testimony to her willingness to breach the behavioral codes of polite society in the interest of furthering her renewed relationship with Marcher. To be sure, as Marcher observes, and as “he afterward made out to himself, . . . she had been consciously keeping back what she said and hoping to get on without it [with]a scruple that immensely touched him” as would any scruple touch any man so enamoured of good manners and his own practice thereof. But, as Marcher also and more importantly observes, “everything else failing,” an ideally well-mannered and ladylike approach in particular failing, “she herself decided to take up the case” to ensure that “this sketch of a fresh start would [not] show for quite awkwardly bungled,” scruples and the appearance of unladylike and even manish forwardness be damned.

Additionally, one has to note that throughout the forty year span of the tale, May conducts what must appear to others to be a very intimate and, for the historical period, even “indecent” premarital affair with John Marcher in the privacy of her home and in
total disregard for public opinion and "appearances." This disregard for appearances and her awareness of the impression that she is making is even explicit, as indicated by her confession that "I never said . . . that it hadn't made me a good deal talked about," that "It hasn't been a question for me," and that "all that concerns me [is] to help you pass for a man like another." Moreover, it is even arguable that May's whole motive for purchasing this house of ill repute is to increase the opportunity for intimacy with Marcher since she already had a place in which to stay before she spent what must have been a large part of her modest, windfall inheritance to purchase it. Hence, we see that, from the beginning of the tale, through its middle, and to its end, May Bartrum consciously breaches the code of good manners and even risks designation as a brazen hussy to the end of getting done the job of furthering her relationship with Marcher. Stripped as she is, what else is a woman to do?

Given all of this and more, we can see the point of the general socio-economic class to which James assigns May Bartrum in "The Beast in the Jungle." As Marcher observes,

this young lady might roughly have ranked in the house as a poor relation; . . . she was not there on a brief visit, but was more or less a part of the establishment - almost a working, a remunerated part. Didn't she enjoy at periods a protection that she paid for by helping, among other services, to show the place and explain it, deal with the tiresome people, answer questions about the dates of the
building, the styles of the furniture, the authorship of the
pictures, the favourite haunts of the ghost? It wasn’t as if
she looked as if you could have given her shillings – it was
impossible to look less so. [Yet] she was there on harder
terms than any one; she was there as a consequence of
things suffered, one way and another, in the interval of
years.

That is, as far as socio-economic status is concerned, May Bartrum is the most common
character in the tale. Yet she is also the most “correct” and effective. Perhaps it is his
unacknowledged but deep Americanism and his coincident eschewance of the European
that so inclines him; perhaps it is his sympathy for and appreciation of power minorities
of the kind that Americans were relative to Europeans and Europe in his time; but,
whatever it is that so inclines him, James has here, in the example of May Bartrum in her
contrast with John Marcher, implied an endorsement – albeit a qualified endorsement – of
the more balanced behavior exhibited by members of the more common classes of which
May Bartrum is a significant representative. Moreover, this endorsement of the socio-
economically common in turn gives further support to the indictment of the more
mannered and elite that Marcher represents. As far as “The Beast in the Jungle” is
concerned, we see, again, that manners, as personified and practiced by John Marcher,
are the beast, the source of the nothingness that devours John Marcher and the source of
the cruelty that denies a most deserving May Bartrum her desire and just reward, while
the breach of manners is all that provides any chance of escape from that fate. In the end,
May's mild "crudeness" is not enough; only a much more nakedly aggressive approach would or could have been. But, while a show of such naked aggressivity would have been even more to the point of this chapter's thesis, it would also have been to the detriment of the story.

An excellent way to sum up this very brief chapter, to reiterate its thesis, and to argue that the situation of "The Beast in the Jungle" is not as "unlikely" as Ward might suggest (Search for Form 54) is by way of an anecdote that is very much to the point. When, to borrow the title of one of my poems, "my wife of many years" and I first started dating – on our very first date, in fact – we went to a movie, "Cotton Comes to Harlem," at the old Majestic Theatre which has since been converted to the dance hall at which our oldest son went to his first formal dance. The time was sometime in late March or early April, near my birthday, near the time of year at which the climax of James' tale is set, and my mother had sent me ten dollars to "take my best girl to the movies." When we arrived at the theatre and were seated, however, Gwen, my wife to be, said she was cold. She and her dorm mates, unbeknownst to me, had been engaged in somewhat spirited considerations of whether I had come as a friend or a prospective lover. The complaint that she felt a chill, though veracious, had ulterior motives attached to it. I did not completely miss the possibility of the point, but, not wanting to seem the presumptuous and lecherous opportunist, the hated "player," and wanting above all not just to seem but also to be well-mannered as my mother would have especially wanted me to be with her money, I declined to offer a conveniently draped arm for comfort and responded instead by saying, "I'm sorry; I should have anticipated; I neglected to bring a jacket." I could
see no well-mannered way in which to get at the truth, to test whether the complaint about a chill was a romantic ploy or an honest confession. In the end, the beastly culprit, beautiful or at least attractive but also ferocious and nearly destructive, and threatening as a tiger does to devour its keeper as well was not stupidity, not egotism or arrogance, but manners. Fortunately for me this was not the truth’s last opportunity for revelation. John Marcher, for whatever reason, is not so fortunate. But we should not take his misfortune to mean that his motive is not the same. We should not take his misfortune as a reason to condemn him without recognizing that the system that almost deterministically endorses and encourages his most objectionable behavior is manners. “The Beast in the Jungle” is in large part, as Kerner asserts, a tale through which “by isolating ingrowniness, James wishes to terrify the reader out of wasting his humanity” (252). However, “The Beast in the Jungle” is also a tale through which James additionally warns the reader of the ferocity and brutality of good and beautiful manners, the world that sanctions and encourages such manners and of which such manners are an integral part.
Mr. Connell and Mr. James, Odd Peas in the Same Pod:  

Art, Eras, and Motives in  

“The Most Dangerous Game” and “The Real Thing”  

In a way that fully and concretely challenges the thesis of this entire work, one of the most daunting tasks in the “Introduction to Literature” that I frequently teach at Texas Southern University is that of justifying inclusion of a work like Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” in the same course wherein a work like Henry James’ “The Real Thing” is considered. If we can rely upon the indications in the sample student essays published in The Norton Introduction to Literature that is the frequent text of choice in such a course, there are even grassroots questions as to whether either work should be included in any course for “real” readers (512-17). On the one hand, with Connell we have a writer so minor in his status that the largest library in the nation’s fourth largest city lists only two secondary sources on his most important story, and those two sources are themselves unimpressive and of relatively little use. Additionally, no other work by Connell is even listed in the library’s bibliography. On the other hand, and at the other extreme, in James we have, again, a writer who is infrequently read even by graduate students studying for exams at the best of universities, and I really doubt that, for all my efforts and even success in arguing this thesis of an accessible and even enjoyable James, there will ever be a course at Texas Southern University in “The Popular Henry James” or “Henry James for Fun and the Lay Reader.” Be those lamentable facts as they may,
however, a look at James in “The Real Thing,” which, as one of his many stories about artists in their struggles with their art, is really rather representative, and Connell in “The Most Dangerous Game,” which is one of his very few stories but is probably more popular than all of James put together, reveals that there are shared concerns—specifically, boredom as a motive, the change of eras, and the problem of art—that not only argue greatly in favor of each author and particularly in favor of the thesis of a popular, enjoyable, and accessible James but can also be used to catapult even the most common and reluctant reader into something at least closely akin to an understanding, appreciation, and outright enjoyment of James.

An author’s primary responsibility being to motivate his characters, we can start with the issue of motive in “The Most Dangerous Game.” As far as General Zaroff is concerned, Connell chose to make boredom his motive for hunting humans. Zaroff’s boredom and its assignment as his motive are explicit:

“Hunting tigers ceased to interest me some years ago. I exhausted their possibilities, you see. No thrill left in tigers, no real danger. I live for danger, Mr. Rainsford. . . . I was lying in my tent with a splitting headache one night when a terrible thought pushed its way into my mind.

Hunting was beginning to bore me! . . . I asked myself why the hunt no longer fascinated me. . . . Simply this: hunting had ceased to be what you call ‘a sporting proposition.’ It had become too easy. I always got my quarry. Always.
There is no greater bore than perfection. ... I needed a
new animal. I found one. ... Every day I hunt, and I never
grow bored now . . . .”

Zaroff has become bored with hunting animal game; animal game has lost its excitement
for him, excitement being but the opposite side of the coin from boredom and therefore
amounting to much the same thing. Zaroff’s boredom is, of course, natural and quite
plausible, boredom being one of the consequences of the leisurely aristocratic life that
Zaroff enjoyed as “son of the Czar,” a life in which one often finds the need, as Zaroff
does, to “invent a new sensation.” The reader’s moral and intelligent response, however,
is that, however plausible it may be, boredom is hardly an adequate motive for murder;
indeed, it is nearly pornographic in the most extreme of ways. In a way that bespeaks a
contempt for the undersensitive reader, however, Connell links and even identifies Zaroff
with both Rainsford, the would-be hero and good guy of the story, and the reader by
making this same boredom their essential motive as well. Rainsford, himself a famous
big game hunter, also hunts presumably because hunting excites or at least entertains him
— that is, it helps him alleviate or avoid boredom; and there are hints at the beginning of
the story that hunting mere animals is beginning to bore him as well. Specifically, in his
conversation with Whitley before he falls off the yacht, he pooh-poohs Whitley’s notion,
which he implicitly condemns as romantic, that jaguars have feelings and a capacity for
understanding: “‘Nonsense,’ laughed Raisford. ‘... Be a realist,’” he says, anticipating
as he does so Zaroff’s accusation that he is being romantic. He thus is not, in his
motives, very different from Zaroff, the beneficiary of the American stock market whom
he, in his very American holier-than-thou attitude, finds contemptible. Moreover, the reader, who generally identifies with Rainsford as an American and an apparent good guy, is also indicted on the same charge in that he too is motivated by boredom or excitement. The reason that the common reader finds Connell's story so likeable is that it is exciting in the most crude kind of way; with the life and death of a hero with whom he identifies always hanging in the balance, the story is not boring. The reader reads this "Indiana Jones" kind of story, and to some extent even agrees to "hunt" for meaning in it, for the same, morally inadequate, morally reprehensible reason that Rainsford and Zaroff hunt; and that is to alleviate boredom. In this shared motive, Rainsford, the reader, and Zaroff are all very much alike. They all live in the same glass house and neither should throw stones.

Another point on which the reader takes a hit has to do with the change of eras that is depicted in the story, Connell's point being that, contrary to the, again, holier-than-thou American reader, when eras change and new political systems are put into place, not very much genuine change takes place. Connell's Zaroff is clearly Russian, which provokes the common American reader of the 1930s, the time during which the story was written, and even now, in an era when a president can refer to Russia as "the evil empire" and not be laughed out of office for doing so, to identify him as almost necessarily communist, thereby opposed to American democracy, and villainous. In addition to the connotations of the word "villain," which imply a bigotry of their own, lost to the general reader is the absurd incongruence in his seeing Zaroff as both a communist and an aristocrat, a czarist, who was in historical fact deposed by the communist revolution in
Russia in almost the same way that the aristocrats were expelled from power by democracy in the American revolution. Lost as well is the nevertheless readily discernible fact that the communist revolution was the last, the most recent, and therefore the most easily remembered of the great “common man” or essentially democratic movements. When Rainsford defeats Zaroff he reenacts on a private scale the deposition of the last vestiges of aristocracy by the forces of democracy and thus identifies himself as bedfellow to the communists who deposed the Russian Czars as well. However, what happens at the very end of the story is telling. Once compelled to do so, Zaroff, holding true to his ideas and even exhibiting a Tom Sawyerish inclination toward democratic co-participation in his own absurd and perverse schemes, seems gleefully to engage with Rainsford in a hand to hand fight to the death. “En gaarde, Rainsford!,” he says; “One of us will serve as a repast for the hounds, while the other will sleep in this most excellent bed tonight!” Zaroff’s “most excellent bed” is just that — most and therefore too excellent for any man. It is an ostentatious display of aristocratic wealth and a symbol of power’s corruption. Additionally, the wealth that sustains Zaroff in his corrupt and aristocratic existence is at least maintained by his investments in American securities. In his concern for the common man and for less fortunate others, any genuinely democratic person would find such wealth and its display distasteful. But, upon defeating Zaroff, Rainsford, the supposed American democrat, reports that “He had never slept in a more excellent bed.” Rainsford reveals himself to be Fanon’s Oedipalesque native, who simply wants not to change the way of doing things in the world but to own the settler’s land, to own the settler’s cattle, to own the settler’s house, to own all the settler’s possessions and even
to sleep in the settler’s bed with, preferably, the settler’s wife, who is really but another of the settler’s possessions and another of the trappings of power. That is, in the case at hand, when the aristocratic era, as represented by Zaroff, the Russian, is displaced by the democratic era, as represented by Rainsford, the American, then not much changes. The victor simply substitutes “new kings for old.” For not seeing this, the holier-than-thou common American reader stands once again indicted.

All of this indictment bespeaks a contempt for the reader on the part of the author that is frequently an outgrowth of the artist’s attempt to deal with the problem of art, a very important issue since it has much to do with whether one willingly reads the proffered text. As meant here, the problem of art is the problem that the artist – any artist - has of maintaining fidelity to his craft, practicing that craft at a level of sophistication commensurate with his abilities and with the demands of professionalism, while at the same time maintaining rapport with an audience that is not sophisticated enough to appreciate his most sophisticated work but that nevertheless assumes the right to judge his work and dictates his commercial or practical success. In short, the problem of art is the problem of trying to earn a living while avoiding prostitution of one’s talent. Always having to compromise to some extent or another, the artist frequently expresses his contempt for an underappreciative or insufficiently sophisticated audience by imbedding in his text some criticism of them, some detail designed to expose their intellectual inadequacy or, less perjoratively, simply to make them better educated. In dealing with the problem of art in “The Most Dangerous Game,” Richard Connell succeeds in writing a story that is obviously quite enjoyable for common readers but that is nevertheless filled
with meaningful details that provide some significant educational value as well and that
accuse the reader of not knowing a great deal about history that one readily should know.
Additionally, within the story itself, Zaroff too is an artist, one who practices the art of
hunting and does so at what is clearly the most sophisticated of levels, so sophisticated
that his "audience," for whom he expresses contempt (note his bigoted contempt for the
other-racial, non-white sailors whom he usually traps on the island), rejects his
performance as intolerably perverse, thus demonstrating the need for the artist to
maintain rapport with his audience, however unappreciative and unsophisticated that
audience may be. However, many of the story's details accuse that same reader of rather
inexcusable intellectual and academic inadequacy. What does it say, for example, that
the reader, in his pro-American and anti-communist bias, tends to see, uncritically,
Rainsford as the good guy and Zaroff as the villain? What does it say that the common
reader has no sense of what the word villain really means, that the word is an anathema to
his very existence? What does it say that the common reader has to be reminded by way
of a footnote in the text that Czarist Russians were displaced by the Russian communists
in the Bolshevik Revolution, that the Bolshevik Revolution was the last of the great
democratic movements, and that Russian communism is thus political twin to American
democracy? Whatever these things say, none of them are flattering to the reader who is
unaware of them; and Sarah Rosen, the student critic who "doesn't think [that Connell's
story] ought to be in The Norton Introduction to Literature" on the grounds that "college
students ought to be engaged in more challenging and thought provoking reading
material" (515), stands indicated with the rest for having missed the challenges and the
merits that are already and very noticeably there and for failing to see that which may
make Connell's tale "the subject of serious study."

The case for "The Most Dangerous Game," at least in summary, thus made, we
can use it as a springboard to a consideration of James' "The Real Thing," which may
well be as Labor pronounces it "admirably suited to the literary and critical initiation of
the college student" (156) but which is otherwise distracting. In actuality, James is really
quite a bit more respectful of the reader than Connell and most other artists, assuming as
he does the ability of the reader to negotiate the challenges of his texts and declining to
sugar coat the therapeutic pill. The case is much as Broyard asserts in writing that
"James [is] like an ultimatum, for bidding us to fall short" and that his "respect for our
species makes us uncomfortable" (10). (Or is it that he intends to discourage the
unqualified reader altogether, to keep the inadequate reader "out"?) At least for the
common reader, there is little or nothing attractive about James' text at the surface level;
he makes no attempt to lead or hook the reader into an interest in his text. He assumes,
rather, that the reader will have the intelligence to be interested in issues that are
themselves relevant and interesting and that he will derive his pleasure from the mere
intellectual exercise that this "more challenging and thought provoking" text requires and
thereby provides. Jeffersonian democrat that he is, James assumes as well that the
intelligent reader who encounters difficulty with the language, the vocabulary, and the
syntax of this or any others of his stories will simply, like a genuine democrat and a
genuine student, spend the time and energy to do the "work" necessary to negotiate his
way through this or any text that does not require specialized, elitist knowledge for its perusal.

At the same time, however, the devil in James is often not in the details; the figure is rather in the carpet, in the more gross macro units of the text. In “The Real Thing,” for instance, it is the basic plot – and, contrary to O’Faolain (135), there is a plot – that serves as the vessel of a large part of the meaning of the text, particularly as far as the change of eras is concerned. Hocks asserts that “there are no Americans in the story, no ‘international theme’” of the sort for which James is well known (122). However, in the same way that my second semester freshman composition students are shown that there are “women” in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” by virtue of the fact that issues immediately relevant to the treatment of women are manifest in the story, there are Americans in essence in “The Real Thing.” Specifically, in a way that clearly makes it a very pro-American story in spite of its British setting, “The Real Thing” essentially recounts a pivotal moment in the history of an aging, recently retired, moderately and even marginally aristocratic couple, “two social has-beens” in Labor’s terms (157), Major and Mrs. Monarch, aptly named and caught in the throes of this change of eras. As their name implies, Major and Mrs. Monarch represent the aristocracy, particularly the lowermost or outermost margins thereof, wherein military officers were accorded a place among the classes of persons privileged by birth. Indeed, as Susan Bazargan notes, the Major and the Mrs. are arguably not even “the real thing,” arguably not real royalty but persons who “simulate” (as opposed to “feign”) their status as royalty: “All the symptoms or signs of good breeding are present in them, ‘in their clothes, their manners,
their types,' and yet clearly they have no wealthy 'references'; their severance from wealth has obliterated their 'value'” (136). As members of the aristocracy, “dead” and “frozen” as Quentin Anderson asserts, “into the forms prescribed by caste” (134) and especially as “fixed, intractable, pictorial ‘values’” and fine pieces of human furniture that could grace and flatter the drawing rooms of country houses during weekend garden parties, Major and Mrs. Monarch had no need of personal, self-generated income. However, at the historical moment that the story depicts, eras are in transition. The aristocratic era that previously sustained the Major and the Mrs. is in decline. Like James himself, who, in London, during one winter alone (1878-79), dined out by invitation one-hundred seven times at the expense of others and clearly, in his portliness, seemed rarely to have missed a meal, the Major and the Mrs. had their needs met as part and parcel of their status as members of the leisure class. Their rather threadbare clothing, however, bespeaks not only their declining personal economic fortunes, which both Labor (157) and Putt (112) observe without noting its thematic significance, but also the fact that, in this historical era, the aristocracy is in decline, more specifically on the outs, having rightly been put there by the push of the rising democratic, working class. However, it is an error to think as Seymour Lainoff does that the new world is “a world in which standards of morals and manners seem to have disappeared” or that “the older system of manners (represented by the Monarchs) [but] no longer applicable, has not been replaced by an identifiable corresponding social code” (138), for the new era of democracy has a behavioral code that is every bit as specific as that of the preceding era, specifically regarding work, the behavior most at issue in the story. From this push of the working
class masses arises the need for the Monarchs to work, to find means of sustaining themselves economically by dint of their own labor. Labor (as an activity), however, is anathema to the leisure class; and, in a world wherein men work to achieve identity and status, the Monarchs are impotent. There is virtually nothing that they can “do.” As examples of “the beautiful people” in a world where beauty is its own excuse for being, their entire raison d’être has been simply to be, not to do anything. Of course, the Monarchs do try to do something; they do seek gainful employment. However, the employment they seek is itself suspiciously aristocratic in what it requires. As artist’s models, which they try to be, they presumably anticipate that they would once again simply have to be, and not to do anything. As it turns out, they are wrong; there is a great deal more doing to modeling than simply being. In the rather poignant, rather sad moment at the story’s end, the moment which James rightly perceived as the residence of the tale’s “pathos” and “tragedy,” we see as Lainoff also sees (138) that the Major and the Mrs. are anachronistic, that retirement is compulsory and that time has passed them by, and that the only task for which they now are suited is that of the servant, dressed as they are in garb that men in the democratic era associate with butlers and maids.

In contrast, characters like Oronte and Ms. Churm just as clearly represent the rising democratic masses, the members of which are nameless and faceless, even chameleon in their identities, and have to work for a living. Ms. Churm, in particular, shows a significant knack for assuming a variety of poses, none of them close to the primitive and crude cockney maiden that she really is, but all of them therefore requiring that she demonstrate what we have already seen Ms. Birdseye of The Bostonians
demonstrate and what Anderson notes as a capacity to get out of herself, to sympathize with others who are unlike her, and to understand and identify with "the other" (134).

Serving as a transitional figure between these two groups is the artist, contemporary representative of a class that once in history was the sponsored favorite of the aristocracy but that now, in the era of democracy and the common man, reluctantly owes its allegiance to and depends financially upon the larger audience, the masses. One notes, for example, that the unnamed narrator -- why he is unnamed may be thematically significant, may well be telling of a lack of real or at least mature identity on his part -- is, first of all, an illustrator, illustrations being generally far from consideration as works of serious artistic merit, the exception of Dickens' Cruikshank notwithstanding and even serving to prove the rule. Illustrations, instead, generally address the presumed needs and wishes of the common reader, readers from the democratic masses who presumably need illustrations -- showing in the telling -- to maintain their interest in the written work, the maintenance of their interest being necessary if the artist/illustrator is to sustain himself financially. Additionally, the narrator's illustrations are for magazines, magazines being a sign of the democratic times via their dependence on subscriptions in large numbers, numbers that can only be found in a more numerous, more common, less elite public.

Putt identifies the narrator's profession as that of provider of "illustrations to high-society magazines" which, in addition to being something of a contradiction in terms, is contradicted by Putt's further assertion that the narrator provides "graphic illustrations of the kind of fictional characters in magazine stories about the upper classes for the delectation of lower-class readers" (112) and, in any case, is still very much to the point
of saying that the narrator is a man of common skills and common means with semi-
aristocratic, elitist pretentions and ambitions. Indeed, by his own confession, these
illustrations are not intended as serious works of art; they are, rather, his "potboilers," his
greater ambition being not only to provide illustrations for the author of "Rutland
Ramsey," who has been "long neglected by the multitudinous vulgar and dearly prized by
the attentive" but also to operate in "a different branch of art . . . to perpetuate [his]
fame." Hocks, himself pronouncing the narrator "not the real thing," cites David Toor's
assertion that the narrator/painter "remains little more than 'a hack,'" revealing as much
by way of "continually pronouncing Major and Mrs. Monarch 'impossible' and
ultimately blaming them, all too conveniently, for the 'permanent harm' attributed to his
work at the end" (120). And, especially if we assess the narrator as he is at the start of
the tale, this criticism is correct. However, the narrator does have possibilities as a
significantly more serious or accomplished artist. His friend, Jack Hawley, has
apparently more than once "done [him] the honour to tell [him that he] might do
something some day." His possibilities and his aspirations bespeak his status as a
historically and socially transitional figure – he is tied to the common man by practical
considerations of income but partakes of elite status by virtue of his talent and potential.
His function as a transitional figure is also bespoken by both the excellence and the
limitation of his rapport with the Major, whom "he liked to hear . . . talk" because it
"combined the excitement of going out," an aristocratic, elitist, or at least leisure class
excitement, "with the economy of staying home" that, not being able to afford the
expense of going out, the members of the working class must practice. The truth is that,
as an artist in the contemporary world, he is, like the Major and the Mrs., one of the deposed elite, one who echoes the lost era of the sponsored artist when he proffers that “If I were only rich I’d offer him a salary to come and teach me how to live.”

Transitional though he may be, the narrator is only reluctantly so; he is himself in transition in his progress toward acceptance of his identity, and is perhaps appropriately unnamed because he has not come to this acceptance. This reluctance is part of the problem of art that manifests itself in the story. The narrator’s real aspirations, again, are to make his mark in another branch of the arts, that branch apparently being serious long fiction of the sort that “Rutland Ramsey” represents. He wants, that is, to produce work that is more commensurate with the level of sophistication of which he at least thinks himself capable, work through which he can more responsibly maintain fidelity to his craft.

Putting the most flattering face on the matter, however, art of the level of sophistication that “Rutland Ramsey” represents tends to be, like “Rutland Ramsey” and its author, “long neglected by the most multitudinous vulgar and prized [only] by the attentive” or those who are intellectually elite enough to be so. Expressed from a different perspective – specifically the perspective of the disparaged masses – such works deserve their fate by virtue of being excessively exclusive, often even romantic and insufficiently earthy in their subject matter, like the aristocratic, anti-democratic, “really royal” “Tale of Buckingham Palace” that the narrator vainly would like to get his magazine editor to publish and for which, in the narrator’s view, the Major and the Mrs. would so suitably be able to sit.
Regardless of the perspective, the fact remains that the artist here is faced with the problem that was initially identified, the problem of trying on the one hand to produce an artwork whose sophistication maintains fidelity to his craft while maintaining rapport with an audience too incompetent or simply unwilling to appreciate such a work. The response is to compromise one’s performance, to prostitute one’s talents, to stoop as a rule rather than an exception to production of the “potboiler.” Unhappy with having to do so, the artist here as elsewhere holds the audience in contempt, for it is the audience with its intellectual and aesthetic limitations that necessitates his compromise. In “The Real Thing” the expression of this contempt is clear. We see it in the tone of the narrator’s comment regarding the neglect of the author of “Rutland Ramsey” and the promise of his vindication. We see it in his characterization of his work as a “potboiler.” We see it in his insistent desire to do something artistic with the Monarchs, his felt obligation to them, his occasional defense of them, and his preference for their company. We see it in his confession, even upon first meeting the Monarchs, that “the ruling passion of [his] life was the detestation of the amateur,” a detestation that bespeaks an impulse, on the part of a would-be elitist forced to live in a democratic world, to make but a new-found elitism, a new-found aristocracy based on a snobbish exclusion and detestation of the unskilled, underskilled, or simply uncredentialed and on an inclusion only of the rank-ordered “professional.” But, of course, if the example of colonial America is to be considered, this substitution of new kings for old is also a very American thing.
Of course, the focal problem in the story is neither the problem of art per se nor the change of eras nor boredom as a motive per se; the story's focal problem is the titular one, the problem of the real thing and the impotence of the artist in the face of it. The problem of the real thing — or, at least part of it — is that, in contrast to Ms. Churm, who comes to the artist as a teeming mass of infinite possibility, or Oronte, who is the closest thing possible to a human chameleon, it comes to the artist already "done," a finished product of realized potential, leaving nothing about which to make what James calls an "ado," inviting no response more creative than the photographic, and thereby being boring in its completeness and in what Zaroff would call its "perfection." For example, even if the artist-narrator uses Ms. Churm as a model for "a Russsian Princess" he is still creating and promoting an image of democratic possibility. In contrast, when he considers Mrs. Monarch for that role, what he has is not the image of possibility but the image, as her husband ironically observes, of "the lady already made."

Even so, though for reasons far different from those implicit in the narrator's response to them, it is possible to disagree with James as to his apparent allegation of the uselessness of the Major and the Mrs. as subjects of illustration in a democratic era. I speak of his apparent allegation because James may well be alert to the same possibilities of which I am about to write, possibilities to which his flawed "wanna be" elitist narrator is not. Specifically, one of the textually implied reasons that magazine readers reject the Monarchs as models for magazine illustrations is that the rising poor do not want to see in the media forms of their time images of the very class that they wish to depose. They do not want to see the elite used as "models" to which they are to aspire. The Monarchs as
models are anathema to the rise of the common man, the possibly Oedipal predispositions of the common man notwithstanding. What the common man, the reader (by definition) of the magazine, the reader for whom the genre of the magazine was created, wants to see is a model the image of which represents the infinite potential of the freed masses, which is what Ms. Churm and Oronte, both malleable to the extreme, do. By the same token, however, there is no image more flattering and satisfying to the rising democratic masses than that of an aristocrat in decline and in tatters, an image in keeping with exactly what the Monarchs are. Moreover, the Monarchs are also the image of those aristocratic pretensions, those who are aristocratic only by appointment and even then only marginally so, those who are but the butt of the aristocracy and who, but for the grace of the god of political favors, would just as easily be commoners. The story of the American Revolution must have its King George, and in this instance the role of the deposed king is best played by the Monarchs. The Monarchs as magazine illustrator’s models are, in short, not useless, not inappropriate. They are only misused, misappropriated. And, it is perhaps thematically significant, telling of the nameless narrator, that he is unable – nay, reluctant – to recognize their proper use. He, too, is resistant to the change in eras that they and their threadbare appearance represent.

Reluctant and somewhat mistaken though he may be, the narrator does eventually give up on the use of the Monarchs as models. The question, as far as the last of the three shared issues, boredom as a motive, is concerned, is why. In his exchange with his friend, Jack Hawley, whom O’Faolain would excise from the story on the grounds that his role is superfluous (135), Hawley observes that the problem with th eMonarchs is that
they are “stupid,” their being stupid suggesting that they are boring as well. The
narrator’s eventual rejection of the Monarchs, however, is not initially provoked by any
sense on his part that they are stupid or boring in any colloquial sense. Indeed, the
narrator finds conversation with the Major to be quite engaging, pursuant to which he
encourages him to keep him company while he works. However, as models, the
Monarchs hardly get to exhibit their mastery of the art of conversation. Their success as
models depends not a wit on it, or, heaven forbid, Ms. Churm would never do.
Additionally, as suggested by his identification as a figure in reluctant transition, the fact
that the narrator endorses the Major and the Mrs. may signify little as far as whether they
are boring is concerned; his judgment, in the end, may not matter; his judgment, in the
end, may not matter; his judgment, in the end, is biased or more generally flawed and
Jack Hawley, whose judgment is biased in the opposite direction, has all but said as
much. More judgment is biased in the opposite direction, has all but said as much. More
significant is the fact that, eventually, the narrator does decree that the Monarchs are
boring. However, in a way that comments on what boredom is really all about, he gets
bored with them because, like a common, undergraduate reader facing the requirement
that he read a Jamesian text, he concludes that they are inaccessible. He finds them
boring as subjects also because, again like the common undergraduate reader, he fails, or
at least does not realize before it is “too late” for his illustrations, to understand how they
are adequate as subjects for illustrations and/or paintings as well. It is appropriate to
regard his action – or inaction – as a failure because James, after all, has quite succeeded
in making them the subjects of an art of fiction that, in his view, is very much like the art of painting.

Moreover, marginally successful though he arguably may or may not be as an artist or mere minor illustrator, the narrator is evidently a poor judge of what the democratic public wants. His inadequacy on this score is, in fact, the reason that he needs Jack Hawley to set him at least partially straight. Jack Hawley, that is, is actually in a limited way a normative figure, a representative voice for the dispossessed and currently emerging masses, a man who finds the Monarchs "a compendium of all that he objects to about the social system of his country" and is therefore allied in spirit with commoners. Nor, contrary to Labor's implication (157), is his alleged heartlessness a basis for disqualifying him as a judge or for claiming his failure at the tale's moral level. On the contrary, Oedipus, like Brontë's Heathcliff, is understandably, equitably, and perhaps rightly heartless. Oedipal or not, the public, and that is the immediate concern, finds the Major and the Mrs. boring as subjects of art. Boredom, thus, is the motive not for the characters in the story but for the tacitly depicted audience. Boredom and the coincident desire for more dynamic, less fixed and "done" characters, is the motive for the audience's rejection of the Major and the Mrs. as subjects for magazine illustrations. Boredom is generally the motive for the commoner inclined to reject literature depicting the upper class in its usual element, just as boredom is the explicit motive for the contemporary commoner referred to at the beginning of this essay, Thaddeus Smith, who objects to literature in which "nothing happens, or, if something does happen, it happens in somebody's head" or has to do with "whether somebody used the wrong fork or had a
good time or didn’t have a good time at a party” (513). And, the shallowness of the too-
common critic notwithstanding, the consequence of use of the boring as a subject of art is
the alienation of the audience, the failed negotiation of the problem of art.

At the same time, however, lest we engage in the politics of exclusion, we need to
acknowledge that there is another side to the question at hand, that the Monarchs’
usefulness as subjects of art for the masses is not the be all and end all of their reality as
human beings or even as subjects for art. Moreover, given that Hocks is correct in his
observation that “there is no reason to expect [Jack Hawley] to grasp the full
complication unless he were a deep and perceptive man in James’s sense, which he is
not” (131), this is a side of the question that Hawley as a pragmatist and as an advocate
for the common and a critic of the elite, is incapable of seeing but that the narrator,
perhaps because of his political ambivalence, seems at least vaguely and unconsciously to
sense. Specifically, there is a worth to the Monarchs, a story to be told about them, a
potential that the narrator as an as yet immature artist is unable to tap into or even to see
concretely until it is too late to be of use to him in the story. Implicit in this assertion I s
the notion that the artist/narrator changes, that he grows or develops for the better as the
story goes on, the validation of which notion only appears to threaten the thesis of a
change of eras, boredom as a motive, and the problem of art in James’ tale. In spite of his
recognition that James achieves what the narrator does not, Labor asserts that the
narrator’s initial attempt to make use of the Monarchs is “foolish” (157), while Munson,
echoing this sentiment, posits that there is a “fiction test’ which most real people [like
the Monarchs] cannot pass, [the problem being that] real people supply only hints for
fictive people, copying is bad business, [and] taking on the Monarchs is parallel to what a real novelist, usually immature, does when he tries to put a real person into a book (134). However, as Walter Wright points out, "the Major and Mrs. Monarch mean more to the narrator at the end than at the beginning"; and Wright sees this change coming as a result of "wisdom": the narrator at the tale's end, Wright asserts, "is a much wiser man that at the beginning" (139).

The question in this position, however, is that of the lesson that the tale's narrator/artist has learned. Wright claims not only that the narrator "cannot choose but hear" but also that the lesson or tale that he hears is that "when one is rich and at leisure, manners come easy," that the Monarchs even without money yet prove and never cease to be "the real thing" (139). Indeed, if the Monarchs were intrinsically lacking as potential subjects for art, then no artist, not even James, could have managed, as both Wright himself (141) and Hocks (122, 123, 125-26, 133) observe, to make a poetry of the narrator's initial despair, to write such a well-turned and popular story using the supposedly useless Monarchs as a subject. The reason is that James is the real thing, James is a real and mature artist, while the narrator as yet – indeed, by his own confession and Jack Hawley's assessment – is not. James begins much as the narrator begins, with the anecdote from his friend George du Maurier, which Ward reminds us is originally static and pictorial, as much so as is the image of the Monarchs when they first appear at the narrator's door. Being the real thing, however, James proceeds as the narrator does not to see the story implicit in the pictorial image that the Monarchs are, the very para-American or Americasque story, I argue, of a change of eras, boredom as a
motive, and the problem of art, whereas the narrator/artist, not yet, as Munson points out, a mature artist (135), fixes the Monarchs from the first, "knows from the first what he has in mind for them without first coming to know anything about them ("in the pictorial sense," he says, "I had immediately seen them. I had seized their type – I had already settled what I would do with it"), anticipates also that they have come to him for a portrait rather than as models, and sees them thus in all of this in pictorial, static, fixed terms rather than in the dynamic terms of the story that their pictorial image tells.

To be sure, as Hocks observes, the narrator also from the first does see in the pictorial image of the Monarchs a story; he does, that is, exhibit the capacity of the mature artist to "get an ‘ell’ from an ‘inch’ and to guess the unseen from the seen’ when he thinks about the past history [sic] of the Monarchs":

It was odd how quickly I was sure of everything that concerned them. . . . Their good looks had been their capital, and they had good-humoredly made the most of a career that this resource marked out for them. . . . I could see the sunny drawing-rooms, sprinkled with periodicals she didn’t read, in which Mrs. Monarch had continuously sat; I could see the wet shrubberies in which she had walked. . . . I could see the rich covers the Major had helped to shoot and the garments in which, late at night, he repaired to the smoking-room to talk about them. I could imagine their leggings and waterproofs, their knowing
tweeds and rugs . . . and I could evoke the appearance of
their servants and the compact variety of their luggage on
the platforms of country stations.

However, in spite of this insight, which comes very close to capturing the use to which
James puts them, and in spite of the fact that his insistence on trying to do something
artistic with the Monarchs throughout most of the story bespeaks his sense, however
vague, that there is something about them that he should be able to render artistically but
has failed to appreciate, the narrator still fails even at the story's end to discern any use to
which he can put them except "something that wouldn't absolutely have pleased them,"
which might quite possibly be the use, unflattering to the aristocracy, that I have
proposed for them except that the use to which they finally put themselves is certainly far
less flattering. During the course of the story, however, the two personalities that the
narrator, in his materialistic posture, initially regards as useless become for him two
human beings whose pathos touches him and renders him a more sensitive and humane
person and thus potentially a better artist. By engaging with them -- in conversation and
in contemplation of what to do with them -- the narrator, as does James, and as does the
attentive reader in his democratic progress toward understanding James, "unstiffens"
them, to use Hocks' term, and begins the process of seeing in them their potential as
subjects for art. The upshot of this consideration is the recognition that the Monarchs are
not boring as subjects for art, even for the allegedly underappreciative underclass, except
insofar as the artist is too inadequate to recognize that which is of interest in them and to
render them interesting. Moreover, the problem of art and, in this case, the problem of
boredom that is part and parcel to it, is not an occasion for compromise; it is rather a challenge that the artist worthy of the name must and can, if he is adequate, meet. It, too, is a problem of rendering.

Consideration of the question of boredom as a motive in "The Real Thing," of course, brings us full circle and thus to a close. The point of this analysis is, again, that the same key that one uses to gain access to Connell's artistically lesser story gains one access to James' more sophisticated and obscure tale as well. To be sure, upon entering the door, one finds that the house that James built is far more expansive than the three room cabin of Connell's creation. In "The Most Dangerous Game," for example, the problem of art is addressed by both Connell and Zaroff, and these two "points" are enough to establish the direction on the graph of the line that Connell is taking. But, in "The Real Thing" this same problem is addressed by James, the unnamed narrator, Jack Hawley, the landscape painter, and the magazine editor in a complex host of ways that may make it easier to see that James is concerned with this point but also makes it far more difficult to determine the direction of the line he taking. Nevertheless, the difference here is simply one of degree. James has simply written at the level of the colloquial "PhD," the level obtained by "piling higher and deeper." At bottom, the fact that the same key opens the door to each of these two quite different houses of fiction argues an accessibility for James that soundly refutes any charge to the contrary.
VI

Sex in James:

The Drama of Penetration

in

The Sacred Fount

In the second chapter of this treatment the focus is on James’s consideration of the rather earthy issue of minority status as far as power and culture are concerned, while in Chapter Three, The Bostonians affords an opportunity to consider James’ position on the equally earthy question of democracy. In the very short but pregnant fourth chapter the focus on the inadvertent brutality and beastliness of manners continues the emphasis on earthy and anti-elitist concerns and the discovery of such in James’ work, while Chapter Five argues that James is often just plain simple, as simple as the least complex and most common of those who can lay any claim as writers of serious or respectable literature. However, if there is any issue or concern that can be characterized as timelessly common and earthy then a concern with sex is it. Indeed, during the period that witnessed the rise of the middle class, the common man’s interest in sex was depended upon to be strong enough to keep the lower classes down and was even encouraged as a means of accomplishing this end. In contemporary society, of course, wherein sex is used to sell everything, audiences are so bombarded with explicit sexual images and (to place blame where it belongs) are so insatiable in their appetites for such content that they ironically no longer have any sensitivity to the subtleties of sexual language or, arguably, to the
subtleties of language of any kind. However, during the Victorian era that preceded the era in which James wrote, which Victorian era was also the era that witnessed the greatest increase in adult literacy rates, the common interest in sex, which was perhaps most loudly confessed by the extent to which expression of the sexual was repressed, was arguably though perhaps unintentionally employed to the excellent educational end of functioning as a lure for the reader who, with his interest in penetration, in sex, could be seduced – with the promise of a sexual reward – into the intellectually rewarding exercise of conducting a close reading of even the most challenging text. If, with his interest in sex, the common man will not work toward intellectual development in exchange for payment in sex, then, one suspects, he may not work for anything.

Given the earthiness of a concern with sex, demonstration of James’ concern with sex argues to some extent the earthiness of James as well. Moreover, conducting such a demonstration by way of a focus on James’ *The Sacred Fount* argues James’ earthiness more convincingly still. While the thesis of an accessible and ever likeable Henry James is further validated by demonstration that the lay reader can be profitably and pleasurably guided through a text as thorny as this one is generally perceived to be. It is thematically significant that, although critics may regard *The Bostonians* as a text that is possessed of unresolved tensions, *The Sacred Fount* is the text most often recognized as the most taxing in James’ sizeable canon. Referring to this difficulty in his 1953 introduction to the Grove Press paperback edition of the novel, even Leon Edel, the dean of James scholars, admits that
Half a century has elapsed since Henry James wrote *The Sacred Fount*, and criticism, on the whole, still tends to regard it in weary bafflement. Over none of his novels have the critical waves melted so helplessly into their own shimmering foam. When the book appeared in 1901, the few reviewers who attempted to read it either masked their bewilderment in derision or candidly admitted they could not understand. Henry James had "out-Jamesed" himself; he was "intent on making nothing out of nothing"; "he had written a brilliantly stupid piece of work." And so it has been with one or two rare exceptions, in the ensuing decades. In a work as recent as the brief sketch of the novelist by Michael Swan, *The Sacred Fount* is still "that strange and baffling book." And Mr. Swan’s curious account of it reveals just how baffled he is. (v)

Following this assessment, in 1967 J. A. Ward writes that "*The Sacred Fount*, bewilderingly, is unresolved" (*Search for Form* 220). However, because his text is pointedly directed toward the less specialized reader of James’ work, which is roughly the same audience that this treatment aspires to reach, perhaps more significant is Louis Auchincloss’ confession that

I cannot find a redeeming feature in this unpleasant novel; I can only regard it, as did many of James’s admirers at the
time of its publication, as a sad aberration. Discussion of it belongs to his biographer, and I say no more of it here.

(114)

Given this reputation among critics, it seems safe to say that, if any text in James' canon is to be accused of inaccessibility and unearthliness, then *The Sacred Fount* seems a most likely candidate. As John Lyon asserts even as late as 1994 in an introduction to the Penguin Classics paperback edition of the novel, *The Sacred Fount* is "a baffling novel" (viii), and he is somewhat inclined to agree with Peter Brooks that it is "impervious to explication" (ix). By the same token, however, if a work like *The Sacred Fount* is shown to be more accessible and earthy than criticism has heretofore recognized, then James, even at his "worst," can hardly be said to be the exclusive writer that readers tend to think him; and, to borrow from Lyon again as well as from Jean Blackall, his "worst" may even prove to be his best in the sense of being "one of the most revealing documents in respect of James' more general practice as a writer" (viii). The proof of the pudding regarding the primary question of James' elitism may well lie in the question of *The Sacred Fount*.

I

Absent Lancelot when the Devil is a Gentleman

or

"My wife said if I go hunting or fishing or camping just one more time, she's gonna leave me. My God, I'm gonna miss her."
Perhaps the chief provocation for such derisive comments as those that Edel reports is the fact that *The Sacred Fount* reads like an advanced algebraic proof. Indeed, therein lies one of its most engaging features as well, and this treatment is not the first to have noted as much. Even so, while these features and their value are thematically significant (thematically significant in that they are a part of the provocative drama that the novel chiefly affords), the larger point of *The Sacred Fount*, “the figure in the carpet,” as it were, is not to be found in the steps of this proof or in the following thereof. Hints and insights regarding an other, more pleasurable and productive reading of *The Sacred Fount* are few. Nevertheless, Putt, while writing about James’ “In the Cage,” unknowingly – or so it seems, since he does not pursue it when he addresses *The Sacred Fount* – offers something in passing that is really of quite considerable use. Demonstrating an inclination to notice an element that is manifest in *The Sacred Found* as well, Putt first observes that

the real life of the telegram girl “in the cage” is the

vicarious imaginary life she leads while piecing together,

via their constant “wires” to one another, the intricate yet

feckless social affairs of the toffs, male and female, who

are forever dashing into the office to arrange, or postpone,

or cancel, their ever-changing assignations and evasions.

In doing so, Putt asserts a quality that makes the telegram girl so much like the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* in his own vicarious enjoyment of the assignations of others that the likeness goes without saying. Putt goes on to write not only that
such plot as the story holds concerns her silent emendations
which aim to further the Captain’s amatory escapades but
help him instead towards a compromised marriage
but also and more significantly that
all this . . . is of less interest than the Captain’s complete
inability to see beyond the class barriers separating them.

(109)
The point is this: in both “In the Cage” and The Sacred Fount, the greater value lies not in
the investigating or searching character’s insights but in his oversights. The thing for
which the Captain, in “In the Cage,” is looking is a great deal like the thing for which the
narrator of The Sacred Fount is looking. Moreover, this is the same thing for which the
reader of the latter work, understandably following the narrator’s lead, generally looks.
And this thing is, putting it quite simply and perhaps echoing James’ Maggie Verver, the
wrong thing, the right thing being the woman in front of each of them.

It could be observed at this juncture, albeit to some distraction, that far more
substantial hints as to a more profitable and pleasurable reading of The Sacred Fount can
understandably be had from a reading of Blackall’s excellent Jamesian Ambiguity and
The Sacred Fount, which at many points very nearly robs this treatment of much of its
thunder. In fact, Blackall’s status as the only critic to have written a full-length book on
this thorny text, along with the quality of her work, dictates that anyone who writes much
about The Sacred Fount must depend heavily on reference to her work. Among the
countless insightful and superior observations made by Blackall is her early summary
description of the narrator as

  a man both proud and analytic by disposition . . . [who]
  becomes so preoccupied with his concept that he . . .
  becomes the victim of an overriding obsession to perfect
  and validate his theory. Meanwhile . . . he also begins to
  feel . . . especially for Mrs. Server, with whom he falls in
  love. He would like to declare himself, but his elaborate
  theory gets in his way because he believes she is wholly
  absorbed by her love for one of the vampires and that she
  could not, therefore, be interested in him. Hence he must
  either reject the theory or give up the lady. Because he is a
  proud man, he chooses to believe that he is right rather than
  to woo May Server. (11)

However, Blackall errs in thinking that “he would like to declare himself,” in her later
assertion that it is his observance of forms (in this case the form of not encroaching on
what he believes to be Gilbert Long’s territory) that discourages him from approaching
May Server, in her attributing his action or non-action to conscious choice, and in her
assertion that “he must either reject the theory or give up the lady” (140). It is not true
that the narrator’s ignorance of May Server is conscious, that he consciously “chokes
every humane feeling” because, as he says “I was there to save my priceless pearl of an
inquiry and to harden, to that end, my heart.” These notions are, in fact, inconsistent with
Blackall's own contention that the narrator is a victim of his own intellect and with the fact that, with his frequently bad manners, he has not been respectful of forms anywhere else in the novel (49, 128, 164, 169-70, and elsewhere).

In any case, the same right thing referred to above is the neglected and overlooked right thing in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" as well, a brief comparison to which reveals an even larger part of the answer to the question of The Sacred Fount. Additionally, along with the comparison between Hawthorne and James that Blackall asserts (165), such a comparison further argues the common touch in James in general and particularly in The Sacred Fount since "Young Goodman Brown" is a work whose accessibility and earthiness are not only promised by its title -- "Goodman" and "Brown" are both common appellations -- but are also firmly implied by its being frequently anthologized in college, high school, and even junior high or middle school texts. The Sacred Fount and "Young Goodman Brown" end in the same unsettled fashion. Readers of Hawthorne's story are left to ponder whether Brown's unsettling experience is real or just a dream, while readers of The Sacred Fount, those few there are, are left wondering whether the narrator's hypothesis has been substantiated or whether the accusation of insanity levelled by Grace Bissenden at the novel's end is closer to the truth. Yet, in each case, the answer to the work's final question is largely and even pointedly beside its ostensible main point, its apparent main "thrust," if you will.

To be brief, and possibly redundant, this main thrust is sexual. Regarding The Sacred Fount this may seem an assertion of the obvious, especially in light of Lyon's observation that "sex, politics, and sexual politics are everywhere implicit in this novel"
(xvi) as well as in light of Ward’s easy identification of “The Sacred Fount [as] James’ one novel whose major theme is physical love” (Imagination of Disaster 5). However, the reference to the sexual here is a reference not to the obviously and literally sexual but to the more obscurely, implicitly, and figuratively sexual. The sexual in question here is expressed in the drama of penetration that each work amusingly depicts and of which the novel’s thorny algebraic quality is a part. In the case of Hawthorne’s story, which needless to say is simpler, young Goodman Brown forfeits the very attractive opportunity for healthy, all-American sexual penetration that Faith, his very attractive wife of only three months, seductively and even pleadingly offers him; and he chooses instead to pursue an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity about the evils of the forest – to pursue, that is, an opportunity for intellectual penetration. However, as Brown and his companion, a kindly old gentleman who is apparently the devil himself, penetrate more deeply into the forest – engaging thus in a third kind of penetration, a physical penetration of the forest – the kindly old gentleman gradually “strips” Brown of all of the “old clothes” or “rags” of his identity and sense of himself and his heritage, penetrating finally to the very heart of his emotional and religious faith, converting Brown into a morose, ill-tempered, anti-social and somewhat “mad” man, and implicitly achieving a kind of homosexual penetration that appropriately punishes a man who has denied an attractive and healthy heterosexual opportunity.

It must be admitted that the validity of this thesis regarding “Young Goodman Brown” has not yet been acknowledged in any published criticism. But, in addition to the fact that a closer textual analysis would discover ample support, this is much beside
the point. What happens — arguably, if you will — in “Young Goodman Brown” serves to illustrate the kind of thing that happens in The Sacred Fount as well. In a way similar to Hawthorne’s generally and thus unspecifically and somewhat anonymously named Goodman Brown, James’ explicitly anonymous narrator, who in Blackall’s view also at least initially appears to be a “good man” (44), sets forth from London on a train ride that will physically penetrate the English countryside and thereby begin his drama of penetration. Continuing his drama, his goal in taking this train ride is to achieve an intellectual penetration of the sexual secrets of English countryhouse garden-party lives. The consequence of such voyeuristic and unwholesome pursuit, however, is his comical neglect and failure to recognize, his inability indeed to see — has he really gone blind as the old wives tale would predict? — the superbly attractive opportunity for wholesome and desirable heterosexual penetration that is offered or at least easily available to him via May Server. Having committed such an error, the narrator gets what he or any man deserves for such. Not only does his indulgence in figuratively masturbative and literally self-gratifying (Blackall 94) behavior render him just as figuratively blind, but he also ends the novel a very confused man, not penetrating as he would wish but penetrated — by a woman, no less — penetrated and thus unmanned, dispossessed of that by which he measures himself as a man, and even very possibly so disturbed by his intellectual failure and his intellectual activities as to be “crazy,” a mad man. The reader of The Sacred Fount, unlike the reader of “Young Goodman Brown,” plays his own role in this multi-level drama of penetration, tending to identify with the narrator, participating with him in his attempts to discover the novel’s sacred fount, to penetrate the novel’s secrets and even
the narrator’s mistake, and possibly thereby ironically only duplicating that mistake but at best becoming, as Blackall aptly notes, “the novel’s real detective” (6), and thus its real agent of penetration.

It is one thing, of course, simply to assert such a provocative, “sexy,” and devilish thesis; it is quite another to establish its source in the novel’s details. Turning to those details, however, we note that, in a way that parallels Brown’s physical penetration of the forest and his attempt at intellectual penetration of its secrets, James’ anonymous narrator at the beginning of The Sacred Fount is quite literally at the start of a journey by rail from the taints of London, the big city and corrupt metropolis, and to an extended weekend-long garden party at a private home – Newmarch, no less – in the idyllic English countryside. He is therefore on a journey that, by way of the railroad, the Thoreauvian symbol of sophistication and undone innocence, the serpentine agent of change from virgin territory to civilization, will physically penetrate the idyllic English countryside and the countryhouse garden that is the figurative eden at its core, the morally suspect activities in said eden notwithstanding and the ambiguity of eden itself as either dream world or nightmare world (Lyon xv) notwithstanding as well. Moreover, the narrator is to be identified with the serpentine railway in that, like the railway, he, too, is serpentine, insinuating himself sneakily into every nook and cranny in his attempt to penetrate the secrets of private lives. The opening scene thusly characterized, the arguable drama of penetration has begun. It is almost needless to say as well that these images of the garden, encroaching corruption, and agents of disruption give The Sacred Fount the look
of a very old and very popular and even very “sexy” story, even without consideration of some drama of penetration.

Even so, it is to Hawthorne’s story that The Scared Fount’s most sustained comparison needs to be made. In “Young Goodman Brown” the drama of penetration indicates its sexual character quite early, specifically in the second paragraph, when Faith of the pink ribbons, Brown’s pretty wife of only three months, registers as seductive, as provocative, and as attractive an appeal as will ever be heard in or outside literature, literally begging her husband to “sleep in thine own bed tonight [on] this night, . . . of all the nights in the year” and punctuating her request with a further appeal to his masculinity and ego. While such may not appear to be the case, the same is true in The Sacred Fount, as James’ unnamed narrator indicates from the start — as early as the third page and no later than the end of the short first chapter — that his interests are sexual, that his intent is to penetrate the secret of sexual relations among the couples at the Newmarch garden party, that his goal is to examine his thesis of the sacred fount.

Moreover, while everyone else — significantly, by the narrator’s own testimony — is travelling to Newmarch in pursuit of an opportunity for literal sexual penetration, he, again by his own testimony, is interested only or at least primarily in intellectual and voyeuristic penetration. The question arises — the question indeed comes up in discussions of the issue — whether, far from being blameable, the choice of intellectual penetration might not be the mark of the superior rather than the flawed man, the man who thinks with his head rather than his penis. In fact, the narrator thinks himself just such a disinterested detective. And, Blackall notes, his “interests are not merely prurient;
[he and his fellow theorists] constantly tend, rather, to cerebralize human experience and to render it abstract in order to discover laws and to perceive essences" (6). However, the Devil, it is said, is often also a gentleman, dressed as he is in “Young Goodman Brown” in a gentleman’s clothes, dressed as he is in The Sacred Fount in the guise of the rather complex intellectual and thus gentlemanly, elite, and socially superior thesis of what Blackall rightly describes as “a highly endowed observer” (158). The fact that here the narrator’s focus is still exclusively on the sexual argues that his pursuit, though intellectual, is simply a surrogate for more literally sexual pursuits and might even need to be characterized as pornographic. At the same time, although Maxwell Geismar would argue to the contrary, Blackall and others rightly observe that James intends for the reader to see that the narrator is not reliable, that these interests are not only sexual but unwholesome and even perverse. James’ narrator is clearly, as Putt identifies him, a “Peeping Tom narrator” (103), and Peeping Toms have never been regarded as anything but perverse. Moreover, while “the idea of love as a force that drains and finally destroys the individual” is also rather morbid and pessimistic if not perverse, it is an idea perhaps examined by James but, contrary to Sicker (109), extoled not by James but by his perverse Peeping Tom narrator. And, as is the case in “Young Goodman Brown,” there is a penalty, imposed by the author, for such perversity. Failing acknowledgment of this punitive posture on James’ part, the reader threatens to commit the sophomorish error—all too common regarding this text, if both Sicker (112) and Isle (9) are correct—of identifying the author with the character that he creates.
A large part of this penalty – and thus a large part of the proof of James’ position
– lies in the fact of the narrator’s generally acknowledged status as a retrospective
narrator, indeed a narrator who is retrospective to the point of being preoccupied with
retrospection and with that which compels him to such. The narrator of The Sacred
Fount is, literally in a word, troubled. At this juncture a comparison with Edgar Allan
Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” is useful, not only because it further advances the
thesis of an accessible Henry James whose concerns are as popular as those of the most
popular and accessible authors but also because it alerts us to James’ intent – or at least
his accomplishment – in characterizing his narrator as retrospective. First of all, the basic
fact of the narrator’s retrospective posture suggests that the text has been presented for
his and our own going over and over to the end of discovering some error. In Poe’s
“Amontillado,” the narrator, Montressor, has himself been traumatized by his act of
murderous revenge when it was his intent, obviously, not to become a victim but to
victimize Fortunato. Narrating the story from the perspective of fifty years later, he
records in a fineness and clarity of detail that not only give us the impression that the
reported incidents are actually happening in the present or have have occurred in the
immediate past – a quality that Isle attributes to the narrator of The Sacred Fount as well
(218-19) – but also hints strongly that his is a more than ordinary and less than healthy
interest, that he is pathologically preoccupied and even obsessed with the past in all of its
detail and seeks, evidently with little success, to reconcile himself with it. He is, in short,
“crazy,” traumatized by the experience which he has himself authored. No less is true of
the narrator of The Sacred Fount, who not only retrospectively presents his tale in
tellingly extensive detail for the purpose of revivifying it again and again in order to deal
with its unresolved conflicts but also, in a way that is far more explicit than in
“Amontillado,” is pronounced “crazy” by his chief confederate, Mrs. Brissenden, to
whose vision he has given a booklength sanction, and is, furthermore, convinced to a
large and confessed degree that the charge just might be valid. Thus, in the end, as partial
penalty for his errors, the narrator stands condemned to madness by himself as well as by
his creator. Moreover, it is not only the obsession, which both J. A. Ward and Lyon note,
that makes him mad; it is, rather, as with Oedipus, his error and his retrospective
traumatization by that error that makes him mad.

Evidence of the narrator’s retrospective posture – and thus of part of James’
penalty for and attitude toward him – is abundant to the point of being pervasive and
pervasive to the point of being significant. Beginning with his Chapter Two reference to
what his “memory associates with the rest of the long afternoon” (13), to his “recover[y
of] . . . a full sequence of impressions” (13), to what he “afterwards saw” (13), and to
what he “recollect[s],” there are easily more than one-hundred provocative testaments to
his retrospective status and thus to the intensity of his preoccupation and trauma and the
degree to which the details of his experience are still quite traumatically present to him.
By far, the most significant of these retrospective references occurs late in the book, in
Chapter X, wherein he confesses as follows:

‘God grant I don’t see you again at all!’ was the prayer

sharply determined in my heart as I left Mrs. Server behind

me. I left her behind me for ever, but the prayer has not


been answered. I did see her again; I see her now; I shall
see her always. I shall continue to feel at moments in my
own facial muscles the deadly little ache of her heroic grin.

With this, the narrator confesses not only that he is preoccupied with something that has
already happened, in the significantly distant past, but also that the chief focus of his
preoccupation is or has to do with May Server and that he has been traumatized,
particularly by the failure of his intellectual pursuits regarding May Server and thus by
the very text that he, by way of the record of his pursuits, has created. He confesses as
well, moreover, that, in a way that accuses Lyon of understatement once again (xi), his
trauma and obsession last even beyond the end of the book.

Also arguing the perversity, the blameability of the narrator’s behavior,
specifically the surrogation of the sexual act, is his ignorance — literally ignore-ance — of
May Server or at least his ignorance of what she has offered. One might counter the
condemnation of the narrator’s behavior by objecting that voyeuristic pursuit might be
more excusable for a man who finds himself provoked or at least prompted to such by
exclusion and a lack of options as far as potential partners are concerned, especially in a
setting wherein everyone else is included and pairing off with someone. Goodman
Brown might have been thusly prompted had Faith’s offer not been placed so clearly on
the table. However, it is the fact of Faith’s seductive and incomparably attractive offer,
which is simultaneously an invitation to community, that most condemns Brown’s trek
into the forest for anti-social, anti-communal purposes. Hence, also arguing the
condemnation of the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* and his pursuit of merely surrogate
sexual activity is his ignorance of May Server. Put simply, the missed clue in this text, this manuscript, this “MS,” is just that, MS, meaning May Server. As is the case in “The Beast in the Jungle,” where John Marcher misses May Bartram’s offer and other indications and opportunities in life due to his narcissistic and thus selfish preoccupation with manners and his fine, self-flattering intellectual conceit, and as is the case in “Young Goodman Brown” and elsewhere in Hawthorne’s work—“The Minister’s Black Veil,” “Ethan Brand,” “The Birthmark,” and “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux” come most readily to mind—wherein preoccupation with intellectual pursuit and with the morality of others leads to a similar neglect and failure, May Server in this novel is the proper MS, the misread text. And, in our attempt to appreciate the very earthy thing that James, throughout his canon, was really all about and to appreciate as well the parallels between the plot and point of *The Sacred Fount* and the plot and point of “Young Goodman Brown” it is important for us to understand this. James’ narrator, like Young Goodman Brown, neglects “marriage,” neglects the establishment of male-female relationships, and in so doing this and other things neglects community. And the neglect of community and marriage in Hawthorne as well as in James is a major offence deserving of major penalty.

In order to grasp the extent of the narrator’s blameability one has to consider how badly he has missed his clue. The extent of this miss is evident in the fact that May Server is clearly the most eligible— and in Blackall’s view “the most womanly” (63)—woman at the Newmarch gathering. As is frequently the case in a James novel, there are in *The Sacred Fount* only seven characters who are depicted in any detail: Guy and Grace Brissenden, Lady John (but not her spouse), Gilbert Long, Ford Obert, May Server, and
the narrator. Among the women, Grace Brissenden is married, the apparent beneficiary of the chronologically much younger Guy Brissenden from whose sacred fount she is heavily guzzling. Moreover, the narrator speculates, albeit with very questionable reliability, she is already having an affair. In short, at least as far as the narrator is concerned, Grace Brissenden is hardly an available woman. Nor is Lady John, who is flirtatious but is also married, an intellectual lightweight if not an intellectual knat, and generally undersirable. In sharp contrast to her fellow female Newmarch inmates, however, May Server is quite eligible and desirable, significantly not only in the views of others but also and primarily in the narrator’s own view. The narrator observes, for example, that “she didn’t think it necessary to be, like Lady John, always ‘ready.’” More importantly, Ford Obert, who “only the other year . . . painted her,” sees her now as a woman on the make. Responding when the narrator, with some incredulity, asks “what was the matter just now – when, though you were so fortunately occupied [with the charming and attractive Mrs. Server], you yet seemed to call me to the rescue?,” Obert replies

“I was only occupied in being frightened . . . at a sort of sense that she wanted to make love to me. . . . She’s different now [from when he painted her]. . . . Her affections were not then, I imagine, at her disposal. . . . They were fixed – with intensity. . . . Her imagination had, for the time, rested its wing. At present it’s ready for flight – it seeks a fresh perch. It’s trying. Take care.”
Later, after the art gallery scene, Obert continues:

"She darts from flower to flower, but she clings, for the
time, to each. . . . She has kept alighting. She inaugurated
it, the instant she arrived, with me, and every man of us has
had his turn. . . . I stick to it that she's different. . . .
Different from herself -- as she was when I painted her.
There's something the matter with her."

Echoing Obert, Grace Brissenden later asserts that Mrs. Server, when she saw her the
evening before, "was all over the place. . . . She's as nervous as a cat. . . . She used to be
so calm -- as if she were always sitting for her portrait." But now, she is "on the pounce."

Finally, it is Guy Brissenden who fleshes out Obert's earlier allusion, telling us that

"Her circumstances are nothing wonderful. She has none
too much money; she has had three children and lost them;
and nobody that belongs to her appears ever to have been
particularly nice to her."

Combined with Obert's speculation that "Her affections were not then . . . at her disposal
[but] were fixed -- with intensity, which suggests that her husband is now no longer with
her and may even be deceased, this report from Guy Brissenden identifies Mrs. Server
not only as a very eligible woman but also as a damsel in distress, a damsel in more
distress, in fact, than even Young Goodman Brown's wife who does, after all, have both
youth and the promise of her husband's return in the morning at the worst, a damsel in
even more distress when one takes into consideration what James depicts in The Spoils of
Poynton, the particularly disadvantaged and severely unjust status of the widowed woman in late nineteenth century British society. And Lancelot, in this instance, is a pervert and a cad.

In this consideration of May Server's eligibility and distress, her status as a woman on the make, the novel's art gallery scene is critical. It is here that Gilbert Long, Ford Obert, May Server, and the narrator encounter the portrait of "the man with the mask in his hand." Occurring in Chapter IV and thus fairly early in the fourteen chapter text, the scene begins with the narrator's invitation — and such an invitation is significant — to Mrs. Server to join him in viewing "some pictures in one of the rooms that had not been lighted the previous evening." Arriving in "the great pictured saloon" they encounter Ford Obert and Gilbert Long, the latter, to the narrator's sense and surprise, doing all the explaining and showing himself to be "an unexpected demon of a critic." The portrait on which the interpretations focus is, by the narrator's assessment, "the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter." The narrator is apparently at his most reliable in his report that

The figure represented is a young man in black — a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown. In his hand he holds an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on a second view becomes a representation of a human face,
modeled and coloured, in wax, in enameled metal, in some
substance not human. The object thus appears a complete
mask, such as might have been fantastically fitted and
worn.

As Lyon implicitly might agree (xxiv-xxv), with this, his prescriptive version of the ink-
blot test and anticipation of Ismael Reed in "beware: do not read this poem," James
intends that what a character or even a reader sees in this portrait says more about the
character than it does about the portrait. And what Mrs. Server and the narrator see and
have to say is revealing. When Mrs. Server proffers that "One could call it . . . the Mask
of Death," the narrator objects, "Isn't it much rather the Mask of Life? It's the man's
own face that's death." He is inclined to argue that "The other one," the mask, is
"blooming and beautiful," at the assertion of which Mrs. Server feels compelled to
interrupt, objecting that the face itself wears "an awful grimace." The narrator, in short,
somewhat brutally and rudely ignoring Mrs. Server's objection, continues,

"The other one, blooming and beautiful, . . . is Life, and
he's going to put it on; unless indeed he has just taken it
off. . . . The artificial face, on the other hand, . . . is
extremely studied and, when you carefully look at it,
charmingly pretty. I don't see the grimace."

Meanwhile, for Mrs. Server, the grimace is all there is: "I don't see anything else," she
says. Yet, it spite of Mrs. Server's objection, which at this point sounds like a plea for
the narrator to cease his prodding or even a plaintive wail of personal distress, the
narrator continues his infernal interpretive digging, following Obert's assertion that "He thinks it [the mask] looks like a lovely lady" first with his own offensive interjection that "It does . . . look remarkably like Mrs. Server" and then with the further observation, equally offensive and shared with Obert and Long, that the figure itself calls to mind "poor Briss." Much to Mrs. Server's credit, "she laughed, but forgivingly"; and the narrator's intrusive interpretation is something to be forgiven because it is offensive, even brutally and ungentlemanly so. His insistence on pursing it — three times others discourage him from doing so — bespeaks the extent of his compulsion and root sense ignorance of the distressed damsel.

Meanwhile, for the most part Ford Obert and Gilbert Long, the original very active discussants of the painting, sit quietly by. Their reticence is also telling. In a way that comments on what meaning is and how it is established — meaning is established by the congress between the reader and the read — Obert and Long become mere spectators because the painting at this point does not mean as much to them as it does to May Server and the narrator, who interpret the painting in terms of their own circumstances. To Mrs. Server, who is — rather heroically, in fact — wearing a mask in order to avoid an ill-mannered show of her distress, the grinning mask is a grimace, a forced smile; and its removal reveals a figure who is really dying inside, as she is. Her interpretation of the painting is thus clearly a cry for help, the cry, again, of a damsel in distress. The narrator, in contrast, every bit as obtuse as Brown is before Faith's plea, is so enamoured not only with his thesis of a scared fount but also with himself and his intellect, his capacity for interpretive penetration, that he fails to see, is unable to see either the merit of Mrs. Server's interpretation or the confessional quality of it. Instead, what he sees in the painting is that the mask looks like Mrs. Server and the mask is all of Mrs. Server that
there is in the painting. Moreover, this mask is not “a grimace” but “blooming and beautiful,” and thus does not bespeak the distress that Mrs. Server would argue. Further, in the narrator’s convenient and self-congratulatory view, the painting represents the two tapped founts of a pair of sacred fount pairs, linked in a conspiracy wherein the one figure, though itself depleted and dead, assists the other in masking its reality from the rest of the world, much as Guy assists May in masking her true condition from the world, appearing instead “blooming and beautiful” when in fact she is depleted and sad.

Adding to the severity of the narrator’s oversight – if such addition were necessary – is the fact that, while May Server is the most eligible female at the Newmarch gathering, the narrator is the most eligible male. Proceeding by omision, of the bachelors at the party, his recent transformation from known dullard and bore to “an unexpected demon of a critic” notwithstanding, Gilbert Long is – or, at least, was – “stupid in fact, and in that character had no business at Newmarch.” Long is, at best, “a heavy Adonis,” “a fine piece of human furniture” because of “his good looks . . .”, [specifically] his six feet and more of stature, his low-growing, tight-curling hair, [and] his big, bare, blooming face.” However, Long is “not now such a model . . . as [the narrator] had seemed to remember; he is now, in fact, “fat and forty” and hardly a good catch on grounds of either his physical attractiveness or his newfound intellectual ability. In his posture as the author of an introduction, Lyon is willing to allow the possibility that, particularly in his last interview with the narrator, Long is merely feigning stupidity in an effort to disguise his identity as the beneficiary in a sacred fount relationship. As Lyon observes, “the narrator sees in Long’s bafflement and anger only further proof of
Long’s new intelligence: Long’s ostensible bafflement screens the reality of a new devious cleverness, a cleverness intent on concealing the workings of the sacred fount whether in his own case or in that of the Brissendens” (xxvii). However, in his posture as author of an introduction, what Lyon cannot say is that such a view, particularly on the narrator’s part, does not hold under scrutiny since, according to the sacred fount theory, which is valid, consciousness of status as a beneficiary necessarily precludes and even destroys one’s status as a beneficiary. Long, in short, must be simply stupid and, as such, is unqualified as the novel’s “best man.”

The only other named bachelor is Ford Obert who, as a painter of portraits, possesses the artist’s eye, especially when the subjects are human, and is very much the narrator’s situational double. According to the narrator, whose attitude toward Obert is as ameliorative as his attitude toward Long is pejorative, Obert is “always expert” and he, along with May Server and in contrast to Gilbert Long, is “known to [the narrator] as [one of his] agreeable acquaintances.” Ameliorative though his attitude may be, however, the narrator acknowledges that Obert is something of a womanizer, that “an aversion to pretty women – numbers of whom he had preserved for a grateful posterity – was his sign neither as a man nor as an artist.” Hence, it is telling when Obert, in a one-on-one pairing with May Server early in the novel, seems mutely to plead that the narrator not “leave [him] longer along with her” and then later confesses quite unequivocally that his friend had read his look quite accurately. The passage in question, which is quoted a second time because its functional significances are several, reads as follows:
"What was the matter just now – when, though you were so fortunately occupied, you yet seemed to call me to the rescue?"

"Oh," he laughed, "I was only occupied in being frightened!"

"But at what?"

"Well, at a sort of sense that she wanted to make love to me."

"... I don't see why terror – given so charming a person – should be the result. It's flattering."

Obert then goes on to explain to his friend the reason for his terror:

"She's different now. ... Her affections were not then, I imagine, at her disposal. ... They were fixed – with intensity; and it made the difference with me. Her imagination had, for the time, rested its wing. At present it's ready for flight – it seeks a fresh perch. It's trying.

Take care."

Mrs. Server, in short and again, is a woman on the make, looking for a new relationship in which her affections can again become "fixed – with intensity," and clearly a person who is capable of such a relationship, capable of such wholesome and productive commitment. To the confirmed and intractable bachelor that Obert is, the kind of relationship that May Server is seeking is woefully undesirable. Indeed, he sees her as a
threat, someone in whose company one needs to “take care.” Hence, he, too, fails to qualify as the novel’s most eligible bachelor.

In an important scene one-third the way through the novel, Ford Obert, now also engaged in the investigation of Mrs. Server, recommends that the narrator, in his search for the identity of May’s supposed lover, “look for the last man.” Gilbert Long and Ford Obert both having thus been excluded, the narrator is “the last man.” During an early exchange the narrator, in concert with Grace Brissenden, deduces that the idea of a woman who is “the mystic Egeria,” the depleted sacred fount, logically presupposes that the identity of her lover and beneficiary will be “the cleverest man of the party,” having become so at the lady’s volunteered expense. By his own assertion, however, and even by the testimony of the intellectuality of his engaging – albeit perverse – novel-length analysis, the narrator himself is “the cleverest man of the party,” the mystic Egeria’s lover, if someone other than the narrator, being “the cleverest but one.” Moreover, it is largely by way of his use of May Server as a subject of inquiry that the narrator flourishes. Indeed, “MS,” May Server, is, again, the MS, the manuscript; and the narrator, as critic engaged in interpretive analysis of that manuscript, owes the whole of his novel-length text to her agency. Indeed, as both Sicker and Ward suggest, he actually owes the whole of his identity – or all of that identity that he has for the reader – to May Server; echoing Ward, who likens the telegraph girl of “In the Cage” to the anonymous narrators of “The Turn of the Screw” and The Sacred Fount, Sicker asserts that “the narrator has no intrinsic identity of his own” (109). Furthermore, in a way that is unbeknownst to him, the narrator’s peculiar thesis – or hypothesis – ends up holding true.
May Server is a sacred fount. She is the narrator's sacred fount. And the narrator is and has been from the beginning of the text the most likely and appropriate beneficiary of what she has had to offer.

His ignorance of her notwithstanding, the reason for the narrator’s failure to establish a relationship with May Server and thus to put her to her proper use is certainly not that he fails to find her attractive. On the contrary, when Lyon asserts in his plot summary of the novel that “the narrator finds May Server attractive,” he once again badly understates the matter (x). Blackall, in some contrast, notes quite firmly that “the narrator perpetually remarks . . . her beauty and her charm” (63). References to the fact that he finds her very attractive are indeed pervasive, albeit tellingly only in the first half of the text. Even when we first meet her she is described not only as “conspicuously charming” but also as “extraordinarily pretty” and “always lovely.” Indicating his sense of the attractiveness of her personality he asserts that “she didn’t think it necessary to be, like Lady John, always ‘ready’.” He adds that she was “delightfully handsome, . . . slim, fair, fine, with charming pale eyes and splendid auburn hair.” He speaks of “her happy nature and her peculiar grace” and is surprised that, when in her company, Ford Obert does not consider himself to be “fortunately occupied.” In his view she is “so gentle and so appealing . . . so charming a person” that attention from her can be nothing but “flattering.” And, in spite of Obert’s warning that her affection “seeks a fresh perch,” he asserts that if she turns her attention to him, “I sha’n’t call for help.” To him she is simply “wonderfully lovely.”
When we next encounter Mrs. Server, in Chapter IV, the narrator is even more effusive in his show of appreciation for her attributes. He reports that “she was pretty enough perhaps for any magic; [she was] the graceful, natural, charming woman.” He makes note of the fact that “she gave me . . . one of her beautiful looks” and that, with “her exquisite face . . . [she was] more than ever a person to have a lover imputed.” He asserts afresh the almost mystical quality of her attractiveness, speaking of “a kind of profane piety [that] had dropped on her . . . almost as on a pilgrim at a shrine.” Additionally, in this same passage, “the positive pitch of delicacy in her beauty” renders her “indescribably touching.” The narrator, at this point somewhat redundantly but therefore tellingly, notes Mrs. Server’s “charming smile” and notes as well that even when she is insistent and in somewhat pained disagreement with others she shows this only “good humoredly.” Moreover, even in the midst of his intrusive and, I would argue, errant interpretation of the painting of the man and the mask, it is his view that the mask is depictive of “a lovely lady” and that the lovely lady “look[s] remarkably like Mrs. Server.” The narrator is even inclined to excuse and find likeable an occasional crudeness or breech of good manners by Mrs. Server, as he indicates when he reports that, while “she was convulsed with laughter” and thereby too loud for a lady, she was so only “in the extravagance always so pretty as to be pardonable.” To the narrator, in sum, May Server, “with her shining, lingering eyes,” “is as charming as a woman can be.”

During a decided lull in his nearly tireless praise of Mrs. Server the narrator makes a single reference to her looks in Chapter V, contending that “she had looked as charming as a pretty woman almost always does in rising eloquent before the apathetic
male”; and following that comment he makes no substantial reference to her beauty again until Chapter VIII. At that point, however, he delivers another flurry of expressions in praise of her attractiveness. To the narrator at this juncture, even her “weakness” is “exquisite” and “beautiful,” even her “silences” are “pretty” as they “pass . . . for pretty speeches”; “she is, in spite of everything, so lovely,” and “her duplicity” itself is even “beautiful.” The narrator observes further “the extraordinary beauty of her eyes,” redundantly refers to her exhibition of “a beautiful delicacy,” notices that she handles an awkwardness in their exchange “as naturally and charmingly as possible,” notes with redundant redundancy “how she remained lovely,” notes “her passion and her beauty,” and finally confesses “doubt if for any other person she had ever been so beautiful as she was for me at these moments.”

At this point, we are almost exactly at the well-placed, 150-page mid-point of what Lyon also identifies as a well constructed, “fearfully symmetrical” novel and, by even the most conservative count, the narrator has testified to his sense of May Server’s beauty or, more broadly and more significantly, her attractiveness at least thirty-one clearly documentable times, thereby testifying as well to the fact that he is interested in her at least in some way and that this interest includes not only a concern with a physical attractiveness that argues her status in his imagination as a sex object but also a concern with her charm in a way that argues an interest more tender and genuine and beyond the crude and merely sexual. It is therefore not irresponsible for May Server or the reader to suspect such an interest or to think that it offers an excellent opportunity for a much desired and even potentially lasting romantic match. Indeed, as Blackall notes, “the
particular ravage that the narrator observes in May Server in the wood... need not be attributed to a disintegrating mind so much as to her confusion at the combination of tenderness and apparent disinterest the narrator manifests toward her, together with her disappointment at not bagging him” and beginning, one might add, with the invitation he extended in the art gallery scene. However, after a single parting reference to her as “the lovely lady” — and even then we cannot be certain that the designation is his rather than that of “the lady on his left” at table whom he has rather crudely asked to ascertain” “who was next Mrs. Server” — all such references of this or any other flattering sort absolutely and tellingly cease. Although it is true that a mere few pages, and moments, ago he had confessed “I doubted if for any other person she had ever been so beautiful as she was for me at these moments,” it is equally true that she is never in the novel as beautiful for him again. It is almost as if, at this critical juncture in the novel, he has had May Server, has had his way with her, has had her, indeed, in his own inimitable way and, having done so, cad and twisted Lancelot that he is, has discarded her.

II

Enter Geoffrey Crayon

and

Emmy Lou Hays

This juncture in the novel is arguably its most critical, for, much as Blackall observes (48), it is the locus of the climax of the novel’s drama, after which all other
action moves downhill and toward final resolution of the conflict which, in this instance, is the narrator’s intrusive inquiry. The scene during which this climax takes place is that of the long anticipated arbor interview between the narrator and the very eligible and apparently lovelorn Mrs. Server. Leading up to this scene, in the preceding chapter, in fact, the narrator, already with Grace and Guy Brissenden in hand as fixed values or givens in his algebraic “A:B::X:Y” equation, receives candid and unsolicited confirmation from the relatively unassailable Guy Brissenden, who is also May’s apparent confidante, that May is exactly as the narrator has interpreted her, that, contrary to the garrulous image that she projects, “she hasn’t any talk, . . . none to speak of,” that “she has no flow of conversation whatever,” that there is a question “of what’s the matter with her,” that her oddness consists at least in part in her appearing to be inordinately happy – “Well, that’s just it!” Guy exclaims when the narrator observes that “I’ve never seen a person more unquenchably radiant” – that, to continue, “she’s tremendously happy” even in the face of “the question . . . of what in the world she has to make her so,” that, in a word and putting it simply, in reality “she isn’t happy” that “she has something to hide,” that “what she tries for is this false appearance of happiness,” and that there is a fear that she may “break down” in her attempt to keep up appearances and that Guy himself fears that he may fail in his confessed efforts to assist her in keeping up such appearances. With this reliable and collaborative assessment in hand the narrator enters the climatic arbor interview with calculated values for A, B, and C in his “A:B::C:” equation, those values being Guy:Grace::May:X, May’s lover being the only undetermined quantity.
The chapter preceding the climatic arbor scene also leaves the narrator with something else of note in hand. During the rather intimate discussion of Mrs. Server that takes place in that chapter, Guy informs the narrator that "she's afraid of you" and that she is alone in the world and unbefriended and then tells him that "I'll make her go for you," all of which signals an attempt on Guy's part to serve as matchmaker between May Server and the narrator. Of particular significance is the typical middle-school ploy that Guy, acting on May's behalf (though not necessarily with her knowledge), uses to test the romantic waters where she and the narrator are concerned. In order to avoid risking the painful embarrassment of rejection and loss of face, especially by someone for whom she cares, the middle-school female interested in a middle-school male enlists a friend to approach the male in question with the pretense that "she thinks you dislike her." Not wanting to be misunderstood, especially if he is interested, and made more confident by this implicit indication that she is interested enough in him to be concerned about the nature and level of his interest in her, the targeted male is prompted not only to discredit any notion of his dislike of the female in question but also to confer with her directly. The female in question thus achieves all three of the results that she desired: (1) avoidance of embarrassment from direct and public rejection, (2) an answer to the question of whether her interest in him is reciprocated, and, if all goes as planned (3) a one-on-one exchange with the male in whom she is interested. Familiar with this middle-school scenario, the reader hears a definite echo when Guy Brissenden tells the narrator not only, again, that "she's rather afraid of you" but also that
"I didn’t mean just now . . . that Mrs. Server has said to me anything against you, or that she fears you because she dislikes you. She only told me she thought you dislike her."

Guy may not intend as much or as crudely as the middle-school “players” intend, but the invitation for the narrator to set the record straight at this point is clear. Moreover, a clarification of the record is what Guy – perhaps along with the reader – thinks he has elicited when the narrator confesses that “I don’t mind admitting that she much interests me.” Guy’s nearly gleeful “There you are, there you are!” in immediate response and his later “I knew you knew it was special! I knew you’ve been thinking of it!,” in fact, strongly suggest that elicitation of such a response was all along his intent. Guy Brissenden’s intent notwithstanding, however, what the narrator should understand is what the targeted middle-school male should understand, and that is that the lady in question is interested in him and cares about what he thinks of her. Additionally, also as with the middle-school scenario, any subsequent meeting between the narrator and May Server, a meeting such as the one that occurs in the arbor scene of the next chapter, should be an occasion for the narrator to set the record straight with May as well. Nothing remains but for May and the narrator to talk of their relationship with each other.

Although lengthy, the passage in which the climatic arbor scene occurs is worth quoting in its entirety:

There was a general shade in all the lower reaches – a

fine clear dusk in garden and grove, a thin suffusion of
twilight out of which the greater things, the high tree-tops and pinnacles, the long crests of motionless wood and chimnied roof, rose into golden air. The last calls of birds sounded extraordinarily loud; they were like the timed, serious splashes, in wide, still water, of divers not expecting to rise again. I scarce know what odd consciousness I had of roaming at close of day in the grounds of some castle of enchantment. I had positively encountered nothing to compare with this since the days of fairy-tales and of the childish imagination of the impossible. Then I used to circle round enchanted castles, for then I moved in a world in which the strange “came true.” It was the coming true that was the proof of the enchantment, which, moreover, was naturally never so great as when such coming was, to such a degree and by the most romantic stroke of all, the fruit of one’s own wizardry. I was positively — so had the wheel revolved — proud of my work. I had thought it all out, and to have thought it was, wonderfully, to have brought it. Yet I recall how I even then knew on the spot that there was something supreme I should have failed to bring unless I had happened suddenly to become aware of the very presence
of the haunting principle, as it were, of my thought. This
was the light in which Mrs. Server, walking alone now,
apparently, in the grey wood and pausing at sight of me,
showed herself in her clear dress at the end of a vista. It
was exactly as if she had been there by the operation of my
intelligence, or even by that – in a still happier way – of my
feeling. My excitement, as I have called it, on seeing her,
was assuredly emotion. Yet what was this feeling, really? –
of which, at the point we had thus reached, I seemed to
myself to have gathered from all things an invitation to
render some account.

Well, I knew within the minute that I was moved by it
as by an extraordinary tenderness; so that this is the name I
must leave it to make the best of. It had already been my
impression that I was sorry for her, but it was marked for
me now that I was sorrier than I had reckoned. All her
story seemed at once to look at me out of the fact of her
present lonely prowl. I met it without demur, only wanting
her to know that if I struck her as waylaying her in the
wood, as waiting for her there at eventide with an idea, I
shouldn’t in the least defend myself from the charge. I can
scarce clearly tell how many fine strange things I thought
of during this brief crisis in her hesitation. I wanted in the
first place to make it end, and while I moved a few steps
toward her I felt almost as noiseless and guarded as if I
were trapping a bird or stalking a fawn. My few steps
brought me to a spot where another perspective crossed our
own, so that they made together a verdurous circle with an
evening sky above and great lengthening, arching recesses
in which the twilight thickened. Oh, it was quite
sufficiently the castle of enchantment, and when I noticed
four old stone seats, massive and mossy and symmetrically
placed, I recognized not only the influence, in my
adventure, of the grand style, but the familiar identity of the
consecrated nook, which was so much of the type of all the
bemused and remembered. We were in a beautiful old
tale, and it wouldn’t be the fault of Newmarch if some other green carrefour, not
far off, didn’t balance with this one and offer the alternative
of niches, in the greenness, occupied by weather-stained
statues on florid pedestals.

Secluded, remote, tree-lined, dimly lit in the twilight, “awesome” by way of the height of
the trees and pinnacles that line it, filled with “the last calls of birds,” quiet and private,
comforting in its nearly wombal location “at the end of a vista,” provocative of
confessedly unidentifiable "emotions," among them "tenderness," this setting, this "niche," this "consecrated nook" with its "arching recesses" that so suggest a cathedral and thus a marriage and sacred vows, this "verdurous circle" is supremely romantic, even magical, like "some castle of enchantment," finding the narrator and Mrs. Server "in a beautiful old picture, . . . a beautiful old tale."

The narrator himself confesses his consciousness that the scene is romantic when he makes reference to "the most romantic stroke of all," the clear implication being that he expects the reader to have understood that all of the other strokes in his linguistic painting of the scene have been romantic as well. However, from the narrator's confessed impressions the reader also notes a decided quirk; he notes that the scene is romantic in two ways, the one, the way in which the narrator sees it, being gothic, the other way, the way in which the reader is more inclined to see it, being, well, colloquial.

Isle comes close to acknowledging this quirk in his notation that the narrator's "painting of reality" is accomplished not only "with strokes of beauty" but also with strokes of "strangeness, enchantment, wizardry" (215). However, Isle also allows for a somewhat ameliorative or simply less pejorative view of the narrator by way of his assertion that "the narrator's intellect and his imagination enable him to escape from this cage of reality into a romantic world which accommodate his pure and elegant theory," later asserting that "the narrator's theory is abstract, pure, and beautiful, as he maintains, but these qualities are a mask for the reality from which it derives [and which], . . . romanticize it, draw from it what beauty he can . . . it [reality] remains squalid" (224-25). Isle's view falls short of discerning in the gothic character of the narrator's view a large part of the
problem with that view and the reason for its failure in the end to apprehend reality correctly. Moreover, the reality to be apprehended is not so much that said reality is squalid or even that this theory is wrong. It is rather, on the contrary, that this theory is essentially right, that reality is certainly not as squalid as is his behavior, and that he is properly the missing component in his own sacred fount formulation. Beginning with Isle’s point of departure and proceeding in what is really a more colloquial manner may, in this rare instance, lead in a more profitable direction. Moreover, squalid though reality in *The Sacred Fount* may be, it is yet no more squalid than are the vulgar citizenry in works by Hawthorne, to whom Isle himself acknowledges James has often been compared (246n13); and the sanction against “The Unpardonable Sin” is essentially the same in each author.

In the general reader’s more colloquial view the scene is perfect for lovemaking, and lovemaking appears at first to be what they are inclined to pursue, so much so that Blackall finds it understandable that May Server misunderstands the narrator’s intent (67). Moving, as he asserts earlier, “in a beautiful old picture, . . . a beautiful old tale,” the narrator sits in patient waiting for May Server, while, in what he interprets as a posture of “surrender,” she, for her part, “had taken care to be unaccompanied.” The narrator speaks of a romantically wordless communication between the two of them, referring to “the meaning of our silence” as if that meaning “seemed to stare straight out” to the two of them and to the reader as well. Their relationship is referred to as “a relation already established” presumably by all of the circling of the subject that has occurred to this point; and reference is made as well to their communicating “more than
we should, either of us, after all, be likely to be able to say.” Proof of their rapport and its magic and romance at least seems to lie in the fact that, upon experiencing it, Mrs. Server relaxes “her lovely grimace,” the cheerful mask that she has worn throughout the day to disguise her real unhappiness from others. And, when in her now more exposed state, “she appeared to wish to produce some explanation of her solitude” – which, one notes, could be construed as unladylike – the narrator further gains her confidence in him by rescuing her with a confession that the “perversity” is his, that “I like a lonely walk . . . at the end of a day full of people,” and by going on to assert their identity as a compatible pair by observing that “this is the very first time, in such a place and at such an hour, that it has ever befallen me to come across a friend so stricken with the same perversity and engaged in the same pursuit. . . . As soon as I saw you there at the end of the alley I said to myself, with quite a little thrill of elation,” he continues, “Ah, then it’s her way too!” I wonder if you’ll let me tell you . . . that I immediately liked you the better for it. It seemed to bring us more together.”

It is upon hearing this last rather suggestive utterance that, by the narrator’s own assessment, Mrs. Server drops her mask and feels herself at ease. As he reports, “It was marked that if I had hitherto seen her ‘all over the place,’ she had yet nowhere seemed to me less so than at this furthermost point.” And this is definitely a furthermost point in the progress of their relationship. It is a point at which May has removed her mask, let down her guard, surrendered and presented herself naked, exposed, and vulnerable to the narrator at the same time that the narrator, in apparent response, has pointedly expressed his interest in and appreciation of her. It is a point as well at which Mrs. Server’s
emotions must apparently be once again "fixed," as they were when Obert painted her and she was implicitly still married with children, all of which leaves the reader at a lost to understand how and why the narrator fails to notice as much. Moreover, to all of this show of interest and consideration from the narrator, Mrs. Server responds, telling him that "I think you are very kind" and thereby reminding the reader of Guy's report to the narrator in the preceding chapter that "nobody that belongs to her" prior to this moment "appears ever to have been particularly nice to her" and that, for the most part, she simply "desires you to be kind." Subsequent to this utterance, Mrs. Server and the narrator go so far as literally to hold hands and eventually to talk explicitly of love. As she sits before him, in his view naked in her exposed identity as the "idiotized" secret source of her lover's rejuvenation but in her view naked only in her self-exposed romantic interest in him, "I finally . . . put out my hand and bore ever so gently on her own [while] her own rested listlessly on the stone of our seat," inviting him to caress it with his own.

During this clearly intimate scene, the narrator recognizes that "it was certainly in quest of a still deeper relief that she had again come forth. [S]he had none the less her obscure vision of a still softer ease." If the object of her having "again come forth" is to complete her investigation of the possibility of a romantic relationship with the narrator, then the "deeper relief" of which she is in quest, the "still softer ease" of which she has an "obscure vision" is to be achieved by way of the fulfilled promise of an actual romantic relationship with the narrator. However, while everything in her view and that of others may point to the consummation of such a relationship, the narrator's firm and even stubborn view is that the person with whom she expects to find this "deeper relief"
and "greater ease" is not himself but Guy Brissenden, and thereby only insofar as she wants Guy not as a lover but as a confidante. Testifying to the difference of her own view, when the narrator reports of Guy that "We strolled a little and talked, but I knew what he really wanted. He wanted to find you. . . . It was visibly with that idea . . . that he left me," Mrs. Server clearly seems genuinely to have "had an uncertainty . . . as to whom I meant" and she eventually "quite repudiates poor Briss" when the narrator finally names him. Then, when the narrator confesses as well that he has based his idea "all the more [on the fact] that he [that is, Guy] didn’t deny it," May, in a show of just how much she is taken aback by such an ill-founded notion, "let [him] take [his] hand from her own" and pointedly and incredulously asks "What made you have such a fancy!"

At this point, Mrs. Server clearly gleanes that, romantic and "in her" though it well may be, the interest of the narrator, her would-be natural lover in any natural pairing of the inmates at Newmarch, is not romantic and "in her" in the way that she would wish. And, lest anyone doubt this assessment, the narrator himself answers May's demand for an explanation by confessing that "what makes him have such a fancy" is

"What makes me ever have any? . . . My extraordinary interest in my fellow-creatures. I have more than most men. I've never really seen anyone with half so much. That breeds observation and observation breeds ideas. . . . It has bred for me the idea that Brissenden's in love with you."
It cannot go without notation that this confession of the "extraordinary" nature of his "interest" – and it is indeed extraordinary – is also a crude boast of his superior capacity for sexually surrogate penetration. His instrument, he claims, is bigger and better than any other of which he is aware. He could not be more vulgar, in the colloquial sense of the word, if he were challenging a fellow male to some adolescent contest involving the lavatory wall. Nor should it pass without notation that, as Isle observes, in this scene "May Server . . . says almost nothing" while "everything is given through the subjective filter of the narrator's speeches and thoughts" in further indication, one should realize, of his narcissism and inadequacy as a man. The narrator speaks of "wonder," but there should be no wonder that, even though May and the narrator begin to speak of love and of "being in love" and of "love by the day" within the next few moments, what is most prominently of note – even Blackall notes the moment as critical (135) – is "the revival of her terrible little fixed smile" and the fact that it "comes back as if with an audible click."
The end of any possible intimacy, any possible consummation of a wholesome romantic and sexual relationship between May and the narrator is here made clear.

Following this jarring end to their intimacy the narrator asserts, "with as little an air as possible of being remedial" but, "air" or no, with the clear and full intent of being so, "I daresay you wonder . . . why, at all, I should have thrust Brisenden in." Except insofar as we, at this point, understand fairly well what he is about, the "wonder" about which he inquires is our wonder as well. Hence, Mrs. Server echoes our sentiments when she cannot avoid replying that "I do so wonder!" and does so "with refined and exaggerated glee." The problem with the narrator's view – and, perhaps, the "wonder" of
it as well— is that it is exactly that, a view, voyeuristic, concerned with viewing and little or nothing else. In what Isle characterizes as his "inability to feel" (232), his emotional impotence in the face of real emotion directed toward real people, his interest in May is in watching her in vampirish relationship with others, not in participating with her in a one-on-one conventionally romantic relationship. His "instrument" in all of this show of impotence, the means by which he "penetrates" the object — or is it the subject? — of his desire as well as the standard by which he measures himself and his attractiveness or desirability as a man, is his intellect. He derives much of the same — or at least similar — pleasure from such intellectual penetration, experiencing the same "absurd excitement" from "plunges of insight" that the reader associates with plunges, well, of another, more earthy type. And, in his "progeny," as it were, "the fruits of [his] own wizardry," specifically his theory in the full development of its symmetry from the single cell that is a bouyant Grace Brissenden to the four-celled organism with a life of its own that it becomes as the Grace/Guy/Gil/May pairing of parasitic pairs, he enjoys not only "the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unnameable" and an "exultation in the beauty of having been right" but also "that joy of determining, almost of creating results." This, for him more than for the most intense, cloistered, and challenged graduate student is what seduction, sex, and parenthood have become.

Moreover, the pleasure that the narrator takes in all of his voyeuristic watching is largely dependent upon May Server's observable distress, her apparent pain. This voyeuristic enjoyment of the pain and vampirism of others is not only clearly sadomasochistic but is also firmly indicative of the perversely gothic character of his
interests. Indeed, Laurence B. Holland acknowledges the possibility of such in his view of Newmarch as a world in which "trivia may burgeon into gothic obsession" (185-86). And, lest one miss the obvious, the whole vampiristic notion of a sacred fount, right or wrong, is gothic. In addition to his voyeurism and his interest in the vampirish, one recalls the language in which he expresses his romantic sense of this entire, pivotal scene. That language is not only the language of the hunter that Lyon calls it (xxiii) or even the comic language of "Fido on the chase" that Blackall sees in it (77), although, not incongruously, there is a measure of such in it. Rather, more significantly, the narrator's language in this instance is decidedly violent, rapacious, sadomasochistic, and, again, in general, gothic. Among indices that arguably number nearly fifty, most prominent are "the high tree-tops and pinacles" and "arching recesses in which the twilight thickened" in this "consecrated nook" with "four old stone seats, massive and mossy and symmetrically placed" that calls to mind a gothic cathedral, the morbid image of "divers not expecting to rise again," his confession of "my private triumph" and his elated sense that May's appearance "was exactly as if she had been there by the operation of my intelligence" as if he were some mad, Hawthornian scientist, his confession that as a child he had with pleasure "circled round enchanted castles... in a world in which the strange 'came true'," his confession of the "odd consciousness [he] had of roaming at close of day in the grounds of some castle of enchantment," which is not only gothic but sadomasochistic in its echo of the gothic imagination of Washington Irving's Geoffrey Crayon and the latter's enjoyment of the frightening, his description of May's walk as a "lonely prawl" and, more importantly, of himself as violently and even rapaciously
“waylaying her in the woods... as if I were trapping a bird or stalking a fawn,” his visualization of Mrs. Server — or, more properly, her mask — as “a bird with a broken wing” and of her as fallen “prey” to the “fixed beak and claws” of a “consuming passion” and “remind[ing him] of a sponge wrung dry and with fine pores agape,” his sense and quiet enjoyment on more than one occasion of her “surrender” and his notation of “the massed wood [sharply juxtaposed] on either side of her” as she proceeds with “her sad, shy advance” toward him, his sense that his ambiguous mention of “him” and Lady John has “kept her for some seconds on the rack” and that when he later suggests that Guy is her partner in doom she stands before him “groping and panting,” and his morbid likening of her anticipated “break down” to “her fall from an unmanageable horse or the crack beneath her of thin ice.” Crowning this list of gothic and sadomasochistic indices — and there are more — is the fact that it is when he sees Mrs. Server in the role of voluntary sacrifice that he feels that he “doubted if for any other person she had ever been so beautiful as she was for [him] at these moments.” In the context of this pregnant catalogue of indices, even his sense that he and May “were in a beautiful old picture, ... in a beautiful old tale” becomes very much more than merely suspect.

No one who has read much of James can fail to recognize the nearly plagiaristic echoes of “The Beast in the Jungle” in the arbor scene just discussed. To wit, one cannot avoid thinking that “the proper form that their [May’s and the narrator’s] relationship should have taken was that of their marrying” or at least establishing a more concrete and conventionally romantic relationship. Much as Blackall aptly asserts, in its barest summary — and such summary is admittedly as much heresy as any paraphrase — the
scene depicts May Server essentially and as unequivocally as the codes of her class allow
tall but offering herself to the narrator, “surrendering” in the narrator’s own terms “her
sorry little musket.” In spite of this prostration before the narrator, in spite of his superior
eligibility as a lover, and in spite of the fact that (as we have seen perhaps more than we
wish or need to see) he finds her intensely and variously attractive in more ways than the
merely physical, she is rejected – nay, not really rejected, for it is not even recognized for
the offer that it is in the terms that it is made.

Au contraire, what May unwittingly offers – rather, what the narrator significantly
takes from her – is intellectual excitement, it being the narrator’s explicit view, which he
later expresses to Ford Obert, that “for real excitement there are no such adventures as
intellectual ones.” May surrenders herself, offers herself to the narrator, and the narrator
takes her. But he takes her, in his own rapacious and sadomasochistic language he
“waylays her in the woods,” he has his way with her in the way that is his way, his way
being the intellectual way. Indeed, he has had his way with May Server and has had her
in this way for the whole of the novel. He, and only he, is “the last man”; he has been
May Server’s “lover”; she has been his sacred fount, the source of his invigoration for the
entire time that we have observed him. But, as Edel would advise, the narrator’s theory
is such – and in the world of Newmarch his theory has its merits – that “physical relations
with women can be perilous to men; but the Platonic relationship of the mind” that the
narrator enjoys with May Server “can be a life-giving force to men, and depleting to
women” (xi). As the narrator observes, May Server ends the arbor scene chapter in just
such a depleted state. Not only is it that “she had really burnt down” and effected “the
revival of her terrible little fixed smile” but she has also become, fairly early in the
chapter, a “wasted and dishonoured symbol” and is soon, in the next chapter, observed in
“her lonely fight with disintegration [as it goes] on without the betrayal of a gasp or a
shiek.”

In an essay entitled “The Ambiguity of Henry James,” Edmund Wilson refers to
the narrator as “a week-end guest who seems not to exist in any other capacity whatever
except that of week-end guest and who lives vicariously through his fellow guests,” while
in his introduction to The Sacred Fount, cited elsewhere in this treatment, Lyon correctly
observes that “the narrator is a man of whom we know nothing other than whatever we
can glean from his involvement in, and telling of, this particular story: his own affairs, he
assures us in chapter 6, are ‘pretty well used to [his] neglect’” (xxii). Blackall, through
whom the note from Wilson is re-presented (1), later seconds Wilson with her assertion
of “the narrator’s self-appointed role as an observer and interpreter of the action rather
than a participant in it” (75). No one can doubt that the narrator has been dependent on
the action of others in the novel for the duration of the novel. No one can doubt that the
narrator has been invigorated for the whole of the novel by his investigation, his
intellectual penetration of May Server, his perusal, as it were, of May Server as text.
May Server, MS, is, again, the MS, the entire manuscript, without the perusal of which
the novel ceases to exist. Indeed, as the narrator himself later asserts, albeit without the
consciousness that would make him see his error, “the so salient figure of Mrs. Server . . .
[is] the controlling image for me, the real principle of composition. My whole
superstructure . . . reared itself on my view of Mrs. Server.” But, as noted earlier,
subsequent to this chapter, no longer is May Server beautiful in the narrator’s view. Except for a single remaining reference, and it is uncertain whether that one reference is authored by the narrator or by the woman next to him at table whom he has rather rudely asked to check on Mrs. Server, there is after this chapter absolutely no further reference to Mrs. Server’s beauty. Much as Maria Gostrey of The Ambassadors has served her purpose and is discarded at novel’s end by Lambert Strether, who confesses that he, too, has “had his woman” and has done so in his own, albeit far less pejorative, intellectual rather than corporeal way, May Server at this point has served her purpose and been discarded.

III

E:me²::Use:Loss

Especially given that there is a concern as to where James’ sympathy lies in this novel, the question at this point is of what might be an appropriate punishment for such an ungentlemanly perverse and brutal act as that committed by the narrator toward Mrs. Server. Hawthorne’s response to such a question is to emasculate the offending male. James’ answer, essentially the same, is that the offending male, having failed to act as a male of his class should, should be in some way stripped of his manhood or unmanned, and this is very arguably the fate that befalls the narrator in the downhill action of the novel’s second half. Moreover, this “emasculating,” such as it is, is accompanied by the slow unraveling of the more favored elements of the narrator’s thesis, a thesis developed
by the operation of that intellect and that power of penetration by which he measures himself as a man, at the end of which, as Blackall notes, Grace Brissenden "emerges as the person the narrator had believed himself to be" (57), proving herself to be "the better man" with "the bigger instrument" as he defines manhood and the definitive instrument thereof, and proving to be the better at wielding said instrument.

This critical downhill phase, with its coincident process of unraveling and emasculation, begins with the narrator's confession that he "remembered feeling seriously warned and like the uninvited reporter" — which, incidentally, has additional implications for James' attitude toward his narrator. He feels confirmed by Lady John's notation of May Server's marked attention to Guy Brissenden but is checked by her assertion that "it's none of my business" — by which assertion he understands that "it's also none of mine" — as well as by the mere fact that he has evidently been reduced to depending upon the lesser minds of others to legitimize his thesis. Indeed, his self-confessed purpose in conferring with Lady John is to test his thesis by what might be called the communal imperative, to test, that is, as Isle also notes (217), whether others have noticed what he thinks he has noticed, the idea being that the reality of the ghost is confirmed only if others see it as well. Yet, again, while confirming his view, Lady John's "brush of awareness" also unsettles him in that it tarnishes his presumed achievement and identifies it as being far less unique than a man of his superior intellect deserves. Indeed, perhaps even more of a check on his confidence and thus on his sense of manhood and superiority is the fact that Lady John makes and demonstrates that she is capable of making this same observation when she advises him to "give up . . . the
attempt to be a providence. You can’t be a providence and not be a bore. A real providence **knows**; whereas you . . . have to find out — and to find out even by asking "the likes of" **me.**” In this, Lady John’s display of insight, the narrator begins to recognize the death of his “personal privilege” and that the personal or exclusive nature of this privilege is rapidly becoming “questionable.” In his ego, of course, the narrator still regards Lady John as too stupid and vain — in fact, “necessarily stupid **because** . . . extravagantly vain” — to realize the full impact of the concrete evidence that she has in her possession, too dense to recognize the existence of anything more than an ordinary relationship as opposed to the sacred fount relationship that he posits. But, he also finds himself realizing that he too has been stupid and vain regarding his love for his thesis. Moreover, as we examine the evidence in retrospect, we note the narrator’s notation that Lady John is astute enough to have been arrested by the image of Grace Brissenden and Gilbert Long in necessarily intimate colloquy on a small sofa or love seat within eyesight of the two of them (that is, Lady John and the narrator). Although we later learn — from the narrator, of course — that this is a most revealing scene, he of the presumably superior intellect notices at the time “nothing in this that should have made my interlocutress stare.” Hence, in this instance, the narrator reveals that he has shown **less** acuity than even the presumably stupid” Lady John.

Of course, what we later learn is not that Lady John has any insight regarding this colloquy that is relevant to the narrator’s thesis but that Lady John is arrested by the sight of the intimate colloquy because she and Gilbert Long are lovers, have been since before day one, and are “in” so deeply that Guy Brissenden would never have facilitated their
relationship had he known "where they are." Contrary to Blackall's assertion, there is really no need to doubt the reliability of this assessment, which the narrator gets from Grace Brissenden, although, as Blackall also asserts, there is reason to doubt Grace's motive (53). What we also learn is that Grace Brissenden discovers unmistakably from this colloquy that, contrary to a key assertion in the narrator's thesis, Gil Long is as stupid as ever he was, which is implicit in the fact that, after all, he and Lady John are lovers. And there is no reason to doubt this assessment as well.

Nevertheless, there is yet a second check that the narrator receives from the image of Grace and Gil in intimate colloquy in that such intimacy bespeaks a mutual awareness of their roles as beneficiaries of their respective depleted sacred founts. The narrator has elsewhere argued, however, that such awareness is anathema to the effective function of the sacred fount; beneficiaries of the sacred fount are by definition unaware of their identities as beneficiaries and consciousness of having been a beneficiary results in cessation of the benefit . . . all of which is a large part of the proof of the argument herein that the narrator is necessarily unaware of his own status as beneficiary.

To continue, although the retrospective reader recognizes that these checks to the narrator's thesis are substantial, it is yet fairly easy for the narrator himself to rationalize— and he does—that he and Lady John think on a different plane and that she sees little beyond the in the facts that she has before her. Far more difficult to reason away would be a challenge from someone like Ford Orbert who, as an artist, is, again, the narrator's essential twin. Naomi Lebowitz argues, with considerable insight and merit, that Obert's view as a portrait artist is flawed by virtue of its tendency to fix people and things in
time, as in a still life or portrait or photograph (128). However, the opportunity to study “before and after” views in this instance is a benefit to insight rather than a hindrance, and, despite his reputation as a womanizer (which makes him, as a bachelor, no worse than the innocent, normal, and healthily natural “spruce young bachelors who cast sidelong glances at the pretty young maidens” at the opening of Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil”), Obert is more the normative figure that both Blackall (116) and Isle (222) see in him, one who is at least capable of seeing that “something’s the matter with” May Server really because he has the “fixed spot in time” advantage of the painter and is also capable of admitting when he does not understand even when the narrator can do neither (Blackall 135).

In any case, following his half-chapter exchange with Lady John and preceded by a brief meeting with Grace Brissenden wherein she makes an appointment to meet with him later in the already late evening, the narrator does meet with Ford Obert in a chapter-length exchange that causes further structural damage to his delicate “house of cards.” Prior to this meeting, he feels himself free and regards himself as having returned to his own prior state. However, he does not see this return on his own part as a sign of reciprocation in his own relationship with May, who, at this point, has regained her own former peace and state of mind, the idea of simultaneous returns to former states being a sign of reciprocating relationship between the two returnees. His failure to see is important, as important as Oedipus’, for what we want, what justice and equity demand, here, in the name of punishment, is not unconscious error but conscious error, especially given that, as Poe’s Montressor would assert in “The Cask of Amontillado,” revenge is
not successful when it has not been consciously felt by its victim; "a wrong is . . .
unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the
wrong." Nor is James' revenge upon his narrator "felt" when the latter sees and admits
that he sees Grace Brissenden's "fine retreating person" as an indication that she has not
begun to return to her former self and that the consciousness that he presumes she
possesses has certainly not destroyed the action of her sacred fount. That is, if she were
conscious then she should be changed back, since one cannot be both conscious and
blooming at the same time. Leaving -- or being left by -- Grace Brissenden, he passes by
May Server in seated conversation with his friend Ford Obert and notices that May's
"fixed smile" "has never been more fixed and unquenchable than now." Of course, still
undeterred in his thinking, what he infers is that this smile is the mark of May's
completed depletion; and, apparently feeling guilty about having stalked her so
unrelentlessly, his impulse is to flight, literally to get out of town as soon as possible.
What he soon learns from Ford Obert, however, is that May at this point has completely
recovered her faculties and is now very much "all there." Obert delivers him still another
check, telling him that "I can't take any more" in a way that constitutes abandonment
even by his intellectual twin, even by one of the more normative voices in the novel.
Obert goes so far as to exhibit real impatience or pique with the narrator when the latter
suggests that they "count the ladies" to determine whether they have all retired for the
evening. "Count them yourself!" Obert impatiently sneers. For his own part, the
narrator, showing himself even more so to be the fool that we already take him to be,
ridiculously and actually strolls through each of the rooms until he "again felt that I must
give up." We see from this ridiculous behavior that Grace has him, her own possible unreliability as a witness notwithstanding and even being fitting. He is out of control, compulsive.

Even so, these are not punishments that the narrator feels. Upon returning to Obert after wandering about the premises in his ridiculous and vulgar attempt to count heads, he again seeks validation of his inquiry if not also his findings by asking, essentially, if Obert has seen something also. "Then you could tell me what I was talking about," he argues to Obert. And, he has a point in that only if there was something substantial in the first place could Obert have been able to guess what he was talking about and to assert as he did that now "she's all there." It is at this juncture that he begins to suffer checks to his hypothesis that have force sufficient literally to "make him stare." Accusing Obert of having been "originally so suggestive . . . from the moment we met here yesterday -- the moment of my first seeing you with Mrs. Server" and of having portentously and conspicuously avoided his glance when he, Obert, was in conference with her "a moment ago," and pointedly referring to Obert's having been "the first to bring it out that she has changed," he receives a severe check when Obert very sincerely reports that "Well, she isn't changed" and then, as he admittedly is groping for just the right phrasing, "Or rather, . . . she is. She's changed back." The conversation, which is critical, continues thusly:

"If her change is to something else, I suppose then a change back is not quite the exact name for it."
"Perhaps not. . . . She isn’t at any rate what I though her yesterday."

"I remember what you said of her yesterday."

"She was so beastly unhappy."

"And do you mean that that’s gone? . . . If she isn’t now beastly unhappy — "

"She’s beastly happy?"

. . . .

"Was what you most saw while you were there with her — was this that her misery, the misery you first phrased to me, has dropped?"

"Dropped, yes.” He was [now] clear about it. “I called her beastly unhappy to you though I even then knew that beastly unhappiness wasn’t quite all of it. It was part of it, it was enough of it. . . . Just now, at all events . . . just now she’s all right.”

"All right?"

"All right."

I wondered, in spite of the comfort I took, as I had more than once in life had occasion to take it before, at the sight of the painter’s sense deeply applied. My wonder came from the fact that Lady John had also found Mrs. Server all
right, and Lady John had a vision as closed as Obert's was open. It didn't suit my book for both these observers to have been affected in the same way. . . . For Obert to have found her all there an hour or two after I had found her all absent [that is, in the arbor scene], made me again, in my nervousness, feel even now a trifle menaced. Things had, from step to step, to hang together, and just now they seemed — with all allowances — to hang a little apart. My whole superstructure, I could only remember, reared itself on my view of Mrs. Server's condition. . . . The question of her happiness was essentially subordinate; what I stood or fell by was that of her faculty. . . . Almost everything was wrong for her being all right except the one fact of my recent view, from the window, of the man unnamed [meaning Gilbert Long].

Desperate to salvage the proof of his thesis, the narrator then reinterprets Long's solitary stroll as not an indication of his intellectual excitation and newly acquired inclination to the pensive but as an attempt on his part ot "keep clear of our company" in the interest of satisfying "a wish to hide" his now being "all wrong" in contrast to and as a reciprocal consequence of Mrs. Server's now being "all right." This reinterpretation, again, is an act of desperation on the narrator's part, in that only if Long has reverted to his former state
of ignorance while May has returned to her original state of being "all there" can he, the narrator, claim validity for his thesis.

Gilbert Long's change, noted and alleged by the narrator at the novel's beginning, from a clumsy Adonis to a veritable demon of a critic, a man of some considerable intellectual substance, is the lynchpin of the narrator's entire thesis. It is Long's newly acquired intellect that demands an explanation and that prompts the narrator to the thesis of the sacred fount, the thesis, in Long's instance, that his acquisition of substantial intellect presumes the existence of a lover as his benefactress. Although the narrator speaks of "the so salient little figure of Mrs. Server" as being "still the controlling image for me, the real principle of composition," and although he also confesses that "My whole superstructure . . . reared itself on my view of Mrs. Server's condition," everything as he has to this point in the novel seen it rises or falls on the condition of Gilbert Long.

Hence, the most devastating check to the narrator's thesis is dealt by Grace Brissenden when, at the novel's end, she reveals to the narrator, on good authority but with persistent reluctance, that she, upon speaking directly with Long, "was nowhere," that Long, she has discovered, "is a prize fool." "He was," the narrator offers, hoping to maintain his position that Long's state of intellect has changed. But Grace corrects his error in tense, emphatically asserting instead that "he is," that she "tried him on purpose, while I thought of you. But he's perfectly stupid," and that, in a word, "there's really nothing in him at all!" Grace is even "not sure -- he's too modest to misrepresent," to misrepresent or to feign non-involvement with" Mrs. Server, even, Grace adds, "if he had the intelligence to play a part." Indeed, if the narrator would but note that, as Blackall has observed (50),
his only reason for thinking that Long is more intelligent is that the latter spoke to him on
the train, he would realize that he has no sound basis on which to presume Long's
improvement in the first place and that Long's alleged stupidity is not only plausible but
probable. In any case, the extent to which the narrator is adversely affected by this
observation on Grace's part is clearly indicated by his confession that "I weighed it
[Grace's assertion] with a grimace that, I feared, had become almost as fixed as Mrs.
Server's."

The narrator realizes that, "If Long is just what he always was it settles the matter.
... Then I utterly go to pieces"; and he says as much. Indeed, as his theory goes, so goes
he. However, he does not quite at this point "utterly go to pieces." On the contrary,
detecting what he thinks is a flaw in the logic of Grace's assertion, he challenges her to
provide him with further explanation, challenges her to make him see what she sees.
Here we see the wisdom of the saying that one should be careful of that for which one
asks, lest it be given. "It was exactly something strong I wanted of you!," the narrator
asserts, and something strong, overwhelmingly and devastatingly strong, is exactly what
she gives to him:

"You've worried me for my motive and harassed me for
my 'moment,' and I've had to protect others and, at a cost
of decent appearance, to pretend to be myself half an idiot.

I've had even, for the same purpose - if you must have
it - to depart from the truth; to give you, that is, a false
account of the manner of my escape from your tangle. But
now the truth shall be told, and others can take care of
themselves!"

And the truth to be told is Gilbert Long’s stupidity as explained by the fact that “Lady
John is the woman” and that she “is now up to the purpose . . . more than she was”
because

“now that we see him [Long] as he is . . . we can only see
her also as she is. . . . She’s good enough for a fool; and so
. . . is he! If he is the same ass – and he is . . . the same ass!
– he would have no need then of her having transformed
and inspired him. Or of her having deformed and idiotized
herself. . . . No, no – she wouldn’t need that. . . . The great
point is that he wouldn’t! . . . She would do perfectly. . . .

Almost anyone would do.”

Indeed, if Long is as stupid as ever he was, then it is not only that “anyone would do” but
also that even no one would do just as well.

Almost all that remains of the narrator’s beloved thesis and thus his love of
himself – and it is a big “all” – is his idea about the phenomenon of May Server,
particularly “the extravagance of Mrs. Server’s conduct,” which, in spite of Grace’s
recommendation that they “leave it alone,” the narrator insists on explaining. Asking her
to complete the literal dismantling of his house of cards, he asserts that “there was
nothing, you know, that I had so fitted as your account of Mrs. Server, when, on our
seeing them, from the terrace, together below, you struck off your explanation that old
Briss was her screen for Long.” And Grace obliges his request, asserting that Mrs. Server “isn’t all gone,” doing so “with decision,” and going on to report that the proof of her not being “all gone” is the fact that

“there was enough of her left to make up to poor Briss. . . . Extravagant? . . . I tell you she isn’t that! . . . She’s horrid!

. . . Horrid. It [meaning her approach of Briss] wasn’t . . . a
dash. . . . It wasn’t, to be plain, a ‘dash’ at all. . . . She
settled. She stuck. . . . She made love to him. . . . I knew
she couldn’t be gone.”

In fact, on the contrary, what she learns from her husband is that “she’s awfully sharp.” The assertion, which really but seconds Ford Obert’s earlier finding that “she’s all there,” is crushing to the narrator, for, based as it is on Guy Brissenden’s novel-length observations, it argues that May never has been the depleted source of male rejuvenation that the narrator fondly perceived her to be.

However, although appropriate in its general effect of unmanning the narrator, there is much that is missing in Grace’s pronouncement. Blackall warns quite firmly that, at the novel’s end, “Grace’s motives may be suspect” (53) on the grounds that she is anxious about having lost control in her relationship with her husband. Although Blackall also observes, rightly, that “it is Grace’s argument, and not the narrator’s, which is most to be trusted at the end” (86), she also asserts the importance of noting “Mrs. Brissenden’s personal stake in the last interview and the length to which she will go to defend herself” (122). Echoing at least a significant part of this position, Manfred
MacKenzie asserts that "Grace Brissenden's account . . . appears to be too defensive or even reactive, too much a matter of her 'tone,' to be the real thing that will unequivocally give [the narrator's] pretensions the lie" (125). Finally, John Lyon acknowledges that "dismissed as crazy, the narrator makes preparations to leave Newmarch," but nevertheless asks

But can we [emphasis mine] dismiss the narrator in this way? Why should we believe Grace Brissenden? . . . Does she have something to hide? Is she attempting to dissuade the narrator not because he is wrong, but because he is right? Is she, Grace Brissenden, Gilbert Long's lover? Or, . . . are Grace and Long protecting each other . . . as joint beneficiaries? . . . [D]o they fear that the narrator's discovery threatens to expose and deprive them? The close of the novel leaves the plot more entangled than ever. (xiii)

Given all of these expressed reservations about Grace's reliability as a witness in the closing moments of the novel, the clear indication is that J. A. Ward's report in The Search for Form should be read more as a suggestion than as a statement of fact and that more attention should be directed toward "the prima facie subject of the sacred fount of personality" as well as to the personality of the narrator who authors the thesis thereof (56). Following that suggestion, the reader should make several salient observations of his own. First, although her accusation that May Server has attempted to make love to her husband is seriously in error, it is quite understandable that she should be fearful and
even suspicious of May since the latter has been spending an inordinate amount of time
with Guy as a consequence of Grace's neglect of her personal affairs. Second, largely
because of her fear of the possibility that her neglect of Briss has left the door open for
May or someone else, anyone else, to approach him — largely, that is, because her fear of
failure causes failure — Grace, in spite of her earlier observation that the narrator is "in
love with [May]," is unable at this juncture to see the narrator as May Server's proper
lover. Hence, Gilbert Long, by way of his confirmed stupidity, and the narrator, by way
of his equally confirmed intellect and apparent disinterest, having both recused
themselves, Grace can imagine only the neglected Guy as May Server's possible lover.

Additionally, the evidence available to the reader but not to Grace is that Guy has
already, specifically in the chapter before the pivotal mid-novel arbor scene, indicated an
inclination to cultivate an interest between May and the narrator, the coldly analytical
narrator who derives his invigoration from the liveliness of May Server, the Frederick
Winterbourne, as it were, to the Daisy Miller of the tale. What we know that Grace does
not is also that the narrator, in the above-referenced arbor scene, has been so obtusely
bent on analysis as to have failed to recognize the offer that May has extended. And, of
course, that such an offer was most pronouncedly made during the arbor scene tete-a-tete,
as well as that such an intimate tete-a-tete even occurred, is also something that the reader
knows and Grace Brissenden, even from her husband, cannot. Finally, contrary to what
Blackall posits, James does not need "the idea of a Gil/Grace affair to take the first
equation out of the fantastical," as it is her claim that he needs to do (157). Indeed, such
an affair would not have such an effect for it would provide for no depletion, Grace
clearly being in full bloom throughout the novel, Gilbert Long at best being much improved by his supposed relationship with a woman, and the same Gilbert Long being at worst but also most probably as stupid as ever he was. Nor can Grace’s motive be that she and Gil Long are endeavoring to protect their gains from their respective sacred fount relationships or even that she, with full consciousness, seeks to do the same for herself alone since, in either case, such consciousness would, again, deny the benefit of sacred fount action. Moreover, such comfortable consciousness is inconsistent with Grace’s show of anxiety. Grace, in short, simply though understandably errs in her accusation against May Server and neither errs nor prevaricates in her assessment of Gilbert Long. But alas, as far as erring by way of a failure and inability to see the truth about May Server is concerned, so does the narrator. And, so, Grace’s failure yet leaves her with residual success enough convincingly to declare herself the winner. Her victory is a mere ghost, an apparition; but the narrator believes in it and so neither he nor she needs a real one.

This last brings us to the question of the narrator in the closing moments of the novel, his much-maligned thesis, and the need for readers to attend more seriously and confidently to the textual evidence in support of that thesis than has generally been the case. After all, if the narrator is truly “all wrong” then he has also almost necessarily been stupid, too stupid, in fact, to have justified our or James’ interest in him. And one cannot expect the man whom T. S. Eliot identified as “the most intelligent man of his time” to have made that great an error, even at his worst. Grace may win, may convincingly declare victory, in the end, but she wins or claims victory by virtue of her
mere "tone" and not her "substance." Noting this, the reader should attend to Lebowitz's assertion that "it is a mistake to agree with Mrs. Briss that the narrator is crazy, or with Ford Obert that he is a busy body. . . . The narrator is never seriously defeated" (121-22). Except in her observation about the position of Ford Obert — for the narrator is a busy body and it is his being so that contributes mightily to his demise — Lebowitz is correct. Were he not such a busy body and a man so enamored of his own thesis, he would realize what neither he nor Grace Brissenden can see (but that, significantly, Ford Obert can).

He would realize that what would save him, even at the stroke of midnight, from apparent yet fully humiliating and apparently lifelong defeat at the hands of Grace Brissenden and save as well his thesis from shattering, is the recognition of himself as necessarily "the last man," the man who, especially given Long's now being out of the picture, almost necessarily is the beneficiary of the gush of May Server's sacred fount, the man who, by his own confession, is now feeling depleted as May Server recovers her "faculty" and had been feeling as invigorated as May Server had clearly appeared drained. In a word, in the end, contrary to Grace Brissenden's pronouncement, the narrator is not "crazy" at all, at least not for his belief in his thesis. Rather, his thesis is quite valid; it is simply that instead of Grace:Guy::Gilbert Long:May Server, the truth is that Grace:Guy::he:May Server, far more appropriately, in fact, because he is the coldly analytical arid soul in need of the gush of May Server's "spring." Herein lies "the thematic connection between the obsessed narrator and 'the sacred fount' theme" that Ward claims "Blackall . . . almost succeeds in finding" (Search for Form 56n; emphasis mine).
Perhaps the best choice as a final question to be addressed in this treatment is the question of James' more general attitude toward sex, particularly as that attitude is revealed in this novel. Ward, in *The Imagination of Disaster*, asserts of *The Sacred Fount* that, "in this fantasy, James objectifies his notion of the depleting power of sex" (73). However, in his assertion as well that "*The Sacred Fount, What Maisie Knew,* and 'The Turn of the Screw' [all] treat varying *perversions* of love" (emphasis mine) and that James regards "adultery and divorce [as] both equally grave violations of the marriage vow" (79), Ward also prompts the alert reader to posit at least the possible qualification that the sex in question is, well, "bad" sex and that, conversely, "good" sex (read good love, good marriage, a good male-female relationship) is anything but depleting and that it is a mistake to assert, as Ward does, "James's habit of identifying sex per se with the ugly and the unnatural" (79). Auchincloss, who, again, is especially relevant because of the popular intent of his text, asserts that

Up to the 1890s [James] had treated fornication as other contemporary writers had. He disapproved of it -- decidedly -- but he used it as a necessary incident in his plotting. . . . But starting with "A London Life" in 1889 a distinct note of horror at fornication enters his fiction. . . . And the reader's sympathy is again enlisted on the side of virtue in "The Turn of the Screw." . . . He had to push his revulsion further. Sex in his fiction now becomes an evil which affects even those who only talk about it. *The*
Awkward Age is the neurotic credo of this disturbed period in his life. . . . The most dramatic example of this period of James's antipathy to sex is The Sacred Fount. (108-14)

Auchincloss' assertion about James' attitude toward fornication, with all of its negative connotations, may well pass without objection; but his view that "sex in [James'] fiction," as sex can be distinguished from fornication, "now becomes an evil" and that The Sacred Fount further reveals James' "antipathy to sex" is very much subject to debate if not rejection. Implicitly espousing a view opposite to Auchincloss; again, particularly regarding this novel, Blackall wisely proffers that "a . . . miracle might occur for May Server . . . if the narrator would admit his love for her. . . . His love for May Server is the agent through which she might be transformed" (136). Blackall's error in suggesting the consciousness of the narrator once again notwithstanding, such an observation clearly implies a view that James regards sex, love, and marriage, all manifestations of the male-female relationship that is fundamental to any but a test-tube society, as redemptive in its effects and positive in its value. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly as far as the ultimate focus of the story is concerned (that focus being on the narrator), not only is it true that the narrator's love, if recognized and confessed, has the power to redeem and transform May Server, but it is also true that, again, the narrator is the novel's Winterbourne in need of May Server's spring, that, as such, the narrator's love and opportunity, if recognized and confessed, have the power to redeem and transform him as well.
Nor is this the whole of the novel's implied statement as far as James' attitude toward sex is concerned. In addition to the fact, which this treatment has endeavored to establish, that the narrator's surrogated sexuality is condemned and appropriately punished, there is also the fact that, as "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," the condemnation and creative punishment of the narrator strongly suggests that James is far more approving of the behaviors of the other characters, whose alleged fomitations are literal, than he is of the narrator's more surrogated sexual behavior. Hawthorne himself is no clearer in "Ethan Brand" about his greater contempt for the man who would use a woman for "scientific" purposes as if she were a rat in a maze rather than to engage with her in literally sexual behavior. Moreover, it is true as well that, contrary to Blackall's somewhat curious characterization of Guy Brissenden as a bore whose boorishness tends to rob him of any sympathy that the reader might give him (167) and to Isle's similar assessment that "Guy has all the helplessness of that type [that both Owen Gereth of The Spoils of Poynton and Gil Long are] with none of his strengths" (208), James intends for the reader, first, to recognize Grace's behavior toward Guy and Blackall herself does, as neglectful and even punished by the inordinate amount of time that Guy consequently spends, is able to spend, and is pushed to spend with May; second, to recognize Guy as a wise, patient, unimposing, and considerate anticipation of The Golden Bowl's more aggressively passive and deviously innocent Adam Verver who knows, among other things, enough to disguise his knowledge, to feign ignorance, and even to cultivate Adamic innocence in the interest of avoiding obligation (which might even lead to speculation that Guy has wisdom and consciousness enough to prevaricate to his wife to
the end of getting her back in check; after all, he has already been credited with having
done something similar, in the prelude to the arbor scene); and, third, to recognize
Grace’s indiscreet and desperate midnight colloquy with the narrator, the anxiety that she
exhibits during it, and the attempt that she thereupon makes to put her relationship with
her husband back in order, to “renail the coffin,” as it were, as something of a confession
that she has been blameably neglectful of her own “personal affairs,” the personal affairs
of her marriage. Especially with this last, along with the first instance of the neglected
recommendation for May and the narrator, James thus implicitly recommends the proper
course of action in love, sex, and marriage – recommends as well that a proper course is
easily possible – and also implies that his choice has simply been the choice for most
writers of significant literature – and that is to depict the conflicted as a means of
illustrating the kosher, the conflicted always being, after all, the thing of which news and
the “novel” are made, the kosher, the “edenic,” after all, almost never being accorded
such status. The conflicted, in this instance, is primarily the behavior, the sexual
behavior, of the narrator; and as much as the narrator’s sexual behavior is unwholesome,
perverse, condemnable, and condemned, James’ attitude toward sex in this novel is
wholesome and positive. What have we come to, indeed, if we either do not or cannot
recognize as much?
VII
The Circle
within which
They Might Happily Appear to Do So

The foregoing chapters – on the cultural imperative in The American, the impulse to democracy in The Bostonians, the dictatorial role of the social institution of manners in “The Beast in the Jungle,” the personality-based compulsion to surrogate penetration in The Sacred Fount, and even the historical, social, and psychological forces at work in “The Real Thing” and Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” – have been intended to cover the long, the short, the early, the late and the in-between in James as the addressed issues are concerned. However, it does not profit much to summarize or reiterate the findings or assertions of this already lengthy text, and, especially given the nature of the beast, summary of such a text in particular is quite possibly far greater heresy than ever paraphrase could be. Given as well the purpose of this text, which is to serve as the basis for a course-length introduction of James to educated readers who would otherwise be disinclined to read him and which lies less in exhausting interpretive possibilities than in suggesting avenues for further study, far more profit would derive from an identification of such avenues of further consideration.

For example, clearly running as a constant throughout this study is a concern with determinism or naturalism, and just as clearly an entire additional chapter could have been written about that issue as it manifests itself in these same and/or others of James’
works, even as the terms “naturalism” and “determinism” might be differently interpreted and applied in this text. Other chapters could also have been written within the scope of this treatment’s thesis. A chapter on “The Problem of the Self in The Portrait of a Lady” would have made a valuable contribution one’s concept of the self, whether collectivist, traditionalist, and extended or individualist, “modest,” and nuclear, or something in-between or differently combined or configured being a fundamental concept in one’s cultural identity, world view, and behavioral philosophy. A chapter on “The Apotheosis of Adam” as that can be observed in The Golden Bowl would also have contributed greatly, the apotheosis of Adam or the adamic at its best and most effective being observable in a depiction of deliberately cultivated ignorance or innocence as an ironic means of aggressively neutralizing and combating evil. Chapter-length consideration could also profitably be given to the democratic implications of “The Impotence of Knowledge, the Universality of Mistake, and the Inefficacy of Deliberate Human Action”; in the end, that is, as illustrated in such a minor work as Confidence, which James identified as a mere “potboiler,” and The Sense of the Past, unfinished at James’ death and published posthumously, all men are reduced to equals by the dictates of these laws. And, serious consideration was also given to developing a much longer chapter on manners and polite society as the beast and the jungle in James’ canon, specifically as this notion is implicit in “Daisy Miller” and Watch and Ward.

Even with such an expanded treatment in mind, seminal works such as The Ambassadors and The Wings of the Dove would have been excluded, the latter fitting best in the chapter on the brutality of manners and the former actually contributing
greatly and amusingly to the already lengthy chapter on sex in James, due, interestingly, to the suggestive "shape" of that novel. Needless to say, however, when over two-hundred pages have already been devoted to consideration of an issue, the space and time limitations of the average dissertation – about one-hundred pages – or even of the average successful academic text – about two-hundred pages – do not reasonably allow for such additional treatment. Such treatment belongs, rather, in the actual course in James, or simply in reading James for intellectual exercise and the pleasure of the text. And, even then, as James himself has said, "relations," here as in James’ work, "end nowhere, and we can only," as we do here and now, "draw the circle within which they might happily appear to do so."
Works Cited


Auchincloss, Louis. *Reading Henry James*. Minneapolis, Minnesota.: U of Minnesota P,
1975.


Blackall, Jean Frantz. *Jamebian Ambiguity and The Sacred Fount*. New York: Cornell


