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HENRY JAMES'S MAJOR NOVELS: A STUDY

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Henry James's most famous biographer Leon Edel observes,

To read the essays and reviews as well as the books, devoted to James since the beginning of this century, in the attempt to discover the contemporary view of the man and his work is to encounter some large and crudely built sphinx, over whom has been flung a prodigious coat of motley. James has been likened to Goethe, to Shakespeare and Racine and to Marivaux (Edel 1).

Henry James is a famous American novelist, critic and thinker. The brother of William James, the famous American psychologist and philosopher, Henry James was born in New York in 1843. He was educated by tutors until the age of 12 and then at schools in Boulogne, Paris, Geneva, Bonn and - when the family returned to America - at Newport, Rhode Island. He entered Harvard Law School in 1862 for a brief spell and, with the encouragement of Charles Eliot Norton and William Dean Howells, both friends later, he began to concentrate on writing.

James published many journalistic and travel sketches. After spending 1875 in Paris he settled in England in 1876, making London his base for over 20 years. He became a British citizen in 1916, before a year he died. James's remarkably wide range of acquaintance in the literary world include Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, H. G. Wells, George Gissing and Edith Wharton, a particularly close friend during the last years of his life. Deeply influenced by Continental literature of the Russian Turgenev, the French Daudet, Flaubert, the Goncourts and Zola in Paris, the Polish Conrad, the Swedish Swedenborg, James took the American experience of Europe as the theme of his first important works: *Roderick Hudson* (1876), *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *Daisy Miller* (1879), and, his masterpiece of this period, *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881). *Washington Square* (1880) and *The Bostonians* (1886) use an American setting and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) studies the political underworld of London, and *The Aspern Papers* (1888) returns to his 'international theme'. In addition to short stories that include *The Madonna of the Future and Other Tales* (1879) and *The Siege of London* (1883), he has published essays *Partial Portraits* (1888) and travel writings *Portraits of Places* (1883), *A Little Tour in France* (1884), and the three significant critical studies: *Of French Poets and Novelists* (1878), *Hawthorne* (1879) and *The Art of Novel* (1884). But James's plays were not a success. His later novels include *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Awkward Age* (1899) and *The Sacred Fount* (1901) - abandon his 'international theme.' *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) are the last novels..

James's biographer Leon Edel divides James's creative life into three periods. The first one covers the works like *The American*, *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. The second one covers the masterpieces *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*. The third period covers such great works as *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. It is in his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884) that James most succinctly expressed his critical principles as well as a justification of his novelistic endeavor.

The following is a critical study of James's three important novels *The American*, *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square*.

**The American (1877):** *The American* (1877) was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* between June 1876 and May 1877, and as a book in 1877. Christopher Newman, a bachelor who has become wealthy through shrewd business dealings in America, travels to Paris, France to find a beautiful wife. He is *an intelligent and idealistic self-made millionaire industrialist*. Though an accomplished businessman, he is naive about European ways. This is the author's attitude too. Mrs Tristram, an expatriate American, serves as a sort of guide and confidante to him, much as Maria Gostrey serves Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*.

Newman becomes engaged to Claire de Cintre, a widow and the daughter of an aristocratic French family, the Bellegardes. But the Bellegardes decide they cannot sacrifice the family pride, even to Newman's wealth, and they cancel the engagement. Meanwhile Newman has introduced Valentin Bellegarde, Claire's brother and his own friend and ally, to Noemie Nioche, a young woman who copies great paintings for a living. Because of his involvement with Noemie, Valentin fights and dies in a duel. Just before dying, however, he provides Newman with the means of compelling the Bellegarde family to allow him to marry Claire: he sends Newman to Mrs Bread, the Dowager Marquise's maid, who reveals that the Marquise had caused her husband's death by withholding his medicine. In the end, however, Newman decides not to use this information for blackmailing, and the novel closes with Claire's becoming a Carmelite nun more out of depression.

Harry Moore thinks though this theme was a familiar one to the French, James made it fascinating by giving it a touch of novelty.

The stage, in 1890, beckoned James first in the person of the actor Edward Compton, whose wife was the American actress Virginia Bateman and whose son was to become the writer Sir Compton Mackenzie. Edward Compton wrote to James suggesting that he dramatize *The American*, and he paid an advance of £250 on it in 1890. The play was opened at Liverpool in 1871. The play had a happy ending as the brother is not killed and as Newman marries the heroine at the end. The whole thing was like a comedy of manners. Edward Compton played the role of Christopher Newman, and Elizabeth Robins that of Claire de Cintre. However, the London audience found it un-dramatic.

**Daisy Miller (1879):** This is a short novel by Henry James, published in 1879. The heroine Daisy Miller is touring Europe with her mother and brother. The expatriate American community interprets her innocence and lack of concern for social convention as immodesty, and she is ostracized. One of its members, Frederick Winterbourne, is charmed by her innocence, however. In Rome Daisy takes up with Giovanelli, a young Italian. Winterbourne meets them one evening viewing the Coliseum by moonlight, and berates Daisy for her lack of social decorum. He warns her of fever. James's friend Edith Wharton has written a short story "Roman Fever." Shocked and hurt by his reaction, she returns at once to her hotel, where she contracts malaria and dies within a week.

Henry James made a play based on *Daisy Miller* for a New York theater but it was turned down telling that it was too literary.

**Washington Square (1880):** *Washington Square* (1880) is a short novel published serially in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1880 and in book form in 1881. The motherless daughter of a wealthy New York physician, Catherine Sloper is unappreciated and ignored by her father, and leads a lonely and bleak existence until she is courted by Morris Townsend. She accepts his proposal of marriage, but her doctor-father refuses to give his consent when he discovers Townsend to be penniless. Exasperated by Catherine's obstinate attachment Dr Sloper takes her away to Europe for a year. This does not change her mind, but Morris, faced with the prospect of Catherine having to forfeit her inheritance if she marries him, breaks off the engagement. Seventeen years later, after the death of her father has made Catherine a rich woman, Morris returns and proposes again. Good or ill she rejects him absolutely and settles down to the life of a

spinster in the family house in Washington Square. The theme of the novel is a traditional one.

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