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Ethics and literature: love and perception in Henry James

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ETHICS AND LITERATURE: LOVE AND PERCEPTION IN HENRY JAMES

A Thesis

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Abstract

In this paper I argue for the value of literature in ethical instruction. Following Martha Nussbaum, I argue that literature often promotes the kind of context-specific judgment, respect for the cognitive value of the emotions and empathy for others that are foundational to the kind of ethical judgment Nussbaum and I support. Like Nussbaum, I find that Henry James’s novels evince these same ethical values and that his novels, especially the novels of the late phase, are therefore useful for ethical instruction. Unlike Nussbaum, however, I do not believe that James portrays erotic love as an emotion that is incompatible with ethical judgment. Instead I believe that James makes a distinction between desire and love and that the former is incompatible with ethical judgment but the latter is not. In fact, I argue that James portrays erotic love as a stimulus to the kind of openness to the other that is necessary for accurate judgment, and I demonstrate this by examining the main characters of three novels of the experimental phase—*The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*, and *The Awkward Age*—and exposing the ways in which their love for others, especially their erotic love for others, encourages (or could have encouraged, in cases where the characters fail to love) their capacity for ethical judgment. By focusing on three novels from the experimental period I also expose the connections between the thematic concerns of the experimental and late periods and suggest that James is as preoccupied in his middle period as is in his late period with the relationship between awareness of others and an appreciation and affection for them.
Chapter I

In a 1999 article in *PMLA* Lawrence Buell highlights six major strands of thought influencing the current revival of ethical criticism in literary studies. The first is an approach interested in the “moral thematics and underlying value commitments of literary texts and their implied value,” an approach Buell sees as a modernized version of the “Arnoldian-Leavisite conception of literature as ethical reflection.” A second is “the intellectual history of moral thought from Puritanism to transcendentalism to pragmaticism and beyond,” and a third the interest in the ethics of narrative and genre typified in the work of Wayne Booth, as well as more recently in works like Adam Newton’s *Narrative Ethics* (8). This latter approach emphasizes the ethical implications of a text’s (or as Booth calls it, an “implied author’s) rhetorical commitments. A fourth strand is the growing interest among some ethical philosophers in the moral value of literature; works by Martha Nussbaum in particular have “mattered to scholars in the field of literature less because of any radical originality of method than insofar as their example has abetted revival of a moral or social value-oriented approach to literary studies” (8). The fifth and sixth strands, those Buell believes to have had the strongest influence on the ethical redirection of literary studies, are the turn towards ethical issues evinced in the late works of Derrida and Foucault. Buell pinpoints the 1987 posthumous publication of “Nazi-collaborationist” passages from Paul de Man’s journal as an impetus for the reevaluation of the esoteric interests of deconstruction and Derrida’s own turn towards social and ethical issues in works like *The Gift of Death* (9). He also points out that in the *History of Sexuality* Foucault “shifted from his longstanding concentration on the power-knowledge problematic and on the construction of social selves by discursive
macroinstitutions to the care of the self conceived as an ethical project” (9-10).

My own approach in this paper has been influenced more by the third and fourth strands of thought than by the ethical turn within deconstruction; in fact, my impatience with (among other faults) the esotericism of the “early” Derrida motivated my delight in discovering the neohumanist current in ethical criticism. Another motivation was my impatience with the reductive nature of most political theory, which seemed equally ineffectual as politics and as tools for comprehensive literary analysis. In contrast, Wayne Booth’s seminal work *The Company We Keep* defines the ethical broadly enough to include qualities we would normally call aesthetic while never allowing us to forget that these aesthetic qualities matter to our daily lives. Building on the analogy that books are like friends, Booth suggests that the books that are the most ethically valuable in this broader sense of the ethical—the ones that offer us the most enrichment—are the ones with which we should spend the most time.

The texts I want to examine, several works by Henry James, exhibit the kind of balance between quantity and concision, reciprocity and hierarchy, intimacy and reserve, etc. that according to Booth characterize the best of friends.² (In the past Booth has expressed reservations about other of James’s works and I will mention these later.) James has in fact been a favorite source for both philosophers and literary critics engaged in the recent revitalization of ethical criticism, and the list of those who have written on Jamesian morality includes among others Martha Nussbaum, Cora Diamond, and J. Hillis Miller.³ James’s popularity can be attributed in large part to his inclusive moral outlook, an outlook formed partly in response to the waning authority of prescriptive morality and traditional social hierarchies in the face of the cultural and economic upheavals of the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries. James is uneasy about the vulgar materialism he sees filling the gap caused by these eroding traditions, yet like his brother William envisions the possibility that the gap might also clear the way to an ethical view that is responsive to the contingencies of experience and depends more on the cultivation of personal character than on rules and absolutes. In her article “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism” Nussbaum summarizes the salient characteristics of this ethical view, described in James’s theoretical writings as well as in his novels, as:

(1) an insistence on the plurality and non-commensurability of the valuable elements of a well-lived life; (2) an insistence on the importance of contextual complexity and particularized judgment in good deliberation; (3) an insistence on the cognitive role of the emotions; and (4) an insistence on human vulnerability and the vulnerability of the good.4

This description of James’s ethical view undergirds my own paper; and in fact most of what follows could be described as a corrective footnote to Nussbaum’s work on James in Love’s Knowledge. My correction is primarily aimed at Nussbaum’s belief that James portrays erotic love as incompatible with the clarity of vision and judgment necessary to sustain this ethical view. I believe on the contrary James makes a distinction between desire and erotic love—a distinction that may not be clear to Nussbaum, whose idea of eros derives from Aristotle—and though the former is incompatible with his ethical view, the latter is not. In fact, I believe that James’s texts portray erotic (or romantic) love as well as other forms of love as both enhanced by and even enhancing the susceptibility to the particular indispensable to this kind of ethical outlook.

In his book Desire and Love in Henry James David McWhirter argues that James’s fiction makes a distinction between desire and love.5 Desire is a “narcissistic fantasizing of the mind”; a person consumed with desire is interested in the other only as
a projection of his or her own needs and lusts (5). A loving person, on the other hand,
“embraces the other’s limited and imperfect reality, and invites and accepts the binding
and defining embrace offered by the other” (6). I agree with this analysis, which would
demote what Nussbaum calls erotic love to mere desire and preserve erotic love from
being banished from the ethical existence. But I do not agree with McWhirter’s
application of this analysis to the three major novels of James’s late phase, The
Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl. McWhirter claims that
these novels show a progression from an uncritical endorsement of desire as embodied in
Lambert Strether to a rejection of desire and an affirmation of love, typified in the
mutually affirming embrace of Maggie and the Prince at the end of The Golden Bowl.
My own interpretation of these novels is that if they show any movement at all it is
towards a greater degree of fatalism about the possibility of achieving a real awareness of
and commitment to the other in the face of “the constant force that makes for
muddlement.” Maggie’s emotion for the Prince, for example, never matures beyond a
selfish desire for possession, and her “pity and dread” in the last line of the novel testify
to her dim awareness of this fact.

The late novels have garnered so much theoretical attention over the last several
decades that instead of providing full-blown alternatives to these readings I would like to
examine three novels from the experimental period that can more justifiably be said to
progress from ambivalent portrayals of desire to moving portrayals of genuine love of
both the romantic and platonic varieties. These novels have added benefit of portraying
very similar heroines in very similar situations. The form and content of each establishes
a connection between love and a particular kind of ethical sensitivity. In demonstrating
this connection I also hope to prove that James intended his novels to serve a larger purpose, one that is important to most people who embark on ethical criticism, and that is to help readers proceed from and through textual analysis to self-analysis. Most disciples of the various jargon-laden political theories currently dominating graduate seminars and literary journals seem intent on proving that the political is not personal, and I think that if literature is going to retain any sort of relevancy in the twenty-first century for both students and the wider culture we who still treasure and teach it are going to have to keep reminding ourselves that literature is first of all—always—for life.

Endnotes


2 For a complete list of Booth’s criteria for judging books’ ethical value, see chapter six of The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).


Chapter II

In the introduction to *Love’s Knowledge* Nussbaum describes her evolving attitude towards the place of erotic love in the ethical life. In her initial approach to the subject she was convinced that the Aristotelian ethical stance, a stance characterized by the context-specific judgment described above, “was inclusive enough to encompass every constituent of the good human life, love included” (50). She saw this attitude reflected in James’s novels, in his belief that a rich awareness should and could infuse every aspect of an individual’s life, including his love life (51). Later, however, she came to believe that erotic love could conflict with the ethical viewpoint, “even when that viewpoint is understood in the broad Jamesian/Aristotelian way” (51). She read *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors* to be dramatizing that conflict, to be showing that, for example, the ethical consciousness Maggie develops throughout the second half of *The Golden Bowl* has to be sacrificed to her love for the Prince, a sacrifice symbolized by her burying her eyes in his breast at the novel’s end (136-7). Likewise, Nussbaum suggests that Strether’s failure to love Maria Gostrey and approve Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s relationship results from his disapproval of any action that requires an individual to sacrifice his clear-sightedness (his ability to see everything) and his rationality (his ability to explain what he sees in a way that makes it clear to others).

Nussbaum eventually arrived at a third view, one she sees illustrated in *David Copperfield*, in David’s erotic love for Steerforth but rarely in James. Nussbaum believes that David’s love for Steerforth is a function of his ability to see clearly, to enter into the experiences of others. Unlike Strether, David uses his capacity for perception to close distance between himself and others, not to create it, implying that “the non-judgmental
love of particulars characteristic of the best and must humane ethical stance contains within itself a susceptibility to love, and to a love that leads the lover at times beyond the ethical stance into a world in which ethical judgment does not take place” (52). For David storytelling becomes an expression of this loving perception, a way to acknowledge the claims of both Steerforth (who represents the erotic) and Agnes (who represents morality). David believes that art mediates between these two perspectives, that the best art promotes perceptive love, not perceptive distance, and inspires warmth as well as reflection. James’s narrators, on the other hand, are determined to maintain their reflective distance, which is why love—Nussbaum claims—is always relegated to the margins of the Jamesian novel (346). James refuses to allow us to participate in anything that dulls his characters’ capacity for reflection and may dull ours: “we are borne up morally, held as ‘participators by a fond attention’ in the adventures of all the characters, even when we are reminded that there are silences into which the morality of fine-tuned social perception has no entry” (346). According to Nussbaum, James believes that the novel should function as friend and guide, not as lover and seducer, and he is wary of attempts to mediate between the two roles, whether by his characters or his readers.

Although I agree with Nussbaum that James certainly intends his novels to encourage his readers’ capacity for reflection, I do not believe that he intends to suggest that reflection alone is the ultimate end of the ethical life. Instead I believe James’s novels frequently point to the truth that “the non-judgmental love of particulars characteristic of the best and most humane ethical stance contains within itself a susceptibility to love,” and that cultivating this susceptibility is part of the goal. Over and over again in his novels James shows characters whose capacity for perception nourishes
their capacity for love, characters who, if they fail to actualize their love, fail either because they have made reflection itself an absolute goal or (more frequently) because they have reverted to a more primitive pre-reflective moral standard—but not because love categorically resists reflective consciousness. Nussbaum’s reading of James is not thorough enough; where she sees characters whose reflective consciousness conflicts with love, I see characters whose conflict with love results from their inability to sustain this consciousness, either because they are “too old,” too immature, too idealistic or too afraid to abandon their prejudices entirely. Nussbaum also makes the mistake of assuming that the emotion that causes Maggie to bury her eyes in the Prince’s breast—or the emotion that Strether sees between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, especially when he spies them on the river—is the only kind of love there is, or that it is love at all, instead of lust or, as Pippin argues in Maggie’s case, the same kind of desire that leads Adam Verver to collect works of art.¹ James is wary of any emotion that resists reflection, and erotic love is an emotion that often does and one he is notoriously wary of, but he would not agree that a resistance to reflection is one of its definitive characteristics. Instead, he would say that reflection enriches and justifies erotic love, just as it enriches charitable love and friendship. The result of that reflection does not, however, “lead the lover at times beyond the ethical stance and into a world in which ethical judgment does not take place,” if by “ethical stance” Nussbaum means to include both “ethical judgment” and “the non-judgmental love of particulars” (52). In her explication of the novels she at times confounds the two. As the novels and prefaces show, James would say that judgment understood as “the non-judgmental love of particulars” is integral to the ultimate success of every type of love, and that even judgment understood in a more
traditional sense may have a place, though it is would not be the place a traditional
moralist would give it.

If it has one it will be contained within James’s larger sense of judgment, this
keen sensitivity to the particular. James’s judgment is more inclusive than the traditional
moralists’; an individual’s aesthetic value—his picturesqueness, so to speak—qualifies
him for moral appreciation even if from the traditional moralist’s point of view nothing
does. The imagination James and his narrators possess helps them discover some
redemptive quality in everyone, even if it is only in a character’s aesthetic or dramatic
value for the author or perceiver. Thoroughly evil characters are infrequent in James’s
novels, as infrequent as his most perceptive narrators’ attempts to make reductive
judgments like “good,” “bad,” “right” or “wrong.” In fact, judgment is probably the
wrong word for the type of reflection of which James approves; it could more be
accurately called perception, if we understand perception not as a precognitive activity
but as a conscious and constant attempt to distinguish between views that are clouded by
unexamined emotions or ideas and views that (as far as this is possible) attempt to do
justice to every possible perspective on given people and situations. James himself called
it imagination. As Cora Diamond writes, James’s morality consists precisely in his
reluctance to judge, if we understand judgment in the traditional sense. Morality for
James consists in cultivating one’s capacity for perception, even if that perception leads
one to see beauties or interest in people more traditional moralists would condemn. What
saves this from being mere decadent aestheticism, after the manner, say, of Kierkegaard’s
seducer, is the sense of responsibility inherent in James’s notion of perception: one has a
responsibility to “be one of the people on whom nothing is lost,” which includes seeing
that life matters for more than spectacle to most human beings. To attempt to make reflection an end in itself—to cultivate it with a decadent detachment as Mrs. Brooks attempts to do in *The Awkward Age*—is as much a fault as not cultivating it at all. For everyone who is recognizably human this attempt at detachment will always fail anyway, as it does for Mrs. Brooks. Kierkegaard’s seducer has more in common with a devil than a man, his existence more with death than life, which is precisely Kierkegaard’s point.

As we shall see, characters in James who attempt to detach reflection from life—an attempt usually motivated by a desire to make life like work of art, whether that be a golden bowl, a French painting, a house full of priceless antiques or a literary salon—either fail, because life messily intrudes and reminds them of the impossibility of avoiding responsibility, or succeed only by blinding themselves, by shutting their eyes to life and growth and choosing an unmistakably sterile existence, a kind of death-in-life.

We can see that the responsible reflection James promotes in his narrators, as well as in himself, is for him the only existential option that avoids the life-denying extremes of a Mrs. Brooks, whose artistic code is ultimately no less short-sighted than Mrs. Newsome’s moral code. We can also see how reflection is so closely connected to love. For James perception is not real if it is not responsible to life and to others. In fact, responsibility is always already *in* such perception for James; to perceive things is *already* to have become responsible for them, to have taken action on their behalf, and to refuse to acknowledge that this is so is a dangerous position to be in, for oneself as well as for others. To perceive is already to have performed an act of altruism. To capitalize on this with further acts of altruism, acts that resemble more closely our usual perception of “acts,” is a difficult task, since “really experience ends nowhere” and deciding on
which perception to act can seem arbitrary and acting at all inopportune. There is always
a sense in which acting on one perception may jeopardize our responsibility to the next
one. Here is where many of James’s narrators back down or break down, and
understandably so; what I want to suggest is that here is also where the texts offer the
possibility of not breaking down, of overcoming this difficulty by committing to love, by
willing or encouraging love to inspire continued action, action that even if arbitrary or
inopportune will be forgiven or forgivable because motivated by love. Perception is a
reaching out to the other, an initiatory act of altruism, and as such is difficult to sustain,
much less to expand upon; James knows, however, that love frequently inspires
perceptiveness and other acts of altruism in people whose perceptive powers in general
are underdeveloped. Consequently he is sensitive to the ways in which love—genuine
love, whether of the erosic or agapic variety—can help bridge the gap between reflection
and stronger acts of altruism. He also realizes, on the other hand, that cultivating
perception can help actualize and nourish love.

Examining the connections between love and reflection in James’s novels is my
goal in working through them. As Nussbaum points out, these connections are rarely
spelled out for us. Characters seldom achieve a perfect synthesis between perception and
love; Nussbaum mentions the love between Hyacinth Robinson and Millicent Henning,
Hyacinth and Lady Aurora’s “merciful love” for the Princess and the love between the
Assinghams in *The Golden Bowl* as rare exceptions. More often, the possibility is
revealed in the missed opportunities, when readers start asking themselves, “What went
wrong here?” or “What has the protagonist done or not done?” James’s texts are
designed to encourage these questions, to make readers provide whatever answers might
be had. The preoccupation with reflection that Nussbaum complains of—as well as the ambiguity that Booth once notoriously decried—are techniques deliberately adopted to encourage moral reflection in the readers, to encourage them to provide the answers that novelists like Dickens provide for their readers. Unlike Dickens’s readers, James’s readers are seldom allowed to feel the complacency of having the morals worked out for them in advance, of having everything tied together in a way that leaves them with nothing but satisfaction. Such satisfaction can all too easily turn into self-satisfaction and moral inertia if readers begin to assume that in assenting to David’s love for Steerforth, for example, they have performed an action as great as David’s own. James is aware of this danger, and his moral earnestness can only be said to be that much greater if he denies his readers the possibility of confusing assent with more active forms of altruism—if he hopes that letting readers work the problems out for themselves will push them further along the road towards ethical living. Perhaps in his early years Booth was unable to acknowledge the moral motivation behind James’s ambiguity because of his formalist commitments to closure, although even in *The Company We Keep*, published almost thirty years after *Rhetoric*, Booth suggests that “total openness would be total entropy—and hence total apathy in the reader” and uses *The Turn of the Screw* as his example of an overly open text (64). I would agree that texts like *The Turn of the Screw* and—even more so—*The Sacred Fount* may put a burden on the reader that proves counterproductive to attempts to extract anything, unless the moral is (as many have argued) that danger and bewilderment occur whenever perception is divorced from reality. James’s ambiguity has been less of a problem for postmodern critics, though often they seem to have wanted to exploit it without asking whether or not it is an end in
itself. On the other hand, Nussbaum’s failure to question reflection as an end in itself seems to be less about a prior agenda than about inattention to the function of reflexivity in literary works—the moral of which may be that knowledge of narrative technique is never moot, even for philosophical uses of literature. In looking at the novels, then, focusing on The Spoils of Poynton and two other novels from James’s experimental period before surveying The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl, we will need to be sensitive to their literary characteristics. Often I will be employing Booth’s technique of juxtaposing what is said—usually from a limited third-person point of view—with what is not said, asking if the gap between the two might be caused by the narrator’s lack of perception, lack of love, or both, and what this may reveal about perception, love, and the relationship between the two. In the three experimental novels we will find that as we move through them chronologically this gap lessens, as James begins to portray protagonists whose capacity for perception and self-discloser is strengthened by their capacity for love.

Endnotes


Chapter III

The first of these novels, *The Spoils Of Poynton*, is written almost exclusively from the perspective of Fleda Vetch, a portionless young woman introduced to us by Mrs. Gereth, who is a widow anticipating being deprived of her home by her son’s marriage. As Fleda will later remark, Mrs. Gereth has “no imagination about anybody’s life save on the side she bumps against…no perception of anybody’s character—[has] only one question about persons: [are] they clever or stupid?”¹ To be clever in Mrs. Gereth’s sense means “to know the ‘marks,’” which means to be able to recognize and appreciate good taste—to have a “passion for the exquisite” (6). Fleda knows the marks by “direct inspiration, and a warm recognition of this is [Mrs. Gereth’s] tribute to her character” (138). Mrs. Gereth notices that Fleda is the one member of the Waterbath party who is as horrified as she by the vulgarity of their surroundings, someone who may be able to marry her son and preserve the beauty and integrity of Poynton. Since this is the only aspect of anyone’s character that Mrs. Gereth is able to recognize, once she has her utility as a narrator is over. On the other hand, Fleda is extremely imaginative. Dragged into the drama by Mrs. Gereth, she becomes an illustration of James preference for “the particular attaching case *plus* some near individual view of it; that nearness [he adds] quite having thus to become an imagined observer’s, a projected, charmed painter’s or poet’s—however avowed the ‘minor’ quality in the latter—close and sensitive contact with it.”² As he says later in the same preface, Fleda is both “highly individualized” and “highly intelligent,” and in the preface to *Spoils* he claims that she “demonically both sees and feels, while the others but feel without seeing.”³
The question of how thoroughly Fleda sees and feels has been a preoccupation of the novel’s critics. Some have sided with James’s own evaluation in the preface of *Spoils*, where he wrote that Fleda is “a free spirit, always much tormented, and by no means always triumphant…[but] ‘successful’ only through having remained free,” while others have insisted that she is bound to a “rigid code of ethics.” James’s preface appears to ask us to trust Fleda’s version of the events, to believe that in refusing to help Mrs. Gereth’s son Owen break his engagement with Mona she has preserved the source of her freedom—her clarity of vision and judgment—against the onslaught of her own mindless passion and others’ desire to possess her. In asking ourselves whether James’s evaluation of his own work is accurate (if we assume that he is unequivocally endorsing Fleda) the question that first presents itself is why, if Fleda is in the right, she succumbs to Mrs. Gereth accusations at the novel’s climax and writes a telegram calling Owen back. Is this merely an instance of the tendency of a person of unique susceptibility to be temporarily overwhelmed by strong monomaniacal natures, or perhaps a guilty and compassionate attempt to placate Mrs. Gereth by an empty gesture, one she already knows to be futile? The text supports both responses, but neither excludes the possibility of a third, the possibility that Fleda recognizes the truth in what Mrs. Gereth says—recognizes a version of the scene that she has been unable to acknowledge to herself—and feels suddenly empowered to action by having it brought into the open by someone else. Mrs. Gereth’s version, which makes Freda’s cheek “sting from a slap,” is that insisting that Owen let Mona decide whether or not to break the engagement is an act of “systematic…idiotic perversity”:

‘What are you, after all, my dear, I should like to know, that a gentleman who offers you what Owen offers should have to meet such wonderful
exactions, to take such ordinary precautions about your sweet little scruples?’ [Mrs. Gereth’s] resentment rose to a high insolence which Fleda took full in the face and which, for the moment at least, had the horrible force to present to her vengefully a showy side of the truth. It gave her a blinding glimpse of lost alternatives (220).

The awareness is momentary, and by the end of the novel—or at least until the house burns down—Fleda is again reconciled to her decision and “happy,” and even attempts to persuade Mrs. Gereth that the refuge of the unhappy maiden aunt to which Mrs. Gereth has fled has a charm, a “soul, a story, [and] a life,” that Poynton lacked (251). But the brevity of the recognition does not negate the recognition itself. It is only one side—a “showy side,” the showiness of which, for a girl who hates ostentation and vulgarity, may hint at why she missed or suppressed it—but it is a side of the truth, though it may be the only side Mrs. Gereth is capable of recognizing and the only one Fleda is not. The force of the recognition reverberates in Fleda’s reaction, the boldest action she takes throughout the course of the novel: Mrs. Gereth’s description of the lost alternatives stirs Fleda like “the shake of a tambourine borne toward her from a gypsy dance: her head seemed to go round and she felt a sudden passion in her feet…she heard herself presently say, ‘I’ll go to the Registrar now’” (220).

She is too late, of course, but the next question (though Fleda herself ignores it) is how a girl who has shown herself so perceptive in general has managed to miss any part of the truth, much less a part that has as much bearing on her own future as it does on the future of those around her. An omniscient narrator warns us in chapter one that Fleda “has even from herself wonderful secrets of delicacy and pride,” speaking gently of her “little life” and “meagre past” (10). Her pride and her meager past are readers’ clues to her lapse in perception later in the novel. We are told that she has no beauty as soon as
we meet her, and by the end of the first chapter we are left with the impression that the depth of her reflexivity is at least partly a result of its being a sole and secret resource in the midst of her impoverished life. This impression is deepened in chapter two: Mrs. Gereth’s story of her accumulation of the treasures at Poynton proves “fascinating to poor Fleda; who hadn’t a penny in the world nor anything nice at home, and whose only treasure was her subtle mind”:

Fleda, with her mother dead, hadn’t so much as even a home, and her nearest chance of one was that there was some appearance her sister would become engaged to a curate whose eldest brother was supposed to have property and would perhaps allow him something. Her father paid some of her bills but didn’t like her to live with him; and she had lately, in Paris, with several hundred other young women, spent a year at a studio, arming herself for the battle of life by a course with an impressionist painter (14). To readers in fin-de-siècle England this description of Fleda’s background and prospects would have resounded more pitifully than it does today; perhaps they would have been less hasty to criticize her “ethical absolutism,” aware that for a girl in her situation her pretensions to gentility, not to mention her room and board, depended almost entirely on her reputation for correct and obliging behavior.

Edith Wharton’s House of Mirth, published within a few years of Spoils, is probably one of the period’s most frightening examples of the dangers confronting a penniless young woman trying to stay afloat in late Victorian society, usually in the hope of marrying into security. For such women this usually meant living with wealthier friends, rotating among them often enough to avoid seeming “parasitical” and cultivating charm and helpfulness to make themselves seem indispensable (41). Fleda and Mrs. Gereth share a genuine bond in their affection for Poynton, but as the novel progresses Fleda feels more and more that her value to Mrs. Gereth is “the mere value…of a good
agent;” and although Mrs. Gereth can afford to override the material gulf separating the women’s perspectives, with the unconscious insolence of a life spent in a “true fool’s paradise,” Fleda cannot, and she is hypersensitive to anything that may place her in a false position (36, 12). Within weeks of Fleda’s arrival at Poynton Mrs. Gereth has placed her in a grotesque position (even by modern standards) by presenting her to the unsuspecting Owen as a superior alternative to his brand new fiancée, and Fleda’s sense of humiliation and outrage is compounded by “a sore scared perception” that her value to Mrs. Gereth is only as great as her value to Poynton (36). Such a situation deepens her sense of insecurity and awakens her sense of Mrs. Gereth’s “inhumanity,” which comes to be associated with Mrs. Gereth’s “immorality” as the novel progresses (37, 77). It also deepens her sense of the awkwardness of her position at Poynton, and the anxiety and instability involved in her relationship with Mrs. Gereth contributes to Fleda’s growing love for Owen, who is unconscious of the possibility of despising Fleda for her presence in his home. Fleda finds it “exquisite” that “whereas…for her kind little circle at large, who didn’t now at all matter, her tendency had begun to define itself as parasitical, this strong young man, who had a right to judge and even to loathe her, didn’t judge and didn’t loathe, let her down gently, treated her as if she pleased him—in fact evidently liked her to be just where she was” (41).

In short, Fleda’s delicacy may be as much a function and necessity of her dependent condition as it is a free expression of her sense of taste, and her clear-sightedness more likely to be confused with her instincts for self-preservation than it would have been had her social position been more established. If we read Spoils in the light of shorter works like A London Life and In the Cage the connection between her
sense of delicacy and her precarious social footing becomes even clearer and gives us reason to think that James’s judgment of Fleda as “free” might have been one he would have wanted to qualify on more thorough consideration. *In the Cage* was published the year after *The Spoils of Poynton* and was eventually published with *What Maisie Knew* in the eleventh volume of the New York edition. The story’s protagonist is an unnamed postal worker who compensates for her low social status and dreary prospects by constructing imaginative scenarios around the telegrams passed into her cage by her rich and beautifully bedecked customers. Her scenarios are not romantic fantasies but genuine intuitions that allow her to enjoy a sense of superiority over her fellow workers and her counter-clerk fiancé and eventually gain the attention of a handsome gentleman named Captain Everhard. Her triumph is James’s version of the Cinderella story—of the poor girl whose virtue and native delicacy is validated by homage from the Prince in the form of a marriage proposal and the opportunity to display her worth before the highest people in the land. The catch is that sometimes the Prince is not virtuous enough to see beyond the girl’s social status, and his homage rises no higher than an attempt at seduction. Such is the case with Captain Everhard. Instead of being surprised, however, the unnamed postal worker has had no illusions about the possibility of marriage and asks only that she have opportunity to serve him in a way that allows her to maintain her sense of superiority and personal integrity. She is granted her wish, avoiding seduction and helping the Captain out of what she discovers in the end to be a less heroic situation than she had imagined, her personal needs and outsider status having finally clouded her vision. *A London Life*, published with *Spoils* in the tenth volume of the New York edition, illustrates the difficulty of maintaining a spotless reputation in the face of social
and economic pressure. The story’s protagonist Laura Wing is driven to propose to a man she barely knows to escape dispossession and social disgrace when her married sister, who provided the roof over Laura’s head, elopes with another man. Laura manages to recoup her dignity and marry respectably only through the intervention of a kind and wealthy older woman, who unlike Mrs. Gereth is more genuinely concerned for her young friend’s well-being.

Like the unnamed protagonist of In the Cage, Fleda’s powers of perception, though great, are limited and even partly motivated by her need to maintain an illusion of self-respect, and her rejection of Owen is based less on her capacity to see the situation with more clarity than either Owen or Mrs. Gereth than on a deep awareness of her social insecurity, combined with a reluctance to have this insecurity acknowledged by others. The version of the situation that Mrs. Gereth throws out at Fleda in the “high insolence” of her anger is precisely the version Fleda has been attempting to spare herself because it strips her of her pretense to self-respect, of the illusion that she can in fact “be someone” despite her social expendability, and also, she thinks, because it places her so thoroughly at the mercy of others. The morals and manners that Mrs. Gereth often lacks are what save Fleda (she believes) from being as victimized as she could be, and her refusal to surrender them does preserve her freedom if we understand freedom as Fleda understands it, as escaping being viewed by others—and having to view herself—as a vulgar gold-digger, one whose lack of beauty would fail to provide even the smallest amount of social expiation for her marriage.

We can see these fears at work in Fleda in her pivotal scenes with Owen, which occur in the dingy drawing rooms of her father’s and her sister’s homes: the “brandy-
flasks and pen-wipers” cluttering her father’s house, the “smutty maid,” and “the coarse cups saucers and the vulgar little plates” all contribute to her exaggerated awareness of Owen’s pity for her poverty (in their first rendezvous he only just refrained from trying to buy her a dress) and her desperate sense that she must do her best not to seem as pitiful as her situation looks (153-7). The “stunted slavey gazing wide-eyed at the beautiful gentlemen and either stupidly or cunningly bringing but one [tea] thing at a time”—gawking at Owen as if he were a celebrity—provides the reader with a wry view of how far out of her league Fleda is, as well as how liable under duress to fall into the same kind of unconscious class judgments she suspects Mrs. Gereth of making (155). Her reason for refusing to help Owen out of his engagement, which she wails out seconds before she flees their final scene at her sister’s house (and the last time she sees him) reveals the complex motivations behind her consistent determination to refrain from all but “high and delicate deed[s]”:

‘You mustn’t break faith. Anything’s better than that. You must at any rate be utterly sure. She must love you—how can she help it? I wouldn’t give you up…She spoke in broken bits, panting out her words. ‘The great thing is to keep faith. Where’s a man if he doesn’t? If he doesn’t he may be so cruel. So cruel, so cruel, so cruel!’ Fleda repeated. I couldn’t have a hand in that, you know: that’s my position—that’s mine. You offered her marriage. It’s a tremendous thing for her.’ Then looking at him another moment, ‘I wouldn’t give you up!’ She said again…‘Never, never, never!’ she cried; and before he could succeed in seizing her she had turned and, flashing up the stairs, got away from him even faster than she had got away at Ricks (106, 196-7).

“Not breaking faith” is important because it protects women like her from the “cruelty” of men—from being even more vulnerable than they are in a society in which men have every right but the right of breaking their word to a woman. In this society the only thing that protects women from being completely exploited as Fleda is afraid of being
exploited is the code of honor that forces men to behave like gentlemen. She is afraid that breaking his engagement to Mona will be a proof of his inconstancy, and Fleda has even more to lose from involving herself with an inconstant man than Mona. In fact, what looks like sympathy for Mona is actually a projection of her needs and insecurities on to Mona: “I wouldn’t give you up,” she emphasizes twice, “You offered her marriage. It’s a tremendous thing for her”.

As feminists have reminded us, the tragedy associated with gender inequality is that it prevents people from relating to each other as individuals—from exercising the sensitivity to the particular necessary to foster honest and egalitarian relationships. Three people with three different perspectives have recognized that Mona does not love Owen and that she is holding on to him only in the hopes of becoming mistress of a restored Poynton, but Mona’s membership in an oppressed class seems to entitle her to consideration on that basis alone. In fact, her mercenary behavior is almost legitimatized in such a society; Fleda seems to imply that robbing Mona of a “tremendous” marriage is just as unfair as it would be to rob her of a man she loved, that in the former situation she is just as bereft as she would be in the latter. On the other hand, Owen has given proof that he is more than just a fickle boy. Although handsome and weak, he has enough sense to have appreciated Fleda’s superior qualities long before Mona makes the contrast seem as great as she eventually does; he also continually exhibits a great deal of natural tact and delicacy. Yet his membership in the oppressor class denies him consideration on that basis alone; he “must marry a woman [he] hate[s]” in order to uphold his role as an honorable gentleman (196).
We can multiply reasons why Fleda’s lapse in clarity is understandable in her situation. Enough inequality still exists in our own culture to make us doubt the motives of a popular handsome man who is engaged to a beautiful successful woman but suddenly becomes obsessed with a poor ugly girl for her spiritual and moral qualities alone. Even now in such a situation the man must prove his faithfulness unless the ugly girl receives indisputable proof that the other woman is a “bitch” (and we should remind herself that Fleda never sees Mona’s bitchiness first hand); otherwise she has only herself to blame when she is left for another woman. The comparative freedom we have to get impatient with Fleda for not hustling down “to the Registrar” as Mrs. Gereth thought they should is not a freedom Fleda has in the same degree. We may recognize that Mona’s bitchiness, Owen’s innocence and Fleda’s own needs, which are much greater than Mona’s (Mona still has a home of her own, for example), provide plenty of justification for making an exception, but Fleda does not. Even Owen, who is a member of the oppressor class feels the pressure of the honor code, although perhaps with less excuse for seeing around it (he is weak, as Fleda herself acknowledges). Mrs. Gereth tries to show Fleda that acknowledging her desperation—surrendering to it, so to speak—can be a liberating choice, but Mrs. Gereth speaks from a privileged position herself—her choice is between a greater and lesser home, not between a home and nothing at all. More importantly, however, Mrs. Gereth is unable to show Fleda the beauty and higher morality involved in such a choice. Mrs. Gereth has sacrificed her dignity for her love of her possessions, a choice that puts her on par with Mona; Fleda needs to be shown that to sacrifice her dignity for her love of others is ultimately not a sacrifice of her dignity at all, but rather a path to greater freedom and a higher dignity.
To summarize, then, we can say that Fleda is the most perceptive and the freest character in the novel but that her vision of her own situation is clouded—though understandably so—by her fear of acknowledging her own social and economic vulnerability. Her perceptivity is even in a certain sense a defense mechanism, which makes it more likely to fail when asked to peer through her shield of pride. Of course it does fail: her fear causes her to cling to an overly refined honor code that keeps her from seizing a chance for security and happiness when it literally throws itself into her lap. Such a reading would seem to put me on the side of critics who have agreed with R. P. Blackmur that James was “uncertain of his intention” in Spoils and against those who have claimed that James’s characterization of Fleda is correct.\(^5\)

Richard Hocks, a member of this latter group, suggests that in her final scene with Owen Fleda’s apparent projection of her own feelings onto Mona is actually “just the reverse: it is conceiving of each person as so distinctly individual that you are willing to continually subsume your own views into them rather than classify them as Other, which would then take the spark of human life and dignity out of them—one which you know is there because you have it yourself.”\(^6\) Though acknowledging that this scene is problematic, particularly when Fleda “characteristically retreats ‘upstairs’ (like a Victorian heroine),” Hocks claims that Fleda’s real lapses of vision occur when she falls under Mrs. Gereth’s influence after her scene with Owen and attempts to recall him with a telegram and when, in the last chapter, she seeks to memorialize her virtue with one of the relics of Poynton, only to be rebuked by a fiery reminder that life always escape one’s attempts to idealize it.\(^7\) In the scene with Owen, on the other hand, Fleda becomes so determined not to do injustice to any possible aspect of the Other (Mona, in this case) that
she refrains from discriminating altogether, falling back instead on her awareness of how
she herself would like to be treated in the same situation.

In this ingenious reading Hock seems to be suggesting that when a response is
required in the absence of knowledge of all the particulars of situation the best thing to do
is to act in a way that gives the other participants the benefit of the doubt. I agree with
this suggestion; we are occasionally called upon to make decisions or pass judgments
without hearing all the evidence—or at least as much of the evidence as we need to make
an “informed” decision—and we should always respond with generosity, treating others
as we would like to be treated in the same situation, refraining from all but a loving
attribution of the best motives in one’s ignorance of any others. Such situations enact the
ordinary version of the dilemma I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the one
supersensitive perceivers face with each decision they make: how to draw boundaries—
how to determine when one has reviewed all the evidence—when “really experience ends
nowhere.” We expect supersensitive perceivers like Fleda to hesitate when ordinary
people would consider the evidence sufficient; but the interesting thing about Fleda in her
interview with Owen is that she does not hesitate—instead she acts on a plan formed a
month in advance, one she formed as soon as she realized that Owen wanted her to help
him break off his engagement. Her reasoning was not that as an individual Mona
deserves the right be “morally present” in any decision that concerns her but that Owen is
honor bound to keep his promises: “nobody had a right to get off easily from pledges so
deep and sacred,” she concludes (106).

Our opponent could counter that pledges and honor really stand for Mona’s rights
and feelings in Fleda’s internal monologue, so we should probably look at it more
carefully. Interestingly, Fleda acknowledges that Mona does not appreciate the pledge as she herself would and that her own decision not to intervene may “keep [Owen] tied to an affection that had died a sudden and violent death” (106-7). She asks herself how a decision made to keep Owen from dishonorable behavior could mean condemning him to a relationship with a woman he dislikes, and comes to the conclusion that his likes and dislikes are none of her business:

She had nothing to do with his dislikes; she had only to do with his good nature and his good name. She had joy of him just as he was, but it was of these things she had the greatest. The worst aversion and the liveliest wouldn’t alter the fact—since one was facing facts—that but the other day his strong arms must have clasped a remarkably handsome girl as close as she had permitted. Fleda’s emotion at this time was a wondrous mixture, in which Mona’s permissions and Mona’s beauty figured powerfully as aids to reflexion. She herself had no beauty, and her permissions were the stony stares she had just practiced in the drawing room—a consciousness of a kind appreciably to add to the strange sense of triumph that made her generous (107-8).

From here Fleda goes on to hope that despite her generosity Mona will become tired of the engagement and break it off herself, but we need to look closely at this passage to explain Fleda’s motivation in promoting Owen’s honor over his happiness and see if we can answer Hock’s reading fully. First of all we see that Fleda appreciates Owen’s good nature and good name more than she appreciates anything else about him. We have already seen that Fleda appreciates his good nature at least partly because it relieves her of the feelings of vulnerability she feels around Mrs. Gereth and others, and we can add that she also enjoys the power Owen’s good nature gives her over him; there is a sense in which his own quickening perception later in the novel is repugnant because it threatens her control of the situation. From the very beginning she is attracted to Owen because he is “a force grateful for direction” (11). When Mrs. Gereth accuses Owen of being
“disgustingly weak,” Fleda retorts, “it’s because he’s weak that he needs me” (225). His good nature is important to her for a variety of selfish (though understandable) reasons and his good name is probably important for similar ones, since her own reputation is an important part of her defense system. Secondly, the most relevant fact about Mona seems to be that she has enjoyed Owen’s caresses. Fleda seems here to assume that physical love is sacred and that it automatically creates obligations that it would be morally wrong to ignore. Even today many people have respect for individuals of both sexes who assume that physical encounters entail some sort of obligation to the other; likewise, Fleda can be respected so far as not being virtuous is an option for her. However the important question is whether she should be respected for keeping Owen under an obligation that Mona herself does not recognize—for forcing Owen to honor a promise that obviously means nothing to the woman it was meant to protect. Does not keeping this promise really damage Owen’s honor, or does it merely deny Fleda the appearance of moral superiority that she needs to enjoy? We can see in the last part of her rumination that her “triumph” over Mona’s superior beauty and greater “permissions” fuels much of her desire to act with scrupulous graciousness; she is conscious even here that her moral sensibility is what has given her the edge.

One of the underlying assumptions of Hock’s argument is that perceptions are not accurate if they are not constantly verified by the presence of the perceived object. Hock takes this idea from William James, whose more skeptical pragmaticism he mistakenly attributes to Henry. As H.S. Thayer points out in his the introduction to the Harvard edition of *The Meaning of Truth*, William James made the mistake frequently associated with poststructuralists of confusing conceptualization (or perception, as we have been
calling it) with attempts to arrive at fixed or absolute knowledge of something or someone. Every idea presents itself as absolute truth and is therefore suspect; so in order for us to avoid delusion we must constantly verify the concept—physically verify it—by bringing it into the presence of the object in question. Therefore the only way Fleda can have an accurate perception of Mona’s feelings and rights is if Mona is in the room revealing her rights and feelings; otherwise Fleda is doing the most honest thing in avoiding imagining anything. Unfortunately for Hock, Henry James’s novels do not evince the same skepticism towards language and conceptualization that William’s philosophy does. We have already seen that Fleda’s decision is not based on an observation of Mona’s needs and desire; the conflict is between Fleda’s love for Owen and her preconceived notions of honor, not between her love for Owen and her obligation to do justice to every possible version of the situation. Even if it were, however, James gives us little indication that we should doubt the facts of the case because Fleda has not had them from Mona herself. Owen is a reliable narrator and the wedding has not appeared in the papers; these facts are good enough for James.

What about James’s characterization of Fleda? He praised her freedom in the preface of the New York edition, ten years after the original publication of Spoils. The judgment seems to have been borne of ripe reflection and may seem to damage to my claim that James’s use of ambiguity is always deliberate, although not my claim that ambiguity is present in the text, since we know that a text may reveal intentions of which the author himself is unaware. In this case I may have to agree with Blackmur and other critics who have argued that James was never fully aware of his own intentions in Spoils. Spoils is the second novel in what has come to be called James “experimental period,” a
period in which he began to try out more radical narrative techniques after a failed attempt at playwriting and may not have fully realized the implications of employing narrators who are both disinterested and profoundly implicated in everything they relate. We can also conjecture that James himself, like his narrator, retained an admiration for conventional morality—for supersensitive notions of honor—throughout his life; there is a degree to which his own dedication to manner and delicacy—his disgust for “vulgarity”—may have caused him to shrink from pushing perception as far as it would go. As much as he may have appreciated the beauty of conventional morality (especially when contrasted with the kind of licentiousness portrayed in the antepenultimate chapter of *The Awkward Age*), careful readings of both the experimental novels and the later novels reveal that he was increasingly ambivalent about it, aware that a devotion to anything that claimed such absolute allegiance could betray many of the contingencies that characterize life. A simpler explanation of James’s comments, one that does more justice to his authorial consciousness, is that “free” means “comparatively free.” None of James’s reflexive narrators are completely free; they all have some blind spot or limitation that they either face or do not face but that stalls their attempts at complete understanding either way. But to say that they lack the capacity for disinterested reflection that many of the other characters (in what works) more patently lack is extreme, especially since James relies on these characters to present all the subtleties of the drama.

This brings us to the question of Fleda’s reliability as a narrator. If her freedom is compromised in one area, how do we know it is not completely compromised? Can we trust her evaluations of Owen and Mrs. Gereth? Can we rely on her recognition of the
truth of Mrs. Gereth’s accusation at the moment she is giving proof of her capacity for blindness—and does this blindness cast suspicion on everything she has reported to us up until that point? Could her whole story be a fabrication, an attempt to convince both reader and actors that she is a sweet moral lamb so that she can more easily manipulate the Gereths out of Poynton, as Robert C. McLean has suggested? The interpretation would go something like this: Fleda decides that she wants Poynton as soon as she sees it, seduces Owen under the guise of acting as ambassador between him and his mother, hides her duplicity from Mrs. Gereth so that Mrs. Gereth will steal the furniture and Mona will break the engagement, leaving Fleda with her reputation intact. Meanwhile Fleda has nothing to do but make a show of trying to patch things up and blame her failure on her moral scruples. Unfortunately, however, Mrs. Gereth catches on to her duplicity and sends the furniture back before Mona has a chance to break off the engagement. With work we could probably make most of the details of the novel cohere with this interpretation; however, the problem seems to me to be that Fleda herself gives no clues that she is capable of manipulation on this level. Her lies and deceptions are more readily explained by the motives I have already imputed to her—her fears and insecurities—for which there is an abundance of evidence in the text. Irony rarely works unless we have some clues of its existence; and even in a text like The Turn of the Screw, which has been accused of leaving too few clues to a possible ironic interpretation, the narrator is still more deceived than deceiving, as I have been claiming that Fleda is here. As I have already pointed out, characters as thoroughly evil as Fleda would be if she had concocted such a seamless fabrication are extremely rare in James’s fiction.
Moreover, *Spoils* is not written from first-person point-of-view but from third-person limited, a distance that frequently widens into third-person omniscience, and the omniscient narrator himself gives us clues to the way we are supposed to interpret Fleda’s lapses in clarity, the most obvious of which is her name. He also warns us in Chapter One that Fleda “has even from herself wonderful secrets of delicacy and pride,” speaking gently of her “little life” and “meagre past” (10). Her pride and her meager past are the readers’ clues to her lapse in perception later in the novel. We are told that she has no beauty as soon as we meet her, and by the end of the first chapter, when Fleda’s voice takes over, we already have the impression that the depth of her reflexivity is at least partly a result of its being a sole and secret resource in the midst of her impoverished life. But we are also left with the impression that her reflexivity, though limited, is a genuine ability and generally trustworthy, and much greater than that of the other participants in the story. If nothing else, our own life experience has shown us that people who are very perceptive about others are often blinkered about themselves, but that this need not destroy their credibility except in this one area. And again, all of James narrators have blind spots somewhere.

If we agree that Fleda is extraordinarily perceptive except in this one area I want to point out how her perceptivity affects her love for Owen and her concern for others and how it would have continued to affect these things had she been able to sustain it. First of all, we can see that Fleda’s imagination has enriched her love for Owen from the very beginning, enabling her to see more value in him than either his mother or his fiancée has seen. Her love for Owen has never been blind; in fact, the text introduces us to Fleda’s perceptivity as she is evaluating Owen in their initial meeting. Amused to find
herself walking next to Owen, Fleda is aware that Mrs. Gereth has orchestrated the walking arrangements:

Fleda had other amusements as well, such as noting that Mrs. Gereth was now with Mona Brigstock; such as observing that she was all affability to that young woman; such as reflecting that, masterful and clever, with a great bright spirit, she was one of those who impose, who interfuse themselves; such as feeling finally that Owen Gereth was absolutely beautiful and delightfully dense. This young person had even from herself wonderful secrets of delicacy and pride; but she came as near distinctness as in the consideration of such matters she had ever come at all in now embracing the idea that it was of a pleasant effect and more remarkable indeed than to be clever and horrid. Owen Gereth at any rate, with his inches, his features and his lapses, was neither of these latter things. She herself was prepared, if she should ever marry, to contribute all the cleverness, and she liked to figure it out that her husband would be a force grateful for direction. She was in her own small way a spirit of the same family as Mrs. Gereth. On that flushed and huddled Sunday a great matter occurred; her little life became aware of a singular quickening. Her meagre past fell away from her like a garment of the wrong fashion, and as she came up to on the Monday what she stared at from the train in the suburban fields was a future full of things she distinctly loved (10-11).

I have quoted from this passage already, but I quote it here in full because it illustrates just how closely Fleda’s imagination is connected to her love for Owen. From the beginning her attraction to Owen is rooted in a subtle awareness of his character, though it may not be rooted in a very thorough awareness of her own. (If she had recognized her own weakness would she have wanted a weak partner?) She is extremely aware of his physical beauty—his “inches and his features”—which suggests that the attraction is erotic. We are never allowed to forget how attractive he really is and how hard Fleda works to keep from being overly influenced by it, most notably in their walk through the park. She obviously overcompensates for reasons we have already made clear, but the desire to avoid being overly influenced by the superficial attraction does not keep her from feeling and valuing it. In fact her appreciation for his attractiveness is compounded
by her susceptibility to beauty in general, and we often get the impression that her “exquisite taste” enables her to do greater justice even to his most obvious features than most of the people around them do.

More unusually, she feels the interest in the particular character of his density, a quality rarely associated with charm and “delightfulness.” To see the difference between an individual who is just dumb and beautiful (Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*) and one whose density has a great deal of charm (Daisy Buchanan in *Gatsby*) takes a discriminating eye, especially because the latter phenomenon is so rarely seen in men. Although I have already pointed out, using this passage, that Fleda overrates this quality—continually confusing it with his “good nature” and honesty—she nevertheless does it greater justice than either his mother or his fiancée do. And even when she is attempting to preserve his density and innocence at the expense of other unfolding qualities, she retains the capacity to recognize the latter; she can even see when and by whom he is being influenced. As Hocks himself rather perceptively remarks, the way Fleda words her observations of Owen demonstrates her ability to take in new impressions of him just as they reveal themselves. 

Encountering Owen on a shopping trip soon after she leaves Poynton, she notices that “he unduly prolonged their business together, giving Fleda a sense of his putting off something particular that he had to face. If she had ever dreamed of Owen Gereth as finely fluttered she would have seen him with some such manner as this” (63). The simultaneous movement and hesitancy of her judgment here—the way she compares her previous knowledge of Owen, as well as her knowledge of the way most people act when fluttered, with this new impression, acknowledging that it conforms to what she might have thought but that she is still open
to further revelations—is paradigmatic of the way of her perpectivity works. Generalizations from previous impressions are brought up for comparison but are held in cautious suspension before the new data, waiting to be confirmed, altered, or denied. This movement is particularly evident in Fleda’s interaction with Owen as we see her initial impressions being deepened and qualified by succeeding ones, and it is easy to see how her impressionability encourages her love for Owen. Suspending one’s preconceived notions of who people are and how they should act in order to genuinely experience them requires a great deal of courage and tenacity; it is a fundamentally selfless act (Owen certainly recognizes it as such), a reaching out to the Other that we recognize to be a major component of what we usually call genuine love. People who lack the capacity for imaginative empathy (as Nussbaum calls it) usually have a hard time sustaining loving partnerships; those who are interested in having more than a brief fling are forced to develop these capacity to a certain degree, since it is usually impossible to act on another’s behalf unless one has made some sort of effort to understand who the other person is and what his or her needs are. Those who have developed this capacity before they “fall in love” are less likely to get stuck in immature relationships or to make choices based on superficial or unexamined emotions; the extent to which we wonder whether or not Owen is the right person for Fleda, for example, is just the extent to which we recognize her to be operating on fear instead of an awareness of who Owen is.

Obviously cultivating perception does not always lead to love. What I am suggesting is that cultivating perception, especially the kind of responsible perception Fleda cultivates, can lead to love, that it can deepen love that begins as a mere “animal” attraction or it can steer one clear of this if one is looking for something more significant.
The unthinking erotic element is always present in romantic love, as it is for Fleda and Owen in their heightened awareness of each other, but mutual empathy as well as a commitment to the value of that empathy—to the importance of acting on it, of taking it seriously—is also required. On the other hand, if the erotic element is absent, romantic love may not be possible but responsible perception can still help lead to other kinds of love. It is interesting to see how Fleda’s determination to do justice to Mrs. Gereth (for whatever reasons) eventually leads to a genuine friendship between the two women. This occurs partly because Mrs. Gereth is finally forced to develop a larger imagination herself as a result of her dramatic failure—brought about primarily because of her monomaniacal outlook on life—to achieve her goals, but also because as much as Fleda has seen wrong in Mrs. Gereth’s outlook (and as much as she has personally suffered from it) she has looked deeply and thoroughly enough to see what is “great” and what can be respected and admired in Mrs. Gereth in spite of her faults.

In James’s novels perceptive people can almost always find beauty in everyone—we see this most nobly and notably in Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Fleda, we should remind ourselves, is the only character in *Spoils* who manages to “see something” in Mona from beginning to end. We can also see that her ability to “see something” in Mona and everyone else is something more than tolerance or being non-judgmental. Tolerance may be no more than a willingness to “live and let live”; a tolerant person may refuse to see beyond his or her own perspective, recognizing that other people have different perspectives, but be unwilling to see the value in these perspectives, which is why tolerance can sometimes seem to have more in common with selfish indifference than with genuine understanding. Fleda not only recognizes that other people see things
differently but that these perspectives have value and interest. As limited as Mrs. Gereth’s perspective is, for example, Fleda is capable of appreciating it—she loves the treasures of Poynton just as much as Mrs. Gereth does, though not as exclusively as Mrs. Gereth does. Her willingness not just to see these perspectives but to do justice to their value, if not to herself than to others, makes her outlook both more than tolerant and more than the kind of cold-hearted clear-headedness that we have already associated with Kierkegaard’s seducer or with the attitude Mrs. Brook in *The Awkward Age* attempts to adopt.

We could call it simply “imaginative empathy” were it not for our recognition that “the ability to understand what another person is thinking or feeling [the standard philosophical definition of empathy] does not always conduce to compassionate action,” whereas Fleda’s empathy always ends in compassionate action, even if the action is as small as an attempt to acknowledge (either to herself or to others) the existential value of the other viewpoint.11 We could call it compassionate empathy (or just compassion) were it not that compassion usually includes the beliefs that the person deserving compassion is suffering and that that suffering is not really his or her fault.12 A perceptive person tends to maintain a more inclusive definition of suffering and victimization than an average person does—Fleda seems to feel that Mrs. Gereth is in some sense a victim of her blinkered obsession, for example—but because this larger kind of victimization does not, according to most people, qualify the sufferer for compassion, we might want to hesitate to call what Fleda feels compassionate empathy, since she feels it for people who may not seem to need compassion in the ordinary sense. Since Fleda extends concerned empathy to *everyone* she encounters without quibbling over whether or not each
individual deserves it, we should avoid calling her actions compassionate. Her actions are best described as charitable, a word that Fleda uses at least once to describe her obligations to characters in the novel (147). Charity usually connotes actions greater than merely perceiving, though; whereas “neighborly love,” which is frequently used as a synonym for charity, often indicates the presence of an emotion not always present in perception (unlike Nussbaum, I do not believe that the cognitive components of an emotion are sufficient for producing that emotion, though they are necessary to it). The best thing to call it is “responsible perception”: it is the cultivation of an extremely subtle awareness plus a commitment to the existential importance of the qualities of which one is aware. It is a belief that perception is a moral duty. If we can attribute to James any allegiance to what might be called a prescriptive morality we can attribute to him the allegiance to the duty of being “one of the people on whom nothing is lost,” a goal that is coextensive with moral integrity, as his critical works show. We can see how devotion to such a duty automatically orients us towards taking the Other seriously; it is conducive to friendship, as it is in Fleda’s friendship with Mrs. Gereth, as well as to mature versions of romantic love. Responsible perception is not identical with love but tends to be present when love is present, and as we have seen, it also tends to encourage feelings of goodwill and affection towards others by making them objects of concern.

Before moving on to novels that demand (for our purposes) less intricate readings I want to make several more observations about responsible perception based on an imaginative construction of what Fleda would have said and done had she maintained her openness throughout the length of her ordeal. We are back at the kind of question that I initially suggested that James’s novels intend for us to ask: what would Fleda have
thought and done had she been more honest with herself, and what would the consequences of this have been? Our answer to this question will reveal several further benefits to cultivating responsible perception—benefits that will also demonstrate how closely love and perception are related. As we have seen, at the root of Fleda’s lapse in imagination is her inattention to herself: she is frightened of her own desires and vulnerability. This not only prevents her marrying Owen but forces him to marry a woman he “hates” and robs Mrs. Gereth of her beautiful home. It also reinforces Mona’s selfishness and greed. On the other hand, none of these things would have happened had Fleda said to herself, “Certainly in most situations people should stick to their promises, especially in a society in which women could become even more vulnerable if men were to treat their engagements lightly. However, this particular situation is exceptional. For one thing, I love Owen—so much so that I am able to encourage his happiness even if means helping him hasten his marriage to someone else. Secondly, Mona does not love him—or if she does, she does not love him for the right reasons. She loves his home as much as she loves him, and she doesn’t even love his home for the right reasons, which are those that show the most nuanced appreciation of everything Owen and Poynton are. Thirdly, Owen sees that Mona does not love him and he loves me partly because I am different from her, because he senses and values qualities in me that she does not possess right now, not least my capacity to love him for more than his possessions. He may also love me because his mother has planted the idea in his head or because he is experiencing “cold feet” over his upcoming nuptials, but I know him well enough to know that purer feelings are there and that I would be cultivating them if the two of us were married. It is true that I would be robbing Mona of the prestige of Poynton, but I would not be robbing
her of a home. She will always have Waterbath, and a broken engagement is not an
irreversible stain on a girl’s character, especially for a girl like Mona who is stronger than
I and can rebound from almost anything. In contrast I am homeless and penniless and
will have nothing but my pride if I let it stand in the way of accepting Owen. Moreover,
Mona’s plans for Poynton, which include throwing out a “winter garden” as soon as she
gets here, are a travesty I should prevent if I can prevent it without sacrificing the feelings
of other human beings, as Mrs. Gereth often does. If Mona had any real feelings for
Owen or Poynton interfering would be wrong—but if she did, neither Owen nor Mrs.
Gereth would want me to interfere. By marrying Owen I can make myself happy and
secure for the rest of my life without sacrificing Owen or Mrs. Gereth’s happiness. I can
reconcile Mrs. Gereth with her son (she certainly needs to treat him better) and teach
Owen to appreciate his mother and to appreciate her exquisite artistic taste. Perhaps this
will help Mona be more considerate of her next lover. Perhaps it will also show people
that love is greater than pride and throw a small kink into this ghastly class system.”

One of the things this speech shows us is that self-awareness and self-
responsibility help cultivate awareness of and responsibility towards others. Fleda is
under the mistaken impression that her love for Owen and her desire to improve her own
situation will make her do an injustice to Mona, to Owen himself (by robbing him of his
“natural honesty” and integrity), and to a certain extent Mrs. Gereth, by seeming to
validate Mrs. Gereth’s right to confiscate the spoils and manipulate Owen. In respect to
herself and the crisis in which she finds herself she never considers the possibility that
sensitivity to the particular may have a higher moral priority than adherence to an
absolute ideal, though she obviously feels the validity of this activity when addressing the
needs of others. As we have seen, this lack of self-awareness prevents her from doing full justice to all the particulars of other people’s situations as well as her own. If she had questioned her adherence to “Thou shalt not help a man break his engagement,” asking herself what psychological motivation lay behind such an extreme commitment to honor, she might have been able to face her fears and distinguish between unhealthy motivations and healthy ones, the later of which may include letting go of her pride and honor and letting herself be vulnerable. She may also have recognized similar fears operating in Owen, who has been bossed and belittled by his mother his whole life and may be bossed and belittled for the rest of it if he marries Mona, and whose reluctance to break with Mona is as much a sign of weakness as of any sense of honor. She may also have had more sympathy for Mrs. Gereth, who like Fleda is a victim of a patriarchal social and legal system and who is in consequence being thrown out of the home she has created and governed for many years.

One of Fleda’s most interesting lapses in empathy is her failure to enter into Mrs. Gereth’s frustration over the loss of personal dignity that the dispossession entails. She empathizes with Mrs. Gereth’s feelings for the spoils, but she does scant justice to Mrs. Gereth’s “long resentment” over “the effacement to which English usage reduced the widowed mother” (49). Fleda reports Mrs. Gereth’s resentment but the text makes clear that she does not enter into it as she enters into Mrs. Gereth’s feelings for Poynton; instead Fleda’s feelings are all for Owen on this particular issue. She never questions her duty “to help him to live as a gentleman and carry through what he had undertaken; her problem was to reinstate him in his rights”; and her failure to question whether these rights are after all right is of a piece with her failure to question the honor code that keeps
him tied to Mona (95). All these lapses in sympathy can be linked to her lapses in similar areas of self-understanding, and that her responsibility to herself is connected to her responsibility to others. This point is important because of the close link that I have been suggesting exists between responsible perception and love. A distinguished history of religious and philosophical thought has suggested that self-love and love for others are incompatible, whereas if we understand love to be a combination of responsible perception (typically accompanied by more apparent acts of altruism) and unqualifiable but appropriate emotions and feelings, whether these be romantic, filial or friendly feelings, we can suggest that self-love may be as important to love for others as responsible self-perception is to responsible perception of others.

A second point illustrated by our hypothetical fully-perceptive Fleda is that an individual’s sensitivity towards one person need not conflict with his or her sensitivity towards another. A common misconception about love is that some forms of it are in tension with other forms; the most prevalent of these beliefs is that erotic love in its obsessive exclusivity conflicts with familial or friendly love. Religious thinkers have often claimed that *eros* and *philia* collide with Christian *agape*. Without attempting to determine how compatible *agape* is with secular loves of various sorts, I can at least point out that Fleda’s love for Owen, if it had been characterized by responsible awareness throughout, would not have conflicted with her friendship for his mother. The apparent discord comes only with Fleda’s devotion to uncritical notions of rights and honor. If Fleda had seen the claims of both mother and son with greater clarity she might have achieved some sort of reconciliation between them from the very beginning. Her role at Poynton and later at Ricks is to be ambassador between the mother and son: Mrs. Gereth
sends her out to talk sense into Owen and he sends her back to try to persuade his mother, and Fleda pretends to do both but really does neither. She tells Owen his mother is softening (she is not) and encourages hopes in Mrs. Gereth that she herself feels to be vain. Part of her stated reluctance to fulfill her mission is that though she is visiting Poynton at Mrs. Gereth’s request she has fallen in love with Owen early in her visit and has consequently switched sides. She now wants to help Owen and needs to hide this, she thinks, from Mrs. Gereth. The problem with this thinking however is not only that it puts Fleda in a false position (her devotion to her honor invariably forces her to lie, most frequently to Mrs. Gereth), but also that it depends on a false premise, which is that Mrs. Gereth would be angry if she found out Fleda loved Owen. Mrs. Gereth would be delighted to learn Fleda loves Owen, which may be what Fleda really fears—afraid that Mrs. Gereth will make another “vulgar” attempt to fling Fleda into Owen’s arms. On the other hand she is right in thinking that Mrs. Gereth would be upset to learn that Fleda’s love for Owen has convinced her of his right to the house, even if it means installing Mona as its mistress. But if, as I have been arguing, we understand Fleda’s perceptivity to be at odds with her uncritical devotion to Owen’s honor and property rights we can ask ourselves whether her perceptivity, added to or aided by her love, might have shown her that that love was best realized in helping Owen become more appreciative of his mother’s feelings and his mother more appreciative of Owen’s, which would have allowed her to avoid take sides.

If we ask ourselves which of James’s narrators comes closest to a thoroughly responsible perception we would probably say Lambert Strether, though even he fails to maintain his perception to the very end. One of Strether’s goals throughout *The
Ambassadors is to get everyone involved in the situation with Chad and Madame de Vionnet to do justice to the opposing viewpoint—most especially to get the Americans to appreciate the Europeans’ side, since the Europeans already have a fairly indulgent understanding of the American perspective. For Strether it is not just about seeing things fairly himself; it is also about trying to get others to see it fairly. In fact, the things he sees obligate him to try to get others to see them fairly. Chad’s change should matter to Sarah Newsome, and though capable of doing justice to Sarah’s view of the thing, Strether also has to plead with her to see the larger view. Something similar happens in The Spoils of Poynton: as limited as Mrs. Gereth’s imagination is, it does justice to a view of the spoils that Fleda is forced to acknowledge; the spoils demand a larger view than Owen and Mona give them, and Mrs. Gereth is right to demand it—although not to the exclusion of larger views of everything and everyone else. By the same token, Fleda is justified in accusing Mrs. Gereth of “simplifying way too much…of slashing into [life] with a great pair of shears—justified in trying to get her to see that “the tangle of life is much more intricate than you’ve ever, I think, felt it to be” (224). The lives of everyone involved in the situation with the spoils demand a larger view than the one Mrs. Gereth gives them.

Neither Strether, nor Mrs. Gereth nor Fleda is wrong in pleading for the larger view; instead, the view itself creates this obligation—what it is places demands on the viewers that the viewers ignore to their peril—the peril of not really doing justice to all life has to offer. Trying to persuade others to see these views—without doing injustice to their views—becomes a sort of moral obligation. It is an obligation James’s characters wield very delicately but one whose importance is not to be denied. Those like Fleda or
Maggie Verver who attempt to deny it are invariably shown to be choosing a less full life and to be preventing those around them from living as fully as well. In fact, since James sees his narrators as like novelists in being “charmed painters or poets,” we can conjecture that his narrators, like his novels, are intended to persuade those who fall into their hands of the importance of responsible perception. An individual’s responsibility to his or her perceptions may include attempting to persuade others of their existence; therefore, we can infer that doing equal justice to the perspectives of both Owen and Mrs. Gereth might have included persuading Owen, on the one hand, to see the greatness of both Mrs. Gereth’s character and the works of art and persuading Mrs. Gereth, on the other, to appreciate Owen’s simplicity and good nature. If Fleda had done this in her initial role as ambassador she might have achieved a reconciliation between their seemingly opposing interests. She might have enabled Owen to see the importance of preserving Poynton for his mother while encouraging Mrs. Gereth to have been more appreciative of her son. She might have been more successful in the former task since we see Owen testifying, through Fleda’s influence—though she consciously tries not to wield it—to more of an appreciation for art and delicacy as the novel progresses, whereas Mrs. Gereth proves “inexorable as death” until she loses the spoils, though Fleda actually promises Owen at one point that “I’ll make [your mother] see it, I’ll make her see it!” (99). (She does not, of course—she is too scared of revealing her love for Owen to even try.) Still, had Fleda persuaded only Owen she would have achieved more for each of them than she actually does.

On the other hand, if we understand responsible perception to include not only the responsibility of seeing clearly and thoroughly oneself but also (when the occasion allows
it) the responsibility of persuading others to see clearly and thoroughly, and if we recognize further that by marrying Owen or by convincing him to preserve the house for his mother no matter whom he marries, Fleda may be confirming his mother in her monomania, we may want to argue that Fleda is doing the best thing for Mrs. Gereth by depriving her of her home and forcing her to confront the limitations of her perspective. By the end of *Spoils* Mrs. Gereth has been forced to humanize her outlook—to recognize beauty in things other than priceless works of art. Perhaps this punishment is equal to and as equally justified as the one Fleda receives in the end for her own monomaniacal morality (that is, the burning of Poynton, which destroys all evidence of her imagined sacrifice). But is Fleda herself justified in making this a reason for her decision not to marry Owen, that Mrs. Gereth needs to be taught a lesson? Similarly, would she be justified in making Mona’s need to learn a lesson a reason for helping Owen out of his engagement? However inevitable some sort of fall may be for characters who fail to do justice to viewpoints other than their own, a responsible perceiver is never justified in bringing it about. The extent to which Fleda may have had Mrs. Gereth’s comeuppance in mind in refusing to close with Owen—and knowing what we do of Fleda’s psychology and her latent hatred for Mrs. Gereth this is not an unlikely motivation—may be just the extent to which the omniscient narrator has Fleda’s own comeuppance in mind in staging the burning of Poynton. Characters who attempt to “play God” are committing the cardinal sin of pride. Any attempt to aid others must be made with humility and a constant sense of one’s own liability to error; it must always take the form of persuasion, not coercion. If Fleda had faced her situation with a keener sensitivity she would have
asked herself how she could do justice to the most possible people and perspectives while employing the least possible force or bias.

Characters in James have a simultaneous responsibility to acknowledge the limitations of their own perspectives and constantly to attempt to transcend them. An unfortunate though understandable (and perhaps willful) blindness to her own limitations ties Fleda to a notion of honor that even contemporary readers found “an over-sensitive perversity.” Had she questioned the motivations behind her fidelity to this ideal she might have valued it less highly and given other considerations more weight. Her conviction of the sacredness of engagements (and property rights) might have given way to awareness that, like most so-called “moral absolutes,” these were political constructs that served the interests of a patriarchal and hierarchical civilization, constructs that enforced her marginalization. She might have decided to suspend her reliance on these notions in favor of more sensitivity to the particular, to her particular self as well as to the selves and situations of those around her. Had she done this, she might have found that this alternate morality—this “insistence on the importance of contextual complexity and particularized judgment in good deliberation”—would have admitted and aided the ethical value of emotion, including romantic love. It would have admitted emotion, first of all, as an existential fact—one whose existence, characteristics and consequences, all dependent to some degree on the situation in which they arise, must be thoroughly understood before they can be judged. Secondly, it would have admitted that certain emotions—particularly love, whether romantic or platonic—encourage reflexive awareness by developing an individual’s interest in someone outside herself, an interest that will (if it is love and not lust) force her to differentiate between her needs and desires.
and those of the loved one. This alternate, particularized morality may also aid love, especially the kind that is immature or unthinking—the kind often portrayed in literature as recalcitrant to reflexive morality. People who have cultivated the capacity for reflection may be less likely to confuse love with lust, for example. Like Fleda, they recognize the qualities in another person that would make for a compatible relationship; they are also more likely to give second chances to people whom others have dismissed, to feel sympathy for people whose experiences are alien from their own. A reflexive person already, Fleda’s personal involvement with the Gereths—her love for Owen and her sympathy with Mrs. Gereth—increases her sensitivity, and if she had seen this as morally valuable, more valuable than an unquestioning loyalty to Owen, she might have achieved happiness for all of them—for everyone in the drama who stands a chance of redemption.

Endnotes


7 Ibid., p. 143 and 148-149.


10 Hocks, p. 142. See note 6 above.


12 This account of compassion comes from Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).


14 Nussbaum, p. 348. See note 11.
Chapter IV

Love, even of the reflexive kind, does not always achieve its object. If Mona had been a different person—less vulgar and avaricious, more amenable to suggestion—Fleda might, if she had set herself to encouraging understanding in everyone, have succeeded in reconciling Mona and Owen in a way that is conducive to their mutual growth and happiness. In she had succeeded, she would have had to console herself with the thought that she had at least been true to herself and her love for Owen, a consolation she is ultimately denied (though symbolically) at the end of her actions in *The Spoils of Poynton*. I want to turn now to two other novels from the experimental period whose heroines are more genuinely entitled to this consolation when their love fails to attain its object. James does not always deny his protagonists the consolation of self-knowledge: in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* the respective heroines, young girls, are disappointed in love, but unlike Fleda their disappointment is caused less by their own blindness than by the blindness of others—by the inability of their loved ones to free themselves from either the seductions of lust or the claims of conventional morality. The loss of such men is consequently, for the reader, less of a matter of regret, because despite the loss both girls achieve, through their love, a level of discernment that will, especially in Maisie’s case, stand them in good stead in future relationships.

I want to look briefly at *What Maisie Knew* to trace the connection between Maisie’s need to give and receive love and her developing moral sense, which turns out to be the kind of moral sense characterized by a keen sensitivity to the particular, not the kind Mrs. Wix, her governess—the representative of “old-fashioned conscience”—vainly attempts to teach her.¹ What is interesting about this larger moral sense is that James
portrays it as an ordinary psychological development, one that unfolds in and through Maisie’s natural need for love. Thanks to Western schools of religion and psychoanalysis, we are used to thinking of morality as something superimposed by society on our fundamentally bestial and egocentric natures, which may be true of the kind of morality represented by Mrs. Wix; but in Maisie’s morality passion and compassion develop concurrently.

If Maisie is to develop any sort of moral sense she will have to do it on her own; until the advent of Mrs. Wix the field is clear of adults who possess consciences of any sort. A nurse who protests against Mr. and Mrs. Farange’s habit of conveying insulting messages to each other through Maisie is fired by the end of the first chapter and Maisie is left to be reared in a moral vacuum. Mr. and Mrs. Farange are species of James’s rare irredeemable characters; they are vain, licentious, showy, spiteful monsters who function mainly to exaggerate the reader’s sense that Maisie is floundering in the dark. Her first awareness is that the messages she has been passing from parent to parent have been conveying hatred and insult. She has been conveying them “faithfully” with a childish need to oblige parents who have impressed her with how much trouble she has caused them (13). When she realizes, without understanding what the messages mean, that her words do not match her intentions—that she is being made messenger of unhappy and unpleasant things—she shuts down, taking refuge in watchful silence. For a long stretch of the story she is occupied in attempting to understand what adults mean when they say things that do not square with her childish understanding of things, an understanding driven by her need to be loved and to have everyone love each other. She is attracted to the people who are nicest to her: she clings to whoever seems to care about her, although
like any child she is dazzled and drawn by beautiful people, unable as yet to make the distinction between inward and outward beauty. Her first attachment is to Miss Overmore, her first governess at her mother’s, whose loveliness—especially when she holds her fork with her little finger curled out—and apparent liking of her commands Maisie’s loyalty (18). Miss Overmore is the one who teaches her the pleasure of secrecy, who demonstrates the sense of power that comes from withholding truth, who gives Maisie the impression that withholding the truth is one of the ways Maisie can be of use to those who are taking such fond care of her.

Miss Overmore is partially succeeded by Mrs. Wix, who becomes Maisie’s governess at her mother’s when Miss Overmore defects to Mr. Farange’s house. Mrs. Wix is poor and shabby and, as Maisie divines with her childish acuteness, someone who is “in the eyes of the world a figure mainly to laugh at” (25). In lieu of other accomplishments Mrs. Wix has cultivated a grand faded morality which she nourishes with large doses of romantic fiction. Throughout the story represents the convergent claims (at least in the similarity of their goals, that of tidying up the ugliness of life) of romance and morality, which provide both her and Maisie with a refuge from the sense—felt more consciously in Mrs. Wix—of their mutual vulnerability and superfluity in their exile in the shabby schoolroom at Mrs. Farange’s. It is Mrs. Wix who brings Maisie first tidings of Sir Claude, breaching the gates of Mr. Farange’s house bearing Sir Claude’s picture, championing him as the saviour of them both. He will, she implies, looking triumphantly at Miss Overmore, deliver Maisie from the contamination of her father’s home and elevate and dignify the position of them both.
With or without Mrs. Wix’s embroidery, Sir Claude’s beauty, good-nature, and frankness are as irresistible to Maisie as they are to everyone else. Come to fetch her from her father’s house, he appears before her as a “shining presence”:

Nothing else that was most beautiful ever belonging to her could kindle that particular joy—not Mrs. Beale at that very moment, not papa when he was gay, more mamma when she was dressed, nor Lisette when she was new. The joy almost overflowed in tears when he laid his hand on her and drew her to him, telling her, with a smile of which the promise was as bright as that of a Christmas-tree, that he knew her ever so well by her mother, but had come to see her now that he might know her for himself (57).

Sir Claude’s appearance here is associated through Maisie’s mind with the joy of the advent or perhaps—with his “shining presence”—with the second coming. It is interesting to compare Sir Claude with Owen Gereth, who has something of the same effect on Fleda. It may be an effect of his homoeroticism that James makes so much more of a point of his beautiful men than he makes of his beautiful women. Beauty never provides a complete explanation for the effect of women like Princess Cassamassima or Miriam Rooth, whose beauty is either sharpened or qualified by their genius or artificiality. Sir Claude’s beauty, like Owen’s, goes “all the way down”—it is as descriptive of his charm and good-nature as it is of his physical appearance. To have Maisie captivated so instantly is therefore not to attribute to her a superficial infatuation like her earlier infatuation for Miss Overmore, now so patently superceded. Sir Claude has a more sincere affection for Maisie, a more sincere desire to do right by her, a more honest and open temperament, and a more considerate and convivial personality than anyone else Maisie has known, and these things are apparently visible in his countenance as he kisses Maisie hello.
All this is as agreeable to Maisie’s hunger for affection and security as it is to Mrs. Wix’s, and the two spend most of their time in the schoolroom idolizing Sir Claude. Mrs. Wix’s romantic infatuation makes perfect sense to Maisie’s childish mind. They envision themselves as glorious martyrs in Sir Claude’s cause, which appears to be, to Maisie, an attempt to make everything as pleasant as possible, to smooth out the discord and disagreement that has characterized her entire existence. To Mrs. Wix and to the reader his cause is somewhat different: smoothing out the discord is inseparable from restoring decorum and decency, concepts Maisie does not understand. Sir Claude does his best to live up to the expectations of both, and the frankness and geniality with which he generally treats them are what make Maisie suspicious when he asks her to keep a secret from Mrs. Wix. The secret is (though he does not explain it this way to Maisie) that he has fallen in love—or fallen into the clutches—of the new Mrs. Beale Farange, formerly Miss Overmore, and that he hopes with Maisie’s help to reintegrate her into their lives without making a scandal. Maisie declines to help him sneak Mrs. Beale into the schoolroom without Mrs. Wix’s knowledge, and his requesting this of her has a very different effect than did the secret understanding she once shared with Mrs. Beale:

There came to her from this glance at what they might hide the first small glimpse of something in him that she wouldn’t have expected. There had been times when she had had to make the best of the impression that she herself was deceitful; yet she had never concealed anything bigger than a thought. Of course she now concealed this thought of how strange it would be to see him hide (85).

The text does not tell us how Maisie has figured out what being deceitful means and how she seems to know it is bad. Perhaps her mother has accused her of it after failing to penetrate Maisie’s silences, or perhaps she has heard one of the adults around her charge it to one of the others. So far she has been resigned to her own deceit, but the difference
in Sir Claude’s is not just in the size of the thing to be concealed. It is also in its consequences: she conceals things from her parents because she knows that they dislike each other and does not want to be made an instrument of their strife, but Sir Claude is supposed to be “brothers-in-arms” with Mrs. Wix, and to keep something from her would create strife, not stifle it. She is uneasy about this possibility of discord between two people who have created such an atmosphere of good will around her, uneasy that Sir Claude, by suggesting it, is associating himself with disharmony. The time Maisie has spent at her mother’s has been, thanks to him and his kindness to her and Mrs. Wix, filled with gaiety and games and more happiness than she has ever known. Maisie is also uneasy about Sir Claude’s needing to hide something. For her, as for Fleda Vetch, concealment is a defense mechanism—a defense against fear of personal vulnerability. Maisie has not “expected” that Sir Claude would be afraid of anything; he has (even in this talk) been the person who has spoken to her most frankly about things that other adults have tried to hide. She has never associated him with fear, but the chapter closes with his admission that Maisie’s mother frightens him a good deal, which is what makes the deceit necessary.

This episode illuminates the way Maisie’s mind works. She has not been—and will not be, on several more occasions—adverse to deceit if it saves her from being a messenger of ill will, but she “cuts [Sir Claude] short” for suggesting they deceive Mrs. Wix (85). Her morality is “relative”—relative to what would be best for her in each particular situation. What is best for her, however, is not that her selfish whims be gratified but that people treat her and each other kindly. On an intuitive level she already understands that her own well-being is tied to the well-being of those around her. She
does not, as yet, see herself as separate from her governess and four parents. They are the architects of her fate. Like Fleda, she is bound both by circumstances and her fear of making them worse. Also like Fleda, she exercises only passive resistance, choosing when she has to choose (in a passive sort of way—she never asks Sir Claude for anything) to attach herself to those who will cause her the least suffering, that is, those who are most capable of responsible perception, of perceiving her needs and understanding their responsibility to them. Sir Claude is the best choice because he is freer to perceive than any of the others (though this is obviously not saying much). Mrs. Wix’s vision is limited by her morality, which in turn is limited by her fear—a double blindness, symbolized in the text by the “straighteners” she uses to correct her “divergent obliquity of vision,” one of the physical defects which along with her poverty are the source of her fear. The straighteners, she tells Maisie, are “put on for the sake of others, whom, as she believed, they helped to recognize the bearing, otherwise doubtful, of her regard” (25). This belief, like her belief in the helpfulness of her prescriptive morality (“[Sir Claude] leans on me—he leans on me!” she says, hushed and proud, to Maisie), is offered to the reader with ironic amusement (96). Even Maisie knows that Mrs. Wix is not to be taken seriously. No beauty is associated with the perspective of conventional morality in *What Maisie Knew*, as it is in *Spoils* and *The Awkward Age*. Mrs. Wix’s “greasy greyness,” topped off by her goggles, reminds Maisie of “the polished shell or corslet of a horrid beetle” (25). Consequently when Maisie’s great trial comes, the time when—like Fleda—she is forced to take control of her destiny, she is not seduced by the perspective of conventional morality. She cannot defer to notions of honor and delicacy; she is forced to recognize her fear as fear—and to choose between love and fear.
Unlike Fleda, Maisie chooses love, and I want to spend the rest of this discussion proving, first, that her choice is not—as some have argued—a compromise between passion and principle, if we understand principle in a conventional way, and secondly analyzing the content of this choice and how she arrives at it.\(^3\) We have shown that Fleda and many of her readers mistakenly believe her choice to be between passion (or pleasure or happiness) and principle; many readers, failing to do justice to the ambiguities of the text, have understood Maisie’s choice in the same way. Certainly this is the way Mrs. Wix sees it, and after Sir Claude has left them together in Boulogne she strives to get Maisie to see it that way. She wants Sir Claude to forsake his adulterous relationship with Mrs. Beale and set up asylum with her and Maisie. Failing to keep him from returning to England, to the clutches of Mrs. Beale, she turns on Maisie in exasperation when the latter questions why it would not be possible for the four of them—Sir Claude, Mrs. Beale, her and Mrs. Wix—to live together in Europe. Maisie has completely accepted Sir Claude’s argument that Mr. Beale’s desertion gives the current Mrs. Beale as much freedom as the former Mrs. Beale’s desertion has given Sir Claude. And those of us with modern eyes—eyes more accustomed to the point of view of modern morality—can acknowledge Sir Claude’s point along with Maisie. There is difference between two people living together when their respective spouses have abandoned them and the same two people living together when their spouses are still committed to their respective marriages. As readers we can also agree that of the four parents in Maisie’s life Sir Claude and to a lesser degree Mrs. Beale are certainly the most respectable; their affair is carried on with some degree of decorum and attention to the feelings of others (Maisie’s especially, on Sir Claude’s part).
One of the hallmarks of responsible perceivers is their caution in overstepping the bounds of general principle. General principles become principles because they serve a useful purpose; therefore it is always best to have clear and valid reasons for choosing not to be guided by them. Mrs. Beale’s respect for principle is obviously more superficial than Sir Claude’s, fueled more by concern for her reputation than concern for anyone else, though we can excuse this to a certain extent by reminding ourselves (as we reminded ourselves with Fleda) of her impoverished background and limited alternatives. But Sir Claude has always attempted to do justice to the best possible rationale for the principles in question, that of respecting the feelings and rights of others. He has refused to speak poorly of his wife in front of Maisie, he has done his best to project the sense of security that their marriage should entitle Maisie to feel, and has refrained from sneaking Mrs. Beale into the schoolroom when Ida and Mrs. Wix are out, all of which is more than can be said of Ida herself. Consequently we are inclined to sympathize when he tells Mrs. Wix that “You’ve judged for me, I know, a good deal…but you can’t do it always; no one can do that for another, don’t you see, in every case. There are exceptions, particular cases that turn up and that are awfully delicate” (261). We hear echoes of Fleda’s accusation of oversimplification, and Maisie and Mrs. Wix are struck by his “princely” bearing as he says these things.

To Maisie Sir Claude is entirely justified in thinking Mrs. Beale free—not that he has had to justify himself to her as he attempts to justify himself to Mrs. Wix, since Maisie has no “moral sense” in the conventional sense of the word. To Maisie her father’s badness does justify Mrs. Beale’s freedom, and she is not just taking it from Sir Claude that her father is bad—when Sir Claude tried to hand her Mr. Beale’s
“abominable” letter and is intercepted by Mrs. Wix, Maisie tells him “I know what’s in it!” (255). She knows because she has seen her father and his new mistress, the Countess. Maisie’s reaction to the Countess is as disturbing as her introduction to Sir Claude was exciting—disturbing for the reader for its betrayal of James’s unsavory racist side but disturbing for Maisie because it convinces her that there is something wrong with her father’s new relationship and—by extension—with her mother’s relationship with the Captain. Maisie is repulsed by the Countess’s ugliness, which is described in lurid terms. Yet Maisie’s susceptibility to appearance is rarely a susceptibility to outward beauty alone; her own parents are described in the introduction as remarkable handsome, but Maisie reacts to their beauty only when she begins to imagine that it represents some redeeming inner goodness. As we have seen, her responses to Sir Claude and Miss Overmore’s beauty are indicative of these individuals’ (comparative) virtue and good-nature. As readers we are also aware that James is using physical appearance to symbolize what Maisie intuits but is too young to articulate (and James wants to tell as much of the story as possible from Maisie’s point of view). We can assume, therefore—without doing injustice to the part of Maisie’s judgment that is typically childish and superficial—that Maisie’s reaction to the Countess is at least partly caused by an acute childish intuition into the Countess’s character. More explicit in the text is Maisie’s awareness that her father cannot possibly love someone who looks like the Countess (knowing the kind of woman her father has previously preferred) and that if he does not love her the relationship must be terribly wrong, just as her mother’s situation became wonderfully right when the Captain assured Maisie he loved her. Another reason for Maisie’s reaction to the Countess—though it is one that should offend us in this particular
context—is that physical beauty is a morally relevant feature for her, and not just because of her youthful immaturity. All of James’s reflective narrators—and these are the characters who receive James’s greatest moral approval—are sensitive to the relevance of physical beauty in ethical evaluation. Whether it is Fleda’s appreciation of Owen or Strether’s appreciation of Madame de Vionnet, there is almost always a sense in James that beauty is something that must be taken into account when ethical decisions are made. Thus when Mrs. Wix tries to convince Maisie that Mrs. Beale is a bad person and it would be a “crime” for her and Sir Claude to live together, Maisie responds, “She’s beautiful and I love her! I love her and she’s beautiful.” The implication is, as Mrs. Wix immediately recognizes, that Mrs. Wix is “hideous” and Maisie hates her (276): “As for my being hideous it’s hardly the first time I’ve been told so! I know it so that even if I haven’t whiskers—have I?—I dare say there are other ways in which the Countess is a Venus to me!” (276).

The comparison with the Countess is apt not only because it demonstrates how much beauty factors into Maisie’s understanding of goodness but also because it underscores the connection—one that James intends us to make—between the ugliness of reductive morality and the ugliness of reductive greed and desire. While Mrs. Wix is attempting to “straighten” Maisie’s vision, Maisie is (naively and perhaps unconsciously) attempting to straighten hers, by reminding her of the moral relevance of factors other than who is married to whom. Mrs. Beale’s beauty and charm are morally relevant, as is Maisie’s love for her. For Maisie, love is an important factor in ethical decisions: her love for Mrs. Beale, Mrs. Beale’s love for her, Mrs. Beale’s love for Sir Claude, Sir Claude’s love for Maisie and Mrs. Wix, and their love for him. When Mrs. Wix insists
that Maisie wants to be rid of Mrs. Beale just as much as she does, Maisie recognizes the truth of this statement—she does want Sir Claude to be exclusively theirs—but it makes her feel ashamed, not because Mrs. Wix has uncovered a moral sense she is trying to pretend she does not possess but because she feels that she is “being precisely accused of the meanness that had brought everything down on her through her very desire to shake herself clear of it” (275). “I never, never hoped I wasn’t going again to see Mrs Beale!” she says passionately to Mrs. Wix, “I didn’t, I didn’t, I didn’t!” Maisie has been trying to avoid meanness her whole life, and to be mean is the worst crime in her mind. To love—to be loyal—is the greatest good, and Mrs. Wix has better luck in her attempts to instill a moral sense in Maisie when she appeals to Maisie’s love for Sir Claude the next afternoon.

By the next day Mrs. Wix has been trying to give Maisie a moral sense for twenty-four hours, with dubious success. It is obvious from what the text records of Maisie’s speech and thought processes and Mrs. Wix’s exasperated responses that she is unable to comprehend (to the reader’s ironic amusement) why Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale’s living together would be a crime. Up to the last their arguments bounce off each other’s impenetrable minds:

‘Is it a crime?’ Maisie then asked. Mrs. Wix was as prompt as if she had been crouching in a lair. ‘Branded by the Bible.’
‘Well, he won’t commit a crime.’
Mrs. Wix looked at her gloomily. ‘He’s committing one now.’
‘Now?’
‘In being with her.’
Maisie had it on her tongue’s end to return once more: ‘But now he’s free.’ She remembered, however, in time, that one of the things she had known for the last entire hour was that this made no difference. After that, and if to turn the right way, she was on the point of a blind dash, a weak reversion to the reminder that it might make a difference, might diminish
the crime for Mrs. Beale; till such a reflexion was in its order also quashed by the visibility in Mrs. Wix’s face of the collapse produced by her inference from her pupil’s manner that after all her pains her pupil didn’t even yet adequately understand (285).

When no letter comes from Sir Claude that morning Mrs. Wix changes tactics. Announcing that Sir Claude is obviously afraid of Mrs. Beale she abruptly asks Maisie, after a pause, whether it has occurred to her to be jealous of Mrs. Beale. Maisie sees in this question an opportunity to prove her moral sense beyond a doubt. Up to this point she has been keenly aware—if she understands nothing else—that Mrs. Wix considers her “superficial” for not seeming to understand what a moral sense is. She now sees a way to prove that she is taking the situation as seriously as she should. Acknowledging that it has occurred to her to be jealous of Mrs. Beale, she then “throw[s] out in regard to Mrs. Beale such a remark as she had never dreamed she would live to make. ‘If I thought she was unkind to him—I don’t know what I should do...Well I can think of one thing...I’d kill her’ (289). Mrs. Wix’s response to this is immediate and unqualified: she starts weeping so heavily that “the straighteners [are] all blurred with tears which after a little seemed to have sprung from [Maisie’s] own eyes. There were tears in fact on both sides of the spectacles, and they were even so thick that it was presently all Maisie could do to make out through them that slowly, finally, Mrs. Wix put forth a hand” (288). The two sit holding hands until they hear the dinner bell ring, each convinced that Maisie has finally understood the moral point of view.

At least Maisie is convinced that she has; but what Mrs. Wix has done (if we want to read her as completely manipulative) is play a rather a nasty trick on Maisie. Despairing of giving Maisie a moral sense, Mrs. Wix has decided to enlist her against Mrs. Beale by appealing to her affection for Sir Claude—the least noble side of her
affection, the side Maisie has been doing her best to suppress. Goaded, Maisie admits that “it has occurred to her” to be jealous of Mrs. Beale and that if Mrs. Beale ever hurt Sir Claude she would be capable of killing her. Having admitted this and received Mrs. Wix’s emotional approval Maisie believes that she finally understands and has convinced Mrs. Wix that she understands the moral point of view (it is still very important for Maisie to please everyone at this point). But if we were to ask Maisie, as she is sitting on the bench holding Mrs. Wix’s hand, what the moral point of view is she would probably say, “Thou shalt be willing to do anything (including evil) for love.” We know—and Mrs Wix knows—that this is not the moral point of view understood in the traditional sense. The traditional moral view, branded in the Bible, is “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (285). Whether Mrs. Wix is deliberately deceiving Maisie or has confused her own moral sense with her passion for Sir Claude is difficult to say—knowing both James and Mrs. Wix it is probably a bit of both. The tears fogging the straighteners and Mrs.Wix’s pitiful adoration for Sir Claude support the latter interpretation, the way she pushes Maisie into this painful admission supports the former. At any rate, Mrs. Wix reminds us of how easily moral motivations can be confused with (or used to disguise) primitive passions—both are unthinking absolute allegiances.

When Mrs. Beale arrives in Boulogne and attempts to persuade Mrs. Wix and Maisie to stay abroad with her and Sir Claude it becomes obvious (to both them and the reader) that Maisie and Mrs. Wix are not in as much accord as they thought they were. It becomes obvious that what became clear to Maisie on the hill is that she loves Sir Claude best, that her allegiance is to him, and that Mrs. Beale is not good for him—the latter of which makes us realize that Maisie’s love is more mature, less about jealousy and more
about concern for Sir Claude’s well-being than we might have realized from the scene on
the hill. As they are talking at bedtime after their day with Mrs. Beale it becomes
apparent that Maisie’s love for Sir Claude is more mature than Mrs. Wix is capable of
realizing. When Mrs. Wix asks her whether she intends to “kill” Mrs. Beale, Maisie does
not answer, persisting in asking instead whether Mrs. Wix has decided to accept Mrs.
Beale in Sir Claude’s place. Poor Mrs. Wix is obviously in a hard place, caught by her
own inconsistency. She can hardly say she wants Sir Claude to come now that Mrs.
Beale is there and still retain her moral integrity, but on the other hand she cannot say she
prefers Mrs. Beale and retain Maisie’s allegiance. So what she does is “hedge” and loses
Maisie’s allegiance anyway. From Maisie’s perspective Mrs. Wix is backing away from
their solidarity on the hill, their solidarity in their intense love for Sir Claude. She has
never understood Mrs. Wix’s moral qualms so now all she understands is that Mrs. Wix
loves Sir Claude less than she herself does and in fact loves him so little that she is
thinking about sacrificing him for Mrs. Beale because Mrs. Beale has “fawned” on her
for a day. We already know that Mrs. Wix is pitifully susceptible to flattery—that her
moral sense is less likely to be dimmed by giving genuine love than by receiving a little
appreciation herself—and given her background and appearance we may (and should)
wince at the harshness with which Maisie has sacrificed her before they go to bed. As
poor as Maisie herself is bound to be, she has not yet experienced destitution and can
perhaps afford to be more loyal and idealistic than Mrs. Wix. On the other hand, Mrs.
Wix is the one who has forced Maisie into this take-no-prisoners position and is probably
not entitled to groan if she is the first to suffer from it.
This bedroom scene makes it clear that whatever either of them thought, Maisie has not developed a moral sense in any traditional sense of the word. We have seen a little of what she *has* developed and how she has developed it, but I want to look more closely at this development as it comes into full bloom in the railway station with Sir Claude. One of the things we have to keep in mind in describing Maisie’s perspective is that it is not static; it is constantly maturing—growing in leaps and bounds in the last days at Boulogne—so that what she feels and understands at each point is usually modified by subsequent impressions, as we have just seen in the difference between her feelings on the rampart and her feelings in her bedroom later that same evening.  

Thus the best place to say anything about her with certainty is at the end of the novel when she makes her decision and all that is left is for Sir Claude to admire it and make his. First of all we have to acknowledge that for Maisie to make any decision at all is impressive; for the past twelve or thirteen years she has been—like Fleda—almost completely passive, taking in a ton of impressions but acting on very few of them, and always acting on the ones that will make things most pleasant for her. Since she is a child with an unusual amount to take in, there is more excuse for her passivity than there is for Fleda’s and for Maggie Verver’s in *The Golden Bowl*. She certainly has to make her big choice with far less knowledge than they have. Unlike Fleda she does not even understand all the levels on which her choice reverberates; she has no understanding of the “moral sense” of the situation and perhaps as little understanding of the sexual activity the moral sense is meant to condemn, although as I mentioned earlier this probably makes her choice easier in some respects than either Fleda’s or Mrs. Wix’s. Certainly she does not have to worry about public opinion and has yet to experience the
evils of indigence and social ostracism. And if that makes her decision clearer for her it also makes it clearer for us, in not having to wonder (as we did with Fleda) what it would have been had her vision not been weakened by these things. For her the difficulty of the decision is ultimately in making it, in having to own responsibility for what will happen because of her actions, as she has been afraid to do in the past for fear of doing the wrong thing.

The decision for which she has to take responsibility is whether she will stay with Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude together and sacrifice Mrs. Wix or leave them and go home—which is nowhere—with Mrs. Wix, who is “nobody” (309). If she stays with Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale she will be helping facilitate a relationship that makes Sir Claude unhappy, weak, deceitful and afraid but if she does not go with them she will be sacrificing her own happiness. This may seem at first glance to be the same decision Mrs. Wix is struggling over, but the difference is that Maisie’s objection to the first alternative has nothing to do with its being a crime “branded by the Bible.” As we have seen in the previous evening’s discussion with Mrs. Wix, her objection is solely on the grounds that Sir Claude is “afraid” of Mrs. Beale—that Mrs. Beale “hasn’t even been kind to him” (309). However self-serving her dislike of Mrs. Beale may have seemed when Mrs. Wix first appealed to it, as soon as Sir Claude returns to Boulogne Maisie perceives the level of uneasiness his liaison with Mrs. Beale is genuinely causing him. Awakened to Mrs. Wix’s announcing “my poor dear, he has come,” Maisie rushes into the salon and is disconcerted when Sir Claude stops short and “for a longer minute than had ever at such a junction elapsed,” does not open his arms for an embrace (318). The pause that ensues enables Maisie to look around and realize that the salon is no longer his
and hers—it is now his and Mrs. Beale’s and he is standing apart from her, greeting her
“across a gulf” (318-9). The text records that “in a flash she saw he was different—more
so than he knew or designed” (319). It is obvious to the reader that he has spent the night
with Mrs. Beale, but when Maisie asks him if he has seen her he gives a bold-faced lie,
and for the first time in their relationship Maisie receives the “faintest purest coldest
conviction that he wasn’t telling the truth” (320). He is extremely uncomfortable with
the whole situation, and his discomfort is increased with each slip in his story—when he
has to leave without his stick because he has left it in the bedroom with Mrs. Beale, when
the waiter asks him what should be sent up for breakfast “for Madame” (323).

When they sit down together at the café Maisie becomes aware of something even
more disconcerting, that he is more nervous than she has ever seen him. “Little by little”
this gives her “a settled terror, a terror that partook of the coldness she had felt just
before, at the hotel, to find herself, on his answer about Mrs. Beale, disbelieve him”
(326). She begins to realize the depth of his fear and it “[begins] to come to her now that
there was one thing just such a man above all could be afraid of. He could be afraid of
himself” (326). She does not even then understand the depth or the real cause of his fear
but when he explains what he wants of her, the terror deepens as she realizes how much
depends on her and how much more difficult her decision has become over the last few
hours. As she recognizes as they get up to walk around and think it over, the safety that
she had expected to feel once Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale were “free” to live together and
love her has completely dissipated, and “the new medium [is] somehow more oppressive
than the old” (341).
What she has not anticipated but we as readers have with our adult knowledge of
the real natures of both Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale is that even with moral quibbles out of
the way the situation is a recipe for disaster. A flighty woman who is using a little girl to
keep hold of a man whom she knows does not really love her and a man who is bound to
this woman by his obligations to this little girl is not a recipe for a “safe” situation, nor is
the possibility that Maisie’s father has already mentioned, that Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale
will eventually grow bold enough not to need Maisie to cover for them and then she will
become an annoying obligation. What Maisie has sensed is that this is already
happening—that now that Ida and Mr. Beale have set their spouses “free” Sir Claude no
longer feels the need to keep up appearances, of which Maisie has been a part. We can
almost pity the poor butterfly in being saddled with a prepubescent child at the very
moment he is being freed from any need to maintain a heroic and virtuous posture. Ida is
certainly an admirably clever devil. The dullness of Sir Claude’s appreciation of his own
liberation at Folkstone where Ida comes to see them off is a sign to the reader, if not to
Maisie, that he realizes that his heroic gesture has played right into Ida’s hands, giving
her a chance to rid herself of Maisie with a great show of virtue for the sacrifice. Though
still necessary to Mrs. Beale as a shield against public opinion (though several characters
have predicted that this will not last long either), Maisie is now an impediment to Sir
Claude’s freedom—if by his freedom we mean his freedom to sleep in the same bed with
Mrs. Beale without having to lie about it to a little girl the next morning. But what
Maisie realizes during their scene by the tracks is that there is a better freedom to be
had—a freedom from fear and weakness, from being a slave to either passion or
convention. This is the freedom from needing something to hide behind, from being unable to look life in the face and make choices for oneself.

In those last few hours in Boulogne Maisie’s love for Sir Claude develops from an immature passion born out of weakness and need to a genuine love characterized by responsibility to the best in both him and her. Instead of choosing between the two alternatives he offers she suggests a third—that the two of them leave Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale and go off to Paris together. In doing so they would be escaping the bonds of both conventional morality (Mrs. Wix) and soulless lust (Mrs. Beale), neither of which allows for the possibility of love that sees beyond the limitations of the rote or the immediate.

Maisie has indulged in a childish love that romanticizes Sir Claude to keep up the illusion of safety and salvation until she is forced (by circumstances her own immaturity has created!) to face the truth about Sir Claude and the entire situation—or at least enough of the truth to be able to make an informed decision about it. She has to really see everything, or as much as she can see with her childish mind. To do her justice she really has been trying to see throughout the length of the novel. The limitations on her perspective have usually been imposed from outside, from Mrs. Wix’s idealizations and the cover-ups and effusions of Mrs. Beale and the others. What little self-deceit she has practiced has been for the same reason Fleda Vetch practices hers—in defense against the horrors of her personal situation. As I have already mentioned, the self-deceit seems more defensible in Maisie’s case because she is still a child and can be called a victim more justifiably than Fleda. But when Maisie is finally forced to make a decision she makes what Sir Claude (who has enough integrity to see the beauty of her decision yet too little to make one of his own) calls the “only right one,” the one that does most justice
to the potential in everyone. As we have seen from examining *Spoils*, in James the right decision is not the one that allows every perspective equal importance, but the one in which an individual grants every perspective equal consideration and then chooses among them. The right decision is the one that allows experience to inform morality not morality to inform and limit experience, and once everything is experienced chooses the perspective that will do most justice to the best in everyone. In Maisie, who is still a child, the “everyone” is limited to her and Sir Claude, but we will see in *The Awkward Age* that as an individual grows, the “everyone” becomes more and more inclusive, and we can certainly imagine Maisie’s sympathy growing stronger now that she is getting older and going out into the world.

The “best” perspective in James’s world seems to be the one in which each individual is encouraged to work through his or her prejudices and misconceptions in order to see people and things clearly and to help them become responsible and, hopefully, loving perceivers themselves. This is precisely what Maisie does and what she is trying to do throughout the novel, with ever increasing success. In this effort to see everything clearly she is aided by her natural capacity for love, one that we have to say must be unusually strong if it has survived a childhood like hers so intact. Perhaps the least realistic part of the novel is the purity of her emotions and instincts. We often expect an abused child to replicate the selfishness and meanness that characterizes her parents. Yet James is very explicit in the preface to *Maisie* about representing a girl because “the sensibility of the female young is indubitably, for early youth, the greater,” adding that “my plan would call, on the part of my protagonist, for ‘no end’ of sensibility” (viii). To imagine a child who has reacted to neglect by becoming more and
more docile and clingy is certainly not impossible. To imagine anyone with as much sensibility as most of James’s “centers of consciousness” possess is more of a stretch, but it is clear from the story that James intends for Maisie to be one of the purest centers of consciousness he ever portrayed, one who has not been compromised or corrupted as most of the others (even Strether) have. James describes Maisie as full of “active, contributive close-circling wonder…in which [her] identity is guarded and preserved, and which makes her case remarkable exactly by the weight of the tax on it” (xiv). The tax is the sheer number of vulgar and tawdry impressions out of which she must construct her finely-tuned consciousness, and we can say that of all James’s tales this is the one that mostly closely resembles a story of good versus evil, of a heroine of extraordinary virtue facing and defeating her foes. The foes in this story are the twin foes of blind, selfish passion (characterized by all four parents) and equally blind, self-serving morality (characterized by Mrs. Wix), and the heroine must avoid both if she is to defend and increase her virtue, which is that “vivacity of intelligence by which she indeed does vibrate in the infected air” (xiv). She avoids both successfully—resisting the impulse to “see Mrs. Wix” before she makes her decision—and chooses the alternative that guarantees her clarity of vision, aided by her love for Sir Claude.

Maisie has not chosen between pleasure and principle; she has chosen a higher alternative to both—love and “wonder,” another of James’s names for imagination or responsible perception. With the possible minor exception of Sir Claude (and perhaps the Captain?) she is the only character in the novel who is both imaginative and loving. Her imagination helps her realize that she is the only one of the whole group who really loves Sir Claude. Conversely her love helps her see what would be best for him. There is a
wonderful correlation in the novel between Maisie’s developing affections and her developing understanding. Unlike Fleda and most of James’s other characters, she does not have a lifetime of insensibility or deeply engrained prejudices to counteract. In the beginning she does not even have language; she is “a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre,” bombarded by an array of impressions that she must begin to sort out and name (9). Her emotions are equally inarticulate and in need of sorting out, and their development follows that of her limited understanding. In the beginning she loves Miss Overmore because Miss Overmore is pretty, because Miss Overmore seems to like her, and because Miss Overmore is “saving” her from some unknown fate (18). She takes each person at face value, loving them because they have the appearance of loving her, loving the ones that are attractive more than the ones that are not. As her understanding increases, however—as she is exposed to individuals whose appeal lies less on the surface—her affections also deepen; and they finally settle on Sir Claude because he is the individual out of all the others who resonates the most for her imagination. As her understanding deepens her love for him deepens; as we have seen, the crucial events of the last three days in Boulogne are her successive realizations that she loves Sir Claude more than either Mrs. Wix or Mrs. Beale, loves him more because her appreciation of him is less clouded by a personal agenda than theirs is. Whether her love informs her understanding or her understanding increases her love in those last few hours is difficult to say. What seems to happen on the hill is that after drifting along the current of her impressions and emotions for most of her life—squeezing herself into a little corner and keeping her eyes open, taking everything in—she is forced to begin defining her position,
and not knowing everything there is to know about the situation, she takes a stand on what she does know: she loves Sir Claude.

If we tried to plot her development along a sort of existential timeline, it would go something like this: for the majority of her youth she has been receiving impressions, forming conclusions, receiving new impressions and modifying her conclusions in light of these, her emotions more or less at the mercy of her impressions. Thankfully she is very impressionable, so her emotions deepen along with her insight. At a certain point however she is forced to act on these impressions, even though they seem to her to be incomplete. As we have already recognized, there are situations in which impressions can legitimately be said to be incomplete, when falling back on Mrs. Wix may be the wisest option. In this situation however both Mrs. Wix and Sir Claude seem to feel that Maisie has enough information to be able to make up her mind; and at this point Maisie is forced to “claim” her impressions, to wrest them into being. In claiming her love for Sir Claude, which is what her impressions amount to, the chain of cause and effect is reversed: instead of her reflections informing her emotion, her emotion begins to inspire reflection. Her commitment to Sir Claude heightens her awareness of who he is and how she can help him as well as who she is, what her affections are and what others’ affections are not. She is beginning to sense the limits of Mrs. Wix’s emotion even as they join hands on the rampart, and instead of replying, “So do I” when Mrs. Wix says, “I adore him. I adore him,” she stops herself and says instead, “Oh, I know!” (289).

Without belaboring the point we can see that Maisie realizes most of what Fleda might have realized had she not lost her nerve and taken refuge in her honor. What I want to highlight in this reading however is the connection between love and perception.
Maisie’s capacity for perception is indispensable to the development of her capacity for love; without her immense sensibility she may never have ever experienced anything more than the selfish passion her mother and Mrs. Beale experience. Her ability to see “shades” in Sir Claude—and although we have been using the metaphor of vision in imitation of James we know that his “seeing” is as much about sensing or feeling as it is about literally seeing—makes her attachment stronger and deeper than the other characters’ attachments. Recognizing the connection between perceptivity and depth of feeling should be easy for most of us, since in life we usually associate “sensitivity”—meaning roughly what we have been calling responsible perception, that is the ability to feel and appreciate more than most people, not just aesthetically but also existentially—with a greater capacity for appreciation of and attachment to others. In real life the connection between sensitivity and a deep attachment to others is usually not as strong as we could wish, since more often than not the sensitive person becomes so overwhelmed by the burden of that sensitivity that he or she retreats into seclusion and loves and broods from a distance, or else like Fleda retreats into a protective fatalism. The irony of extraordinary sensitivity is that it often robs an individual of the ability to act even as her complex perceptions make her more qualified than most people to make correct choices, and this is the dilemma with which most of James’s perceivers’ wrestle. Many of James most notable narrators—Strether, Fleda, Maggie Verver—fail to completely overcome their immobility, but Maisie is perhaps the most notable among a smaller selection of characters from the shorter works who do succeed.

Published in volume ten of the New York edition along with The Spoils of Poynton is a charming short piece called “The Chaperon,” told from the perspective of a
lovely young woman, appropriately named Rose, who upon coming of age relinquishes her inheritance and her place in society to take up residence with her mother, who was banned from society several decades before the story opens for leaving her husband for another man. Rose has both the imagination to do justice to her mother’s charm and innocence—superficial as both these qualities may have seemed to a more cynical observer—and the courage, born of love, to attempt to reintroduce her into society. Not only does she succeed, she also manages to convince her noble but uptight suitor of the importance of cultivating open-mindedness, and everyone wins in the end.

Unfortunately, Sir Claude is no Captain Jay, but I think Maisie wins as much as Rose in the sense of having the courage to act on her imagination and claim her freedom thereby. And like Rose she is inspired to act by love.

In James’s pantheon there are few if any characters who are portrayed as winning their freedom or their lovers or both without acting from love, and more often, as I have been arguing, they lose their freedom or lovers by not acting from love. Love of some sort is usually the only motivation that keeps characters from acting wrongly. Acting wrongly means acting in either ignorance of or disregard for alternative perspectives, although the former is less of a sin than the latter. As we have seen, there is no such thing as an action that does justice to every possible perspective on a person or situation; actions have to be performed in spite of the impossibility of complete closure. Therefore the difference between a good action and a bad one becomes the difference in approach: is the decision being made with an attitude of humility and an awareness of the possibility of error? Has the person making it surrendered his personal agenda to the primacy of the appearance of the other? Perhaps the reason love is so conducive to clear-
sightedness is that it too demands surrender to the other; an action performed with and through love is already other-directed. To act out of love as Maisie does is to act with a constant sensitivity to the feelings and needs of the person loved, and once Maisie (as she sits on the rampart with Mrs. Wix) has recognized and claimed her love for Sir Claude she is better capable of recognizing and responding to the deep fear that is driving him.

A number of existentialists (Kierkegaard and Heidegger come immediately to mind) have shown us the paradoxical connection between surrender and self-affirmation, and we see it illustrated here in Maisie. The moment of her surrender to her love for Sir Claude is also the moment in which she finally defines herself as a person—learns to say “I” as one of E.M. Forster’s characters puts it. As we have already seen with Fleda, surrendering to others is an act of courage, one that requires facing oneself first, especially one’s fears and, specifically in James, the awareness that one will never be able to achieve the kind of stable identity that frees one from vulnerability to others; and then finding the strength to embrace that indeterminateness. Oftentimes that strength comes from love, as it does for Maisie. To commit to loving another is to commit to taking oneself and one’s obligations to at least one other person seriously. When an individual has really done this, as Maisie has, he or she is more likely to be sensitive to the needs of other people. This does not happen to Maisie— in fact almost the opposite happens—but we would not be amiss in imagining it will happen as Maisie grows and matures.

The immediate effect, for everyone else, of Maisie’s claiming herself and her love for Sir Claude is that she turns her back on them. She dismisses Mrs. Wix as a “nobody” and declares herself willing to “kill” Mrs. Beale. “She hates you,” Sir Claude says to
Mrs. Beale when that lady is offended to learn that Maisie has been trying to get rid of her, and without assuming that Sir Claude speaks for Maisie (though we would probably not be wrong to assume it) the text records that Maisie looks at Mrs. Beale with “new eyes” when the latter asks her “Do you hate me, dearest?” and answers “Will you give him up?” (361). The inference is that Maisie does hate her, or will hate her if she continues to manipulate Sir Claude. One way we could defend Maisie—since I have been arguing that a reflexive person should be able to reconcile their love for one person with their obligations to everyone else—is to argue that, since this a morality tale, Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale are both specimen of a rare type in James, the thoroughly evil and completely irredeemable character. Since the good characters in James are the ones who practice responsible perception, hopefully augmented by larger acts of altruism and some form of loving emotion, it would make sense that the bad characters would be those incapable of seeing beyond or acting on anything other than their fears and/or lusts. Mrs. Beale certainly fits that bill and, to a lesser sense, so does Mrs. Wix. We could also argue that Mona in The Spoils of Poynton does as well. However, I am uncomfortable attributing that kind of dismissal to James himself. As I argued at the beginning of the previous section, James instincts are almost always towards recuperation, not damnation. What seems more likely is that Maisie’s love is not as pure as it could be; there are still elements of immaturity in it. For a child who has just declared her first allegiance to be temporarily blinkered by it is not surprising, though it serves to remind us that even love of a higher and nobler sort can blind us if we are not careful to remind ourselves that love is higher and nobler only because it has been chastened and refined by reflection, and that reflection is still needed to continue the process. A needed refinement in Maisie’s case
may be a more thorough awareness of Sir Claude’s culpability in the whole situation. A needed chastening may be a reminder that Sir Claude’s perspective is not the only one that matters, that others have points of view that also need to be acknowledged.

Endnotes


3 In a standard essay Jean Frantz Blackall argues that “Maisie will prefer pleasure (Sir Claude) to forms (Mrs. Wix) if Sir Claude will prefer forms (his obligation to Maisie) to license (Mrs. Beale).” See Critical Essays on Henry James: The Late Novels, Ed. James W. Gargano (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987): 97.

4 My language and observations here are so similar to Blackall’s (see previous note) that I want to credit him for inspiring them.
Chapter V

Unlike Maisie, the protagonist of *The Awkward Age*, an eighteen year-old girl, balances her love for one person with her love and concern for others. It may be a mistake to call Nanda its protagonist, since *The Awkward Age* is not written from the perspective of one character but from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who presents ten characters in turn, each the focus of one of the novel’s ten books, but she and her mother are the novel’s dramatic center; they provide the essential conflict and epitomize the dilemma characteristic of “the awkward age.” The story opens with the return to society of a noble old gentleman named Mr. Longdon who has just paid a visit to Nanda’s mother, Mrs. Brookenham, herself the daughter of a long-dead but respectfully remembered (at least by Mr. Longdon) Lady Julia, for whom the first book is named. Mr. Longdon was once in love with Lady Julia and treasures her memory as that of the most perfect woman he every beheld, one who “had everything” as he expresses it in book one.¹ Chief among her charms was her high moral sense—not Mrs. Wix’ pathetic kind but the kind Fleda believes herself to be emulating in *Spoils*, one that has a great deal of beauty and delicacy and appeals to both Nanda and Van (the young man with whom she is in love) as it is illumined in and by Mr. Longdon. For these two young people, for Mr. Longdon, and for everyone else involved in the story except several individuals (among them Nanda’s brother) who are too modern to have any doubts about it, the return of Mr. Longdon and the memory of Lady Julia becomes the occasion for choosing whether to return to some form of allegiance to the old way or to remain in the train of Mrs. Brookenham, who represents an emerging modern culture of a particularly decadent artistic sort, one in which everything is out in the open and up for appreciation.
on an aesthetic level only. Mrs. Brook has a great deal of imagination but no sense of responsibility; Lady Julia had “not a grain” of imagination but a strong sense of responsibility, at least to a certain ideal of womanhood; and by the end of the novel Nanda will emerge as the one who embodies the best of each—not, as Vanderbank might have wanted, by aping some version of the innocence and ignorance of Lady Julia but by exercising the imagination she has inherited from her mother with a greater sense of responsibility than her mother does. Nanda’s only flaw is her nostalgia for Mr. Longdon’s old morality, and her consequent inability to do herself complete justice. She knows herself thoroughly—knows “everything” as she and Mitchy and Van all agree—but thinks herself inferior to the type of girl she believes little Aggie to be, one who “knows nothing” (355-6, 377-8). She is still caught up by the Victorian idea that young unmarried girls should know nothing about sex (“Ah say what you will,” she says to Mitchy, “it is the way we ought to be) or even about the types of immorality—adultery most especially in this novel—associated with sex, so much so that she falls in love with a Van who is even more caught up with it than she is and who therefore cannot bring himself to marry her. Van is the male version of Fleda Vetch. He has been one of the leading figures in Mrs. Brook’s salon, so much so that, as Nanda reminds him, he told her as a little girl that she “must take in things at [her] pores. (Nanda hastens to assure the discomfited Van that this was an observation not a command, but the text plays with the possibility that it could have been, or that Nanda might have taken it as, a command, and that Van is therefore partly responsible for the result that he deplores.) Unfortunately he develops a rather cowardly sense of delicacy when Mr. Longdon announces he will make Nanda his heir if Van will marry her. Van chooses not to marry her, though Nanda tries
to make it easier for him by instructing another of her lovers, a rich and worthy young man named Mitchy, to marry someone else, so that Van will not feel any compunction about robbing Nanda of Mitchy’s fortune if he does decide to marry her. Despite this maneuver Van still does not marry her and incurs the wrath of Mr. Longdon, who has by the end of the novel proved himself superior to Van by learning to love Nanda despite her difference to Lady Julia (and thereby showing some affinity with James’s later creation Lambert Strether). *The Awkward Age* is one of James’s most exquisite novels in terms of style, theme, and character portrayal and nowhere is it lovelier than in its last several pages, as Nanda acknowledges that Van has rejected her because she “knows too much” (543). She asks Mr. Longdon why, if her knowledge matters so much to Van, it seems to matter so little to him, who has been the representative of old-fashioned “delicacy” all along:

‘…you know,’ the girl pursued, ‘I *am* like that.’
‘Like what?’
‘Like what he [Van] thinks.’ Then so gravely that it was almost a supplication, ‘Don’t tell me that you don’t *know* what he thinks. You do know.’
Their eyes, on that strange ground, could meet at last, and the effect of it was presently for Mr. Longdon. “I do know.”
‘Well?’
‘Well!’ He raised his hands and took her face, which he drew so close to his own that, as he gently let him, he could kiss her with solemnity on the forehead. ‘Come!’ he then firmly said—quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot (543).

A few lines later Mr. Longdon remarks that Van is “much more” old-fashioned than he is, the latter having learned that there is something to be valued higher than “delicacy”—that something being love. This is one of the rare examples in James of two characters of more or less equal perceptivity coming together and realizing a loving union, one that is consecrated here by Mr. Longdon’s Christ-like words (“Come”) and gestures and
Nanda’s “supplicating” posture. Certainly Mr. Longdon has “bought” Nanda in something of the same sense as Christ “bought” the church: Mr. Longdon has sacrificed the sanctity of his home in Suffolk to come into society to “save” her. Without probing all the implications of this religious imagery we can at least recall both Maisie’s immature idealization of Sir Claude as a Christ-figure and Fleda’s Christ-like (at least in her own estimation) sacrifice for Owen Gereth in Spoils and remind ourselves that religious imagery and attitudes in James are usually associated with a kind of death-in-life antithetical to the exercise of the moral imagination. Mr. Longdon is after all taking her off to a house that has been repeatedly associated with both “peace” and “death,” one in which Nanda has already spent three weeks that have been “the happiest she had yet spent anywhere” (224, 333, 351). What exactly are we to make of Nanda then? Does her affection for old-fashioned morality as embodied in Van lose her the privilege of exercising her intelligence out in the world with a wiser and more knowledgeable partner like Mitchy? Is the reader supposed to understand her retreat with Mr. Longdon as a punishment for her adherence to Van and her disastrous rejection of Mitchy (disastrous at least in its results for both Mitchy and little Aggie, the woman Mitchy marries)? Or is the novel attempting to draw attention, as Maisie does, to the tragic plight of those rare individuals who manage to transcend ordinary human limitations, which is their inevitable alienation from the representatives of both conventional morality and irresponsible imagination?

With James we should probably assume that all of these things are going on. If for a moment we raise the question of intentionality and ask if there is a conflict between what the text is saying and what James intended I can reiterate what I said at the
beginning, that James crafts ambiguity into his novels to provoke these kinds of investigations, with the aim of encouraging the reader’s imagination. As I have already acknowledged, there seems to be evidence that at least in *The Spoils of Poynton* James was not quite aware of his intentions—that the ambiguity may not have been as deliberate as it obviously is in subsequent works, though it certainly is still there, James’s skill in delineating the complexity of his characters’ motivations perhaps causing him to outstrip his formal intentions. We can also admit that an affection for old-fashioned delicacy seems to linger even in the novels bent on exposing the limitations of this delicacy, and that this affection may reflect the soul of their notoriously fastidious late-Victorian author. On a purely textual level, however, Nanda’s retreat could be explained as part of the novel’s realism. Very few of the characters in the late Victorian society James’ portrays in this novel as well as many others have the ability simultaneously to sustain deep love and deep knowledge, and those that do are forced to the edge of society or forced, if they are able to stay in it, to bestow their affections on people who may not be worthy of them. Most choose to align themselves with the moral side when that and the decadent side are the only options; and for Nanda to find Vanderburk more substantive than the rest of her mother’s coterie is extremely plausible given the circumstances in which she finds herself.

I think all these things are motivating Nanda, but I also think this text is less ambiguous than either *Spoils* or *Maisie* about its heroine’s motivations, perhaps because it is not told primarily from Nanda’s point of view. From the very beginning Nanda is portrayed as thoroughly imaginative, as well as thoroughly responsible. But when she is introduced to Mr. Longdon she encounters something outside her previous range of
experience and is more moved by this than she has ever been moved before. “You are good,” she says to Mr. Longdon with tears in her eyes, “I see already how I shall feel it” (154). Perhaps because it is new—perhaps because Mrs. Brooks for all her charm (she was one of James’s favorite creations) has an air of sly corruption about her—Nanda begins to see herself and everyone else in her mother’s world through Mr. Longdon’s eyes. Mr. Longdon begins seeing them through Nanda’s eyes—or at least begins seeing Nanda with greater clarity and appreciation—which eventually makes him realize that Van may not have been the best person for her, though unfortunately this realization comes too late to do any good. In the last few lines of the novel Nanda assures Mr. Longdon that she would not have had Mitchy even if Van had married Little Aggie, and we are left to wonder at the strength of her attachment to a man who has shown himself to be something of a coward and a hypocrite. She has not misread him—she knows he will not propose even as she marries Mitchy off in hopes that he will—and we can only remark that love is a powerful thing and may not be amenable to reason even in those who have made cultivating reason a habit. Then again it is also possible that she hopes against hope that he will do for her what Mr. Longdon is left to do for her in the end and what she had hoped little Aggie would do for Mitchy—“save him”—and we can interpret this hope either as a weakness, as a hope that Van will save her from herself, or as a strength, as a hope that Van will strengthen her sense of responsibility and help her see more of the beauty and less of the suffering involved in such responsibility.

However we interpret Nanda’s preference for Van, enough of her actions are unequivocally right (in the larger moral sense for which I am arguing) to serve as an examples of the kind of behavior we might expect from a grown-up Maisie, one with a
larger fund of knowledge and proportionately refined emotions. The last book of the *The Awkward Age*, named after Nanda, shows her to have succeeded her mother in influence, to have established her own lovely little rooms and to be holding successive conversations with Van, Mitchy, and Mr. Longdon, not picking apart their characters with artistic relish but divining what troubles each of them and doing the best she can to make things better for each of them. She does this not just for them but for her mother as well, summoning Van not to reproach him for abandoning her but to ask him to keep coming to visit her mother, since her mother is obviously as much in love with Van as she is. When Mr. Longdon comes in at the end Nanda even tries to reconcile him to Van, though with such small success that she is compelled to criticize Mr. Longdon for being “too proud about it”—“it” being, as they both know but do not say, Van’s refusal to marry Nanda, even with Mr. Longdon’s inducements (536). Mr. Longdon is proud about it, and their exchange on this point provides perhaps James’s clearest statement of what is required of those determined to be thoroughly responsible perceivers (as well as why most of James responsible perceivers are women!):

‘Well, what if I am [proud]?’ [Mr. Longdon] looked at her… ‘Pride’s all right when it helps one to bear things.’
‘Ah,’ said Nanda, ‘but that’s only when one wants to take the least from them. When one wants to take the most—!’
‘Well?’—he spoke, as she faltered, with a certain small hardness of interest.
She faltered, however, indeed. ‘Oh I don’t know how to say it.’ She fairly coloured with the attempt. ‘One must let the sense of all that I speak of—well, all come. One must rather like it. I don’t know—but I suppose one must rather grovel.’
Mr. Longdon, though with a visible reluctance, turned it over. ‘That’s very fine—but you’re a woman.’
‘Yes—that must make a difference. But being a woman, in such a case, has then,’ Nanda went on, ‘its advantages.’
On this point perhaps her friend might presently have been taken as relaxing. ‘It strikes me that even at that the advantages are mainly for
Nanda may be too young to articulate all that she means here but Longdon evidently feels it enough to think better of his pride in the lines immediately following this exchange. Still, the reader is left feeling that even Mr. Longdon is incapable of rising to Nanda’s level. He is, after all, a man, though not feeling as proud about it by the time the exchange is over. Nanda might not intend the irony inherent in “being a woman has its advantages,” but both Mr. Longdon and the reader feel it, the modern reader perhaps even more than an old Victorian like Mr. Longdon. What he may be beginning to feel, and what we have been impressed by as we have been listening to Nanda in her conversations with Van and Mitchy, is that this “groveling” that Nanda has been doing takes a lot more strength—a lot more “greatness” and genuine dignity—than the pride Mr. Longdon exhibits. Her “pride” is not a matter of making her claims felt but of not making them felt—of not allowing her own claims to get in the way of her attention to others’. This does not mean that she is sublimating her own needs—indeed, she has been facing them with as much honesty as she has faced everything else—but as this speech (and many others) attests, she understands who she is and what she is about well enough to be able to distinguish between her needs and emotions and those of others.

This speech also attests as clearly as anything else in James to the high level of commitment necessary for “taking the most” from things. The difference between Nanda and her mother is primarily a difference in their approaches to life: Nanda believes that taking the most from things is a serious moral duty, Mrs. Brook that it is a diversion, like going to the theater. If we as readers were to decide between the two primarily on the basis of their consequences our decision may be difficult: Mrs. Brook has obviously
been routed by the end of the novel, mostly because the premise that life is spectacle is one that neither she nor her cohorts (primarily Van and Mitchy) can sustain, all of them finding themselves compelled to take themselves and especially their feelings for other people seriously before the novel is over. But discovering this flaw in her viewpoint does not completely break her (and one wonders whether she fully understands it at all), and by the novel’s end she has recovered enough to take an interest in the coming out of Little Aggie. There will always be devotees to worship at her shrine, Mitchy assures her daughter at the end of the novel: Mrs. Brook will “last” much longer than either he or Nanda—there will always be those who come to Mrs. Brook for “‘help’” and “‘understanding’” (Mitchy puts these words in quotes) (523). The understanding Mrs. Brook offers is of limited value, consisting mainly in shaping all sorts of messy behavior into bright clever costumes and handing them back to their relieved owners, but it is, as Mitchy remarks, a service that most human beings stand perpetually in need of (523). Nanda’s understanding, on the other hand, is less in demand, being much less dazzling and much more inclined towards taking people more seriously than they may think they need to be taken. For those who have discovered that they need to take themselves seriously she is much more of a help than her mother could ever be; but unfortunately there are very few serious people about in the awkward age. Even these are less of a help to her than she is to them, and by the end of the novel she has been more or less forced to retreat before their lack of appreciation. Still, the novel obviously intends for us to see Nanda as an improvement on her mother and grandmother; from Lady Julia who represents innocence there a natural progression into experience and then fall and decay (the magnificent debacle at Tishy Grendon’s) and the emergence in the end of a newer
higher order that takes the best of both and transforms them into something altogether new. This newer higher order (which must ascend into the “Temple of Peace” to await the end of the Awkward Age—unfortunately still going on a hundred years later!) is higher than Mrs. Brooks’ because, again, it does justice the responsibility inherent in perception. Those who embrace this order recognize that perception in an other-directed act that begins in childhood when we first learn to differentiate between ourselves (the “I”) and our environment. In those who become responsible perceivers this action is constantly repeated as they grow older, so that both self and other (which includes people and things and all their interactions) grow more and more clear and subtle and distinct. Otherwise they do what the majority of James’s characters do, lose world in self and become a bloated burping ego (Nanda’s brother Harold) or lose self in world and become a shivering shade (poor Van).

This account of self-consciousness and its role in distinguishing between self and others should be familiar to everyone schooled in the continental tradition of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Recognizing the difference between self and other is foundational to ethics—we cannot begin to ask ourselves, “What does he or she need?” until we know who “he or she” is. But we also have to remember that self and other are interdependent: not only do we define ourselves through contrast with others, we depend on them in a more basic way—for sheer survival. Except for the hermit living on the mountain (though even he was born and reared by someone), most of us rely on others on a daily basis, whether we acknowledge it or not. Likewise our ability to perceive is dependent on the existence of things to be perceived. Therefore, to recognize someone else’s needs without acknowledging the obligation the recognition implies is dishonest. The
recognition itself is proof of others’ importance. “We’re all in this together,” as a movie star once said after rescuing one of his fans from being trampled by the crowd. Part of Mrs. Brook’s problem is that she doesn’t acknowledge that “we’re all in this together”; she does not completely follow through on the responsibility her recognition implies.

Nanda does, and I want to close this section by asking how love is related to her knowledge and its attendant responsibilities. She has been in love with Van since she was a child, choosing, as Maisie chooses, the most superior man of her acquaintance. She goes even further than Maisie by actually sacrificing (instead of just being willing to sacrifice) several of her friends for Van’s sake. Whether her love has blinded her to Van’s weakness is difficult to say. She claims to be marrying Mitchy off for his own good, but whether this is true or she actually doing it, as Mitchy thinks, to clear the field for Van, the scheme backfires in both directions: Mitchy’s marriage does not make him good and she herself does not get Van. Even if she were acting with a clear head and pure intentions, the decision does not have happy consequences, and she is left at the end of the novel almost as bereft as Maisie. Unlike Maisie however Nanda’s long practice in “taking the most from things” enables her to see beyond whatever selfishness might have remained in her love for Van and not only do what is best for him—covering his weakness and encouraging his good—but also love those who have prevented her having him, seeing their weaknesses and continuing to promote their happiness. Her last acts before leaving with Mr. Longdon are to attempt to secure Van for her mother, to pledge to stand by Mitchy, taking responsibility for the mess she has caused him, and to try to defend Van to Mr. Longdon. We should note here that loving Van does not include forcing him to become a responsible perceiver. As I mentioned in my discussion of The
Spoils of Poynton, loving others may include encouraging them to develop higher levels of awareness, especially when their lack of it jeopardizes their relationships with other people. But loving others may also include refraining from pressuring them to achieve a level of awareness they are obviously unable to achieve. One of the hallmarks of a responsible perceiver is her ability to recognize that the good is not always the same for every person—that a moral victory for one person may be a moral failure in another. Once Nanda’s love for Van has been chastened by a more thorough awareness of his character she is able to love him by demanding less of him—by not casting his failures up to him, as he is obviously afraid she will, by doing exactly what will put him most at ease, and by encouraging him in the good she knows he is capable of.

Endnotes

1 Henry James, The Awkward Age (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1908): 23.
Chapter VI

The kind of responsible reflection Fleda, Maisie, and Nanda possess in various degrees obviously enables all three of them to love both friends and lovers more deeply than they would have otherwise, if we compare their love to what passes for love in the characters who are not responsible perceivers. Since all three of them are perceptive characters to begin with we cannot say with as much certainty that loves furthers their capacity for perception; but I think this connection is most clear in Maisie whose understanding can be said to develop out of her need for love. Like any child drawn to the kindest and most charming adult she knows, especially when the others are neither kind nor charming, she is drawn to Sir Claude by instinct. She senses his superiority to the others but has yet to develop the capacity to discriminate between his character and her own needs. When circumstances finally forced her to define her position—to answer in effect the question “What do you know?”—her answer is, “I know I love Sir Claude.” This knowledge becomes the basis of her growing comprehension of Sir Claude’s character in their last hours together at Boulogne. As I mentioned earlier, this phenomenon should ring true to any of us who has known someone whose awareness of self and others dramatically increased when he or she fell in love. Sometimes this awareness extends to people other that oneself and the loved one and sometimes it does not. When it does not, love can be said to cloud reflection. Maisie’s disdain for Mrs. Beale and Mrs. Wix and Nanda’s insensitivity to Mitchy in asking him to marry a woman he does not love are examples of this. Here again is where it becomes important for characters to remind themselves that reflection is something that can never be sacrificed—that all perspectives must be given equal due. This does not mean that
everyone must be loved equally but that love should never interfere with clear-sightedness. And as we have seen, cultivating clear-sightedness can often lead an individual to love or appreciate people who might have seemed unlovable. The most compelling thing about each of these characters (Nanda of course most successfully) is the level of understanding they have for people whom others dismiss as useless or immoral and how much this understanding resembles what we usually associate with compassion, or neighborly or benevolent love. I do not want to suggest that benevolent love is reducible to responsible perception, because despite the efforts of cognitive theorists of emotion I think we all associate love with some kind of indefinable feeling, and conceivably a person could be thoroughly reflective in a thoroughly responsible way without exhibiting the kind of warmth we associate with love. What I do want to suggest is that love depends on some basic level of awareness, some ability to differentiate between self and other, and that the greater this awareness is the more authentic love will be.

One thing the discussion of these three texts should have impressed on us is the importance of personal integrity in James’s moral system. Since rules and precepts are always conditional it is important for individuals to be able to see the conditions clearly, “really to see…in face of the constant force that makes for muddlement” as James says in the preface to What Maisie Knew.¹ (And vision is made more difficult by the fact that “the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of realities.”) Morality is not about conforming to rules but about cultivating the capacity to recognize whether or not the rules apply or how they are best adapted to a particular situation, and love often plays a role in developing this capacity. More often in James we see proof that “the
nonjudgmental love of particulars characteristic of the best and most humane ethical stance contains within itself a susceptibility to love,” but he also shows us that love contains within itself a susceptibility to knowledge. Real love is not blind, at least not to the qualities of the person loved. It may be blind to the qualities of everyone else, but at that point responsible perception must reassert itself. Our largest responsibility is to life, and to love one person exclusively and obsessively as Maggie chooses to do ultimately deprives us of the growth in experience that is the means to maturity, to our full flowering into all that we are capable of becoming as individual human beings.

Endnotes

Vita

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