The novel *The Ambassadors* refers to the game of strategy that is central to the story’s plot. The ambassadors are Lambert Strether and Sarah Pocock, namely. Though other characters play auxiliary roles (Jim and Mamie Pocock, Waymarsh), these two have been expressly assigned to the task of recovering Chad Newsome from the dangers of Parisian bohemia. In Mrs. Newsome’s service, both Strether and Sarah must use strategy if they are to succeed. Strether fails and Sarah succeeds. Setting aside the questions of idealism and motive, the argument remains that Strether fails for lack of strategy - he fails to do Mrs. Newsome's bidding and then, when he has decided to advocate for the opposition, as it were, Strether fails again. When Strether argues for Woollett, Chad wants to remain in Paris. When Strether comes around and begins arguing for Paris, Chad is hesitant and cautious, eventually returning home despite Strether's advice.

Sarah arrived in Paris determined to return home with her brother, Chad. While Strether dabbled in French high society and enjoyed his time with Chad's new friends, Sarah took the strategic position referred to as partipris (an obstinate position based upon a prejudgment). Sarah refused to compromise; she would not budge; her position was fixed and her demeanor was hard and crystalline. Her demeanor matched her determination. Strether, on the other hand, thought that he might out-
charm the charmers. He might perform so well in Parisian society that his newfound popularity and influence would allow him to press upon Chad. Instead, Strether was charmed and easily won over. Bilham and Miss Barrace were successful in their strategy: Strether anticipated a positive change in Chad having been told that, in his time in Paris, Chad had changed for the better.

Chad does such an expert job of bringing Strether to his side that midway through the novel, when Chad is at last ready to return home, Strether relinquishes the victory and bids Chad to enjoy Paris for a while longer for Strether, himself, now wants to enjoy Paris for a while longer. In a limited sense, Madame de Vionnet is strategic. She knows that Chad must inevitably return home. She charms Strether into committing to "saving" her alongside Chad. This is an impossible mission, of course. De Vionnet is already married; furthermore, it is unlikely that she could ever join Chad in Woollett, Mass. When Strether commits to helping de Vionnet, he puts himself in the unfortunate predicament of serving two inimical masters.

Mrs. Newsome and Madame de Vionnet. De Vionnet knows that she cannot win in an ultimate sense - but she is able to buy more time with Chad. At a certain point, given her success with Strether, de Vionnet hopes to charm Sarah Pocock in a similar way. Perhaps in this manner, the Countess might have charmed each ambassador that was sent, and having done this, she could have kept Chad in Paris indefinitely. (120) American patriotism, little less since the Civil War than before, has steadily contended that America does as well as Europe as a background for fiction, pointing to the epic dimensions and the epic hopes of existence on this continent.
Less expansive critical dispositions have continued to feel that the human past of the country has not been large enough to match the landscape; that the present at any given moment has lacked the stability, the solidarity, which alone might afford the novelist a firm texture of reality in his representations; that the simplicity of American manners, being merely provincial rather than fittingly republican, renders impossible the subtleties and nuances of European fiction of the principal later novelists Howells held, on the whole, the broadest views. He built, with some limitations, on what he saw before him, not unconscious of Europe but aware that the way to a body of American fiction was action as well as argument and that in the production of a national literature imagination begets imagination.

Mark Twain, without much reflection but with powerful instincts in the matter, wrought in the fashion of all great autochthons—as if his native land were the center of the world. Henry James, at the other extreme, never ceased to regard America as essentially an outlying region of European, more specifically of Anglo-Saxon, civilization. The differing governments of England and the United States were simply nothing to him, who knew and cared so little for man as a political animal. For this craftsman in language it was language which outlined the empire of the English and bound its various parts together in spite of such surface matters as ocean and revolution. He was a loyalist to the tongue of England. And of course speech was for him but a symbol of all the customs which he thought of as centering in or about London and to which he drew near and nearer with a passion of return which implies an atavistic hankering in the blood. In other words, Henry James was a patriot to his
race, and his final transfer of citizenship, though immediately called forth by his sense of America’s procrastination in the World War, was but the outward sign of a temperamental repatriation already complete. The process began early under the deliberate guidance of a father, Henry James, Sr., a remarkable metaphysician and theologian, who sought to make his sons citizens of the world by never allowing them to take root in any particular religion, political system, ethical code, or set of personal habits. Born in New York in 1843, Henry James had the most desultory schooling, under the most diverse teachers, in New York, Albany, Geneva, London, Paris, Newport, Geneva again, Bonn, and again Newport, studying now mathematics, now languages, reading a good deal of Latin and a little Greek, dabbling in Fourier and Ruskin, drawing a little, immersing himself in the British magazines and the Revue des deux Mondes, and from a very early period writing stories after the model of Balzac. A circle which contained at once the elder Henry James and his son William was out of contact with few of the important ideas then stirring; and the father was accustomed to bring into the household many of the eminent Europeans who visited the United States from time to time.

The Civil War would possibly have enlisted Henry, as it did his two younger brothers, but for his uncertain health; and it did without doubt mark him deeply. “It introduced into the national consciousness,” Henry James wrote in 1879, by the “national consciousness” (215) undoubtedly meaning his own as well, “a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult … [a
perception] that this is a world in which everything happens.” (230) His non-participation in the war at first hand appears also to have developed hardly aroused in him a sense that his’ essential role was to be that of a spectator of life. At any rate, instead of going to war he went to Harvard in 1862, for some vague reason to the Law School, which touched him hardly at all in comparison with the men of letters whom he encountered in Boston or Cambridge, in particular Charles Eliot Norton and William Dean Howells. Through them he became a contributor of critical articles to the Nation and the North American and of stories to the Atlantic and the Galaxy. The “open editorial hand” which Howells held out to him from the Atlantic during the summer of 1868, Henry James said, “was really the making of me, the making of the confidence that required help and sympathy and that I should otherwise, I think, have strayed and stumbled about a long time without acquiring. You showed me the way and opened me the door.” (201) New England, however, could not satisfy him. Early in 1869 he made the passionate pilgrimage to Europe which, in various forms, provides the theme for so immense a portion of his work: England, Switzerland, Italy, France in turn met his “relish for the element of accumulation in the human picture and for the infinite superpositions of history.” Singular contrast between the behavior of the Innocent Abroad and the Passionate Pilgrim! Without anything like so deep a sense for history as Mark Twain, Henry James had not Mark Twain’s ignorance to sustain him against the magnetic pull of Europe; nor had the younger man a touch of that indigenousness which restored Mark Twain to his original continent. Lacking any strong roots into the American soil, Henry James, though he returned to Cambridge
in 1870 for two years, and after a further European sojourn during 1872–1874, for one year more, now succumbed to the centripetal pull which all along had been acting upon him, and in 1875 finally decided that his future belonged to Europe. For a year he tried Paris, where he met Turgenev and the Flaubert group—Edmond de Goncourt, Daudet, Maupassant, Zola; but he there felt too much a foreigner for comfort, and late in 1876 he settled for good in London, the natural home of his imagination.

He sustained his position as an expatriate in his subtle study of Hawthorne (1879), which he had been asked by John Morley to contribute to the English Men of Letters series and in which the recent disciple of Hawthorne, while delicately appreciating the master, wrote into almost every page his accusation of provincialism against the entire American nation. “Certain national types,” he answered to Howells’s comment that it is no more provincial for an American to be very American than for an Englishman to be very English, “are essentially and intrinsically provincial.” If James during these acclimatizing years reflected almost constantly upon the “international situation” it was because he stood in that situation himself. A good deal of what it meant for him may be found ripely remembered in his posthumous autobiographical fragment The Middle Years. But he had thousands of companions under the same spell in varying degrees: those of his nationality who, the Civil War being now over and methods of travel in Europe easier than in the home-keeping days of the republic, annually swarmed to Europe for vacations of culture. Whether Henry James sympathized with their aspirations or satirized their
numerous awkwardness's in the midst of manners less casual than those of the United States, he could not overlook them or that simplicity which he identified with provinciality. The ground they traversed furnished him a sort of literary terrain which excited his imagination precisely as the frontier, on which another set of Americans had faced the new as these Americans faced the old, had excited the imagination of Fenimore Cooper.

Highly ironical as it may seem, it is still not highly fanciful to say that *The American* (1877), begun in Paris in 1875 at a time when James, though delighting in the art and companionship of Turgenev, was yet feeling somewhat excluded from French society, sprang from James's conception of a romantic American gesture quaintly like that of Daniel Boone renouncing the settlements, the gesture on which Cooper founded the character of Leather-Stocking.

It was, as James subsequently explained, “the situation, in another country and an aristocratic society, of some robust but insidiously beguiled, some cruelly wronged, compatriot: the point being in especial that he should suffer at the hands of persons pretending to represent the highest possible civilisation and to be of an order in every way superior to his own.” But when the opportunity for vindication came, the American, as James conceived him, “in the very act of forcing it home would sacrifice it in disgust,” not out of forgiveness but out of so great contempt for those who had wronged him that he was unwilling to touch them even in a rich revenge. Nor does the plot at large fall, in its romantic qualities, below this instigating gesture. Christopher Newman, intensely self-made and American, is in love with the widowed
daughter of the intensely ancient and French house of Bellegarde, which, though the
daughter loves him in return, snubs him, snatches the lady from him, and drives her
into a convent. Then, though Newman has found out that her mother and brother
murdered her father, the American, making his large gesture, refuses to let the ax
descend.

Claire de Cintré, lovely as she is made out, belongs with the heroines who are
too limp for life though not for romantic tragedy; the mother and brother, James
himself admitted:

“In real life would have been remarkably careful to get hold of
Newman’s money through marrying Mme. de Cintré to him if need
be before showing him too much scorn. Nor is Newman excessively
convincing; “before the American business-man, as I have been
prompt to declare, I was absolutely and irredeemably helpless, with no
fibre of my intelligence responding to his mystery.” (203)

Yet these imperfect elements are tangled in a fine net of charm. Though the
style is sparer, sharper than James’s style was to become, its texture is here firm
with adroit allusions and observant wit, while the background of Paris abundantly
though unobtrusively fills the picture. Vain as it must be to strive for all the perfections
of Balzac, Flaubert, George Sand, and Turgenev at once, here still was something
that looked toward a synthesis of their excellences—with a singular alloy from the
older type of American romance which rejoiced to set the American hero patriotically
up above the European crowd.
As if to redress the balance or to atone for this patriotic zeal, *The Europeans* (1878) subjects two charming persons from Europe, though with some of America in their blood, to the deadly seriousness which Henry James remembered as prevailing in the suburbs of Boston. There is caricature in his Wentworths, with their large square house and large square consciences; there is perhaps less of it in the European cousins who find here so little use for the virtues of joy or flexibility; but the conflict of manners is nevertheless presented with nearly as much detachment as brilliance. Following it came two shorter novels—*nouvelles*—also equipoised between the hemispheres.

*An International Episode* (1879), which shows an American girl insulted by an English duchess and her daughter and then taking such revenge as she can by refusing to marry the duchess’s son, vexed the British, who in such matters were accustomed to look for satire entirely on their own side. *Daisy Miller* (1879) enraged the United States, where it was thought an aspersion upon American girlhood to represent an entirely virtuous but innocently daring young woman from Schenectady as conducting herself in Switzerland and Italy in a manner which confuses, and worse than confuses, a half-Europeanized young American who loves her.

Fault was naturally found with Winterbourne, the man in the case, who as an American might have been expected to understand Daisy’s behavior as any average American would. But of course to have found fault reveals the naïve temper of criticism in the late seventies. Henry James had done nothing more reprehensible than to make international comedy out of the situation chosen by Milton for his
Comus. Daisy wears her rustic innocence to the revels, and, though traduced, would have emerged safely had Winterbourne been true to the simple faith of his nation. Washington Square (1881) James called “a tale purely American, the writing of which made me feel acutely the want of the paraphernalia of an established civilization. This want, however, did not prevent his making a dainty masterpiece, lucid and quiet and cool, ironical yet tender; out of his story of how poor dull Catherine Sloper dreamed she had a true lover and then found he was only a fortune-hunter after all. The fashion, in which James here constantly explains America to his readers, as if they were of course to be Europeans, hints that he had traveled a long way from his native shores in half-dozen years, as indeed he had. His concern in the international situation had begun to wear thin.

It was, nevertheless, at this point in his career that he produced the first of his books which may be characterized as magnificent, The Portrait of a Lady (1881). Although Isabel Archer belongs in the charming line of those American girls whom James subtly traces through their European adventures, she is more important than any who had gone before her. She is but incidentally American, made so for the convenience of a creator who chose to display her as moving across a scene already lighted by his imagination and familiarized by his art. James saw in her the type of youth advancing toward knowledge of life; of youth at first shy and slight in its innocence but flowering under the sun of experience to the fullest hues and dimensions of a complexity which might under different circumstances have lain dormant; of youth growing irresistibly to meet the destiny which growth compels. Had
James belonged to another school he might have preferred a young man for protagonist; as it was he preferred to watch the more subterranean alchemies which, with the fewest possible external incidents, gradually enrich this sort of woman to maturity. The methods of his narrative were suggested by his theme. He would scrupulously keep the center of his subject within Isabel's consciousness, careful not to make her an egoist but equally careful to reveal her qualities by his notation of the delicate refraction which the scenes and personages of her career undergo in passing through her. Working thus, he could not skimp her story.

“I would build large,” he determined, “in fine embossed vaults and painted arches, as who should say, and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader's feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls.” (105)

His scene shifts spacioulsy from Albany to the Thames, among English country houses more ripe and ample than anything James had yet described, on to Paris, Florence, Rome the inimitable France and the incomparable Italy. Nothing hurries the stream of the narrative, which has time for eddies and shallows, broad stretches of noon and deep ominous pools. Isabel, being young and desirable, and like most of James's heroines allowed no career beside that incident to her sex, gets much of her education from being loved by the too aggressive Bostonian Caspar Goodwood, by the healthy, manly Lord Warburton, by her cousin Ralph Touchett, most whimsical and wistful and charming of all Henry James's men, and by the dilettante Gilbert Osmond. She marries Osmond only to find out finally that she had
been coldly tricked into the marriage by Madame Merle, whom Isabel has thought her best friend when the woman is in reality Osmond’s mistress anxious to get money for their illegitimate child. Something in the intricate, never quite penetrable fiber of the heroine sends her in the end back to her husband for the sake of her stepdaughter, thinking, it seems that she thereby encounters her destiny more nobly than in any previous chapter of it.

The conclusion, on various grounds, does not satisfy, but it consistently enough rounds out Isabel’s chronicle. Praise can hardly exaggerate the skill with which James at first warily investigates as from without the spirit of the fresh young girl, gradually transfers the action to her consciousness, and thenceforth with almost no appearance of art reduces his story to the terms of her realization of her fate. In something of this delaying fashion life dawns upon its victims.

“It is surely a graceful, ingenious, elaborate work,” James wrote of the Portrait to Stevenson, who disapproved of it, “with too many pages, but with (I think) an interesting subject and a good deal of life and style.”

He might justly have said that as to life it was unfailing and as to style all gold and ivory. In his next two novels, The Bostonians (1886) and The Princess Casamassima (1886) he relinquished the advantage of international contrast. The first deals with a group of American oddities somewhat stridently set on improving the status of women. Henry James himself belonged with the school of those who hold, in a phrase which must almost have driven him to a different position, that woman’s place is the home. He brought to his narrative the tory disposition to satire, and filled
the book with sharp caustic portraits and an unprecedented amount of caricature. His Bostonians recall that angular army of transcendentalists whom Lowell's essay on Thoreau hung up once for all in its laughable alcove of New England history.

James regards them only too obviously from without, choosing as the consciousness through which they are to be represented an engaging young reactionary from Mississippi, Basil Ransom, who invades this fussy henyard and carries away its prized heroine, Verena Tarrant, on the very eve of her great popular success as a lecturer in behalf of her oppressed but rising sex. By such a scheme James was naturally committed to making his elder feminists all out as unpleasant persons, preying on Verena's youth and charm and enthusiasm, and bound to keep her for their campaign no matter what that it might cost her in the way of love and marriage. But more than James's own prejudices and his technical device contribute to a certain insufficiency in The Bostonians. It is too largely skeleton, without the blood which might have come from heartier sympathies, without the flesh with which James might have been able to round out a purely American tale had he not forgotten so much about American life. He had forgotten, or at least ceased to care greatly about it. Two visits to his native country during 1881–1883 had left him still hungry for Europe, from which after 1883 he was not to return for over twenty years.

The Princess Casamassima is wholly European as to setting and characters. In it the bewildering Christina Light of Roderick Hudson, now a discontented princess dabbling in revolution, appears again with a mature mystery of temperament and an achieved diversity of whim. The romantic strain which James had lately been
repressing here rose unashamed to the surface and invented a cock-and-bull yarn about a vast, malignant, ramifying secret society which not unlike that in Brockden Brown’s *Ormond* so long before was supposed to underlie the whole of modern Europe, ready at almost any moment to break out and set thrones and governments toppling. With the Princess is involved the pathetic Hyacinth Robinson, unacknowledged son of a lord and yet a book-binder by trade, who falls first into the vicious coils of the militant socialists, then into the kindly, though as it turns out no less fatal, coils of the Princess Casamassima, learns to admire the aristocracy, and comes to a tragic end.

The story, James said, proceeded directly from his habit of walking the streets of London and reflecting upon the possible lot of some person who should have been produced by this civilization and yet should be condemned, as James decidedly had not been, to witness it from outside that is, from outside the world of fashion and intelligence. Would not such a humble hero, if sensitive enough, long for all the privileges of such a civilization, plot against them when denied them, fall in love with them when invited to share them even transiently?

*The Princess Casamassima* is James’s answer to his question; it is, moreover, a superb *tour de force*. Although written as from some timid boudoir or club or milder hearth which trembles fantastically at devouring socialists, the book pleases by its variety and swiftness. It has, in the vulgar sense, a plot. And it is evidence, too, how thorough was the process of saturation going on in its author that the background, splendid or sordid, of this novel is crowded with aspects of reality in
the still life and racy yet believable characters to an extent that makes The Bostonians seem by comparison flat and empty.

If the international novels had shown the “dense categories of dark arcane” of European life threatened by Americans, and The Princess Casamassima by revolution, The Tragic Muse (1890) showed them threatened by art. Nicholas Dormer resigns his seat in Parliament to become a mere portrait painter, to the ineffable horror of his very political mother and fiancée and patron. Parallel to his career is that of Miriam Rooth, who without at first being a lady contrives to become, with the help of genius, a great actress, incidentally refusing, for the sake of her art, a rising diplomat who proposes to make her the most brilliant lady in Europe.

The conflict between art and “the world” had early struck James as “one of the half-dozen great primary motives.” That conflict had governed and shaped his own career. So far as he had been a partizan at all in his pictures of life he had sided with “the world” in its compacter, urbaner phases as against uncivilized crudity and cruelty. But now, standing at the center of the compact, urbane “world,” he studied the phenomenon of genius which deflects Nick Dormer from all that his caste regards as desirable or even respectable; and which makes Miriam seem “important” as a human being in spite of her shortcomings as an ornament of society. That singular personage Gabriel Nash, who has no art but the art of living and who has no rôle in the novel but that of chorus, sums up the general problem.

“It's the simplest thing in the world; just take for granted our right to be
happy and brave. What's essentially kinder and more helpful than that, what's more beneficent? But the tradition of dreariness, of stodginess, of dull dense literal prose, has so sealed people's eyes that they've ended by thinking the most natural of all things the most perverse."

Such notes the æsthetic movement in England had been striking for a decade, but only Pater had struck them with the sustained power or linked sweetness of *The Tragic Muse*, and Pater had written about the long past instead of producing, as James here does, a marvelous document on the artistic life of his own immediate days. Peter Sherringham from watching Miriam arrives at a perception “of the perfect presence of mind, unconfused, unhurried by emotion, that any artistic performance requires and that all, whatever the instrument, require in exactly the same degree: the application, in other words, clear and calculated, crystal-firm as it were, of the idea conceived in the glow of experience, of suffering, of joy.” Such a statement implies that James had found a new aristocracy to imagine about—an aristocracy essentially more cosmopolitan than the shining barbarians of his “perpetual Piccadilly” and his innumerable country houses.

This shift in the objects of his imagination was connected with certain external facts. The popular success which James had hardly tasted except in the case of *Daisy Miller* but which he had confidently expected would be won by *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, had failed him. He felt hurt and mystified, for, contrary to the general notion, he desired more numerous plaudits than
he got. He wanted money, though he had a competency; he wanted the power that comes from recognition. For these reasons more than any other he gave the five years of 1889–1894 very largely to the writing of plays, working enormously without any substantial reward, and finally concluding early in 1895 that “you can’t make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse.” (109) The same period, and partly the same motive, turned him from full-length novels.

“I want,” he had written to Stevenson in 1888, “to leave a multitude of pictures of my time, projecting my small circular frame upon as many different spots as possible,... so that the number may constitute a total having a certain value as observation and testimony.” Of these briefer stories a notably large number deal with problems of the artistic life in its clashes with “the world.”

The Author of Beltraffio (1885) had exhibited the wife of that pagan-spirited author as so afraid of her husband’s influence upon their son that she actually if not quite deliberately lets the boy die to save him from the fearful contamination. The Aspern Papers (1888) recounts the strife between the former mistress of the famous Jeffrey Aspern and the critic who wants to publish the poet’s letters. In The Lesson of the Master (1892) Henry St. George’s lesson to his disciple is that perfection in art may not normally be hoped for by a man whose powers are drawn away by wife and children. To The Yellow Book James contributed three studies richly suited to the purposes of a periodical aiming to erect a temple of art in the midst of British Philistia: The Death of the Lion (1894), in which the genius Neil Paraday dies neglected in a
country house while his hostess gets credit for being his patron; *The Coxon Fund* (1894), laughably modernizing Coleridge into the parasite Frank Saltram who sponges on the rich and devoted and foolish; *The Next Time* (1895), about poor Ralph Limbert who fails in his struggles to boil the pot because he is incapable of anything less than masterpieces, no matter how hard he tries.

This group of stories may be said to end with *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896), with Hugh Vereker explaining to his critics how it is they must look in the whole of a writer's work for the primal plan, the string his pearls are strung on, the complex figure in the Persian carpet of his art.

“If my great affair’s a secret,” said Vereker, “that’s only because it’s a secret in spite of itself.... I not only never took the smallest precaution to make it so, but never dreamed of any such accident.” (110)

So Henry James might have reasoned in his own behalf. Obscurity was his destiny not his design. He had set out to record certain subtle relationships that he perceived binding men and women together in the human picture, and he would not call it his fault if his perceptions had proved more delicate than those of the reading public. He had tried to make national contrasts interesting; he had tried to diversify his matter in the great novels of the eighties; he had tried a new literary form in his plays and had, restricting himself for a time as to dimensions, written about the artistic life as no one had ever done in English. Nothing had availed him with the wider audience. He now gave up the battle, reconciled himself to his limited fate, discovered the house at Rye which was to be his permanent residence till the end of
his life, and settled down to the untrammeled practice of his art. Nothing could be more autobiographical, in a sense, than this later work of Henry James, exquisitely reproducing as it so often does the adventures of exquisite souls among thorns and pitfalls.

To rebutter dispositions he appears, of course, to be making an incredible fuss over nothing to speak of, and he did cease to interest any but that small group capable of caring about passions so delicate as these. But art may be great without being popular, just as now and then some magnificent radiance of personality may light up a narrow corner. A flawless story published in 1895, *The Altar of the Dead*, somewhat forecasts James's final type. It is the tale almost an apologue—of a George Stransom who at an altar privately maintained in a dim church sets up, one after another, candles for his dead, himself gradually perfected by his worship until at last he can complete the symmetry of his ritual by setting up a final candle to the memory of his bitter enemy, now forgiven.

This narrow corner of existence glows with the whitest, purest light of a noble imagination. James's themes, however, rarely rose quite so high. He chose to walk closer to the ground of usual events, expanding and elevating not the deeds of his characters but their sentiments. In *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) the action is only a sordid squabble between a widow and her son over the possession of a house made beautiful with objects of art which she has collected there for a lifetime but which by the hard English law now belong not to her but to him and the stupid bride he means to take. Round this central strife the story grew from a tale to a novel, from a vivid
episode to a drama richly conceived and decorated. Another novelist might have abused the law; some other might have sided with son or mother. Henry James reveals his drama through a third person, the gentle, unselfish Fleda Vetch, who shares the mother's passion for beautiful things but who loves, the son. James lacked the moral arithmetic which taught Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* that wisdom demands the strictest economy in sacrifice: Fleda Vetch, though Owen Gereth loves her and not Mona Brigstock, renounces him without lifting a hand, and condemns, along with herself, son and mother and doubtless wife to pain—and all seemingly with James's approbation. But though in this regard sentimental and immoral, *The Spoils of Poynton* as regards structure, proportion, texture, style, is accomplished perfection, the result of methods now matured and working upon their materials with absolute competence, without sign of effort or haste.

It was natural that in imagining the world in its impact upon tender intelligences, Henry James should have made use of children as his focuses of sensation. *What Maisie Knew* (1897) records the disgusting annals of a “fast” set in London through the mystified innocence of Maisie Farange, whose father and mother, divorced and both married again, toss her back and forth from one to the other in the intervals of incessant infidelity. She sees the outer facts of these obscene menages—joined together, by the way, through the liaison of the step-parents—without comprehending their inner horror. She is like a flower blooming in a filthy pool, by her shy beauty making the contrast a dreadful thing. That contrast is the plot. Charming though Maisie appears in her own right, and ugly as her companions are in
theirs, the interest lies essentially in the relations between them and her. The spectator, aware that in time her innocence will sink down and the dirty flood overwhelm her, constantly winces.

Still worse horrors, however, threaten in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), an almost incomparable short story which, as a sort of moral sequel to *What Maisie Knew*, exhibits two children so corrupted by wicked servants that words will not utter the evil in them. Although a certain symbolism hints at the nature of this particular evil, James was careful not to identify it exactly. Horror multiplies with the vagueness. Maisie is menaced by a bad example which is understood however hated; Miles and Flora appear to have been exposed to dim cosmic forces of evil which surround mankind as in the old Puritan cosmos, now and then expressed in actual sin but always huger than anything which can come of them.

*The Awkward Age* (1899), also concerned with the young, brought James back from his far explorations to polite comedy again, to the problem of the young girl in a society full of innuendo and intrigue. But Nanda Brookenham's experiences are swathed in such countless folds of reference and gossip that, artfully as the drama is expounded, it comes to the ear with a muffled sound, like agreeable voices heard speaking at a distance which lets the actual words die away on the wind. Five hundred pages of such matter strain the most loyal attention to irritation if not to disgust. And much the same thing must be said of *The Sacred Found* (1901), which has a soul the size of a short story and a body enlarged to the size of a novel by the solicitude with which James walks round and round his theme, hinting, hintingand
hinting. A consequence of the exuberant insinuation with which he worked in the first five years of his freedom from hope in the public was that the public found itself, by the reports of those who had read these later books, confirmed in its disposition to neglect him. From these years dates the legend that he had consciously, almost spitefully, evolved a style which no one could read but which it was a jolly game to laugh at.

The laughter grew into a cloud which obscured, and still in most quarters continues to obscure, the three superb novels with which, in prolific succession, he brought his art to its peak: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904). As if with some recurrence of his younger interests, he deals in each of the three with the old situation of Americans in Europe, but in a spirit no longer so reproachful toward them as being merely provincial or dowdy. James had ceased to be worried over the petty blunders of his travelling countrymen, now that he felt himself securely European and no longer felt the responsibility which once had brought compatriotic blushes to his cheek.

Like Mr. Longdon in *The Awkward Age*, an elderly Englishman who has retired to the country but is now drawn back to London again, James’s Americans in his maturest masterpieces bring into a fast and loose society certain old-fashioned virtues and graces, such as simplicity, truthfulness, monogamy, solvency. Even Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, who, having friend from the naughtinesses of Paris, himself surrenders to the beautifully beguiling universe he has entered—even Strether holds fast to the integrity which has all along given strength to his natural
sympathy and which will not allow him to profit by his amiable betrayal of his mission. Strether's being an American who can be contrasted with Europeans, however, does not exhaust his function.

He stands also for a common enough human type, the individual brought up in a limited community who discovers too late, or almost too late, what richness, what content, what joy might have awaited him in some fuller existence. “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to,” Strether says in a speech which Henry James himself pointed out to be the essence of *The Ambassadors*. “It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that what have you had?” With some such precepts Pater had talked of the counted number of pulse-beats and had counseled a life lived at the flame. And in that transcendentalist New England which James partially inherited, Emerson and Thoreau had constantly urged the need of fullness and intensity of life.

Strether’s situation flawlessly fits James’s idea. To get the largest value from them James had of course to make Strether another of his exquisite intelligences—rather too exquisite for his upbringing; he had, too, to make this abundant life into which Strether is initiated a life of lovely line and color, of gorgeous vesture and sweet, subtle, intoxicating atmosphere. All James’s old powers came in upon him, with his new freedom. The execution of *The Ambassadors*, which he thought his most perfectly constructed novel, is as richly imaginative as it is deliberate. James had annually increased the distance between his art and improvisation. He built novels now as architects do cathedrals, planning every stone in advance, testing
every material, calculating every stress, visualizing every “elevation.” Without any impetuous drive of narrative to carry him on, or the clashes of melodrama, he peculiarly needed anxious prevision and conscientious workmanship.

*The Golden Bowl* excellently illustrates this. Maggie Verver, an American girl, marries an Italian prince living in London, and her widowed father marries her friend Charlotte Stant. But there had been between Charlotte and the Prince before their marriages a secret intimacy which afterwards is resumed. With the fictive paraphernalia customary to such cases—jealousy, peeping, revelations, revenges—James of course has nothing to do. He would no more have brought the matter into the courts than would Maggie Verver and her quiet father. For James, as for Maggie, the evil of the situation consisted less in the sin of adultery than in the ugliness of stealth and deceit.

The problem is to bring the hidden offense into light, and the plot is merely the process by which the various characters, one after another, first only gradually, accidentally, then with suspicions hurrying dreadfully into convictions, discover and are discovered. When the truth has come up into the light, the story ends, with Verver and his wife departing for America. Tenuous as the substance may seem to any first glance, *The Golden Bowl* is still solidly constructed beneath its sumptuous garment of phrases and clauses; careless of moral considerations as it may seem to any moralistic eye, it still glows with condemnation of the ugly and the sordid facts which here disrupt a charming microcosm. The story suggests the coming of a great summer sun after a midnight of slinking ghosts. In *The Wings of the Dove* the beauty
and power of truth and goodness receive a tribute which has rarely been paid them in sophisticated novels. As Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* has risen magnificently to meet life, so here MillyTheale magnificently rises to meet death.

The book is the drama of her “inspired resistance.” Without gross or overt agonies, she struggles to experience “as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived.” James made her a New Yorker, the last of her family, rich and free, as the best way he could imagine endowing her with all the ages, and he took her of course to Europe to inherit her domain. There her battle and collapse, since she moves through her fate like a reigning princess, draw a whole circle with and after her; and in the end her tragedy shakes them all.

The particular blackness against which she is exhibited is the scheme of Kate Croy and her lover Merton Densher to make Milly believe he is in love with her in order that before her death she may leave him her fortune. Yet so radiant is the whiteness of Milly’s character that, though the plot superficially succeeds, the plotters are separated by disgust at their own shame. Every dexterity was required in such a story to keep Milly from seeming a prig or at best a tedious saint. James avoids this fatal defect by revealing her not so much in her words and deeds as in the effect she has on those who devotedly or selfishly surround her. She stands, as it were, in the beauty from every angle and which themselves report her quest of a crowded existence during her numbered days. As she slowly fades under her malady the mirrors have an increasing task, until at last she is no longer visible except in them,
where eventually her image lingers even after her death. Such puissance as hers does not lapse with bodily extinction, but lasts on as a remembered effluence of loveliness. If *The Ambassadors* is the best constructed of these three novels and *The Golden Bowl* the most subtly suggestive, *The Wings of the Dove* is most elevated, most tender and most noble.

They issued from what might be called the Indian summer of James’s career as an American. Europe, he wrote in 1902, has ceased to be romantic to me, and my own country, in the evening of my days, has become so. But his longing did not survive the visit which he lustrously chronicled in *The American Scene* (1907). From New Hampshire to Florida, from New York to California, the sensations awakened by the roaring continent overwhelmed him. Like an astronomer come down from his tower into the town, James fled back with his hands to his ears. The remainder of his life was more fragmentary than the rounded period 1896–1904. He resumed for a little while his theatrical ambitions; he wrote more short stories; he worked at the two novels, *The Sense of the Past* (originally begun in 1900) and *The Ivory Tower*, which, though incomplete when posthumously published in 1917, have the special interest that the second of them employs the American scene and both are accompanied by the dictated notes which he latterly made to assist him in his composition; and he carried avowed autobiography through *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), and the unfinished *The Middle Years* (1917). The war shattered his peace beyond repair. This lover of art who had not taken the trouble to form an opinion concerning the Dreyfus case, who had little more to say of the Boer
War than that it doubled his income tax, who had vaguely hoped that the war with Spain might educate Americans as imperialism had educated the English, who had looked with candid contempt upon the Irish aspirations for freedom, now woke to the crisis of the world with a passion which ceased only with his death in 1916.

There was nothing complicated in his loyalty, nothing critical in his attitude toward the drama being enacted. His Europe, France, England, Italy had been assailed in utter wantonness; the barbarians were pounding at the gates and might at any moment break in to befoul the pavements and violate the shrines of his sacred city. His own distant country looked on without lifting a helping hand, and he saw no better way to signify his protest and his allegiance than by becoming a British citizen in 1915, declaring "Civis Britannicus sum" with a Roman boast, and ending his career, as he had begun it, on the note of romance.

Criticism must take account of the vast gulf across which those who like Henry James view with contempt those who do not, and in return those who do not like him view with incredulity those who do. Casual gossip says that his style by its obscurity has fixed the gulf there. While this indubitably operates with regard to certain of his later works, it can have nothing to do with The American, or The Europeans, or Daisy Miller, or Washington Square, or The Portrait of a Lady, which are all as pellucid as a clean spring. And even in the elaborate, maturer books the style is obscure only in the sense that it speaks of matters less blunt and tangible than those which most fiction deals with. Nor will the cosmopolitan aspect of his themes entirely explain the hindering gulf, as has been argued by patriots who wish
to punish him for his expatriation. The three metropolises—New York, London, Paris—which mark the triangle of his chosen territory are objects of curiosity for an enormous audience. Indeed, nationalism hurts James worse than internationalism: he suffers from the sensitiveness to national differences which kept him concerned too much with them and too little with the universal human likenesses which transcend nationality. He was actually less able to forget his American origin than such an unhesitant son of America as Whitman, for instance, who, taking his native land for granted, could send his imaginations out to all the corners of the world without worrying at the national boundaries thus crossed.

Neither may James’s failure to touch the wider world he really aimed at be accounted for by his unceasing labors to perfect his technique of representation. These concerned him alone, or such fellow craftsman or connoisseurs as find in his prefaces to the New York Edition (1907–09) the most remarkable commentaries ever made upon the art of fiction.

James’s essential limitation may rather accurately be expressed by saying that he attempted, in a democratic age, to write courtly romances. He did not, naturally, go back for his models to the Roman de la Rose or Morte d’Arthur or Sidney’s Arcadia or the Grand Cyrus. But he did devote himself to those classes in modern society which descend from the classes represented by the romancers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His characters, for the most part, neither toil nor spin, trade nor make war, bear children in pain nor bring them up with sacrifices. The characters who do such things in his novels are likely to be the servants or
dependents of others more comfortably established. His books consequently lack the interest of that fiction which shows men and women making some kind of way in the world except the interest which can be taken in the arts by which the penniless creep into the golden favor of the rich or the socially unarrived wriggle into an envied caste. James is the laureate of leisure. Moreover the leisure he cared to write about concerns itself in not the slightest degree with any action whatsoever even games or sports. Love of course concerns it, as with all novelists. Yet even love in this chosen universe must constantly run the gauntlet of decorum incomprehensible to all but the initiate.

Decorum is what dams James with the public. In one of Chrétien de Troyes’s romances Lancelot, on his way to rescue Guinevere from a most precarious situation, commits the blunder of riding part of the way in a cart and thereby brings upon himself a disgrace which his most gallant deeds can scarcely wipe out. Sensible citizens who may have happened upon this narrative in the twelfth century probably felt mystified at the pother much as do their congener in the twentieth who stare at the wounds which James’s heroes and heroines suffer from blunders intrinsically no more serious than Lancelot’s. How much leisure these persons must enjoy, the sensible citizen thinks, to have evolved and to keep up this mandarin formality; and how little use they make of it! Only readers accustomed to such decorums can walk entirely at ease in the universe James constructed. But they have the privileges of a domain unprecedented and unmatched in modern literature. It is not merely that he is the most fascinating historian of the most elegant society of the
century. He is the creator of a world immensely beautiful in its own right: a world of international proportions, peopled by charming human beings who live graceful lives in settings lovely almost beyond description; a world which vibrates with the finest instincts and sentiments and trembles at vulgarity and ugliness; a world full of works of art and learning and intelligence, a world infinitely refined, a world perfectly civilized.

In real life the danger to such a world is that it may be overwhelmed by some burly rush of actuality from without. In literature the danger is that such a world will gradually fade out as dreams fade, and as the old romances of feudalism have already faded. Elaborate systems of decorum pass away; it is only the simpler manners of men which live forever.

There is a division between truth and beauty. It is clear that Strether's idea of Paris is a myth. Strether's nostalgia combines with his present need for glory. Paris and all things Parisian are celebrated, and the effects of Strether's mythology are fascinating to watch. In a sense, the real world never conforms to Strether's mental frame. Strether does not 'fit in' socially and Strether fails his missions because of the difference between what Strether perceives and what actually exists around him. Strether falls for Madame de Vionnet's charm and seems stricken at the end of the novel, when he discovers how he has erred. The beauty that Strether sees in Paris is the very loathsome thing that Sarah Pocock and Waymarsh strive against. Strether was led to imagine an improvement in Chad, though even the most generous reading of the novel fails to locate Chad's moral superlatives. Strether sees and worships
glory in others and in the scene. Strether wants glory for himself but he never defines what glory is.

He chases beauty without a real understanding of what is beautiful. In terms of the plot, it is worth noting that Strether is a vacationer, he is traveling as a stranger in a strange land. This makes him all the more vulnerable to liars and deceit. Strether has visited Paris once and much has changed since then. At the same time that Strether is re-exposed to a relatively unfamiliar city, Chad's friends deceive Strether with false images of beauty. Having arrived in Paris of all places, Strether cannot help but find the beauty he has been told to expect.

The motif of the dramatic play and stagecraft is developed in the early books of the novel. The beauty of stagecraft becomes a simulacrum for real life, both a revision and a replacement. This is a form of idealism, an effort to change the real world and have it acted out as a more beautiful story. The mere replacement of reality, however, is less promising. At a show, Strether, Waymarsh, and Maria Gostrey sit waiting for Little Bilham to arrive, for they have invited him. Apparently, Bilham has given his ticket to Chad for Chad arrives, late, and in Bilham's place. This entrance is the manner in which Chad introduces himself to Strether: just as the curtain is rising for the second half of the drama. The social gatherings of Chad and his peers sustain this dramatic beauty in conversation, in timing, and in costume. For Strether, the consequence is the loss and denial of intelligence and hard facts. Finally, the theme of truth and beauty is evident in the discussion of types and impressions. Strether has few facts and he knows very little details of Chad's life in
Paris. Strether must rely upon Maria Gostrey to educate him on the types of person one finds. This is, at best, shorthand - for each individual is complex and unique. Strether celebrates the idea of types as a form of beauty.

He wants to believe that the truth about his fellow man is utterly and entirely knowable. Gostrey is vital because she is able to pigeon-hole each person; she has the necessary taxonomy to describe each character. Gloriani’s garden party is the best example of this beauty and its evasion of truth. A sculptor and collector, Gloriani has a garden decorated with standing statues, of his own art and of his collection.


