CHAPTER - III

THE MASTER'S WOMEN CHARACTERS
This chapter is a formal analysis of action and situation in the selected short fiction of Henry James which would help in understanding his woman characters. It would seem at first only prudent to heed James's own maxim that character and action are inseparable in a successful work of fiction,

"When one says picture one says of a character, when one says novel, one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident and what is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character?"\(^1\)

James's incidents illustrate his characters, or at least they are intended to, and his characters 'determine' incidents. These incidents are neither varied nor violent. By far the most common is a conversation between two people, their speech interspersed with even more subdued incidents typically of the kind which James mentions in the passage immediately following the one quoted above:

"It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is."\(^2\)

Although apparently chosen as a random example, this woman may be any of James's women characters, Mrs. Ambient the Countess, the telegraphist Mrs Monarch or any other woman. This incident is a powerful and significant one because it dramatizes and objectifies the emotion process (of suspicion, anxiety, or most probably growing awareness) which the heroine is presently undergoing. The only way
to explain the powerful effect of such a banal incident is to treat it as an illustration of character. The excitement flows from the vitality of any of the young women characters of sufficient autonomy to invest even the smallest gesture with the vitality of their personality. It sums up to the fact that what happens in the story or the above incident is an illustration of her character, then we may hold the young woman pretty strictly accountable for everything that happens.

James gave his heroines freedom, freedom from severe financial obligations and in this instance freedom from the random but often coercive stream of incident and detail which in reality impedes and deflects the individual. For example in the above quoted scene, the woman has freedom to make a wholly expressive gesture.

If James's characters are indeed free to make their gestures, the incidents in which they are involved, wholly expressive of themselves, then it is reasonable to study Jamesian characters and his, techniques of characterization as seen in the selected short stories, for he created and manipulated them within an action or situation.

Incident may illustrate character, it may also and sometimes more importantly, orchestrate the reaction of the reader. One observes a certain pattern which moves character from one situation or condition through successive stages to a final resting point that is discovered to be in virtual opposition to the point of origin.³

Henry James's sense of women as important material for fiction
emerges not only from the novelistic tradition which has long dealt with heroines, but from the American culture which was recognized from within and without to accord women a particularly prominent position. One of the emerging signs, was that of the American girl's youthful femininity signifying the individualistic spontaneity, freedom and innocence of the New World. James too recognized the figure as particularly characteristic in commenting on the work of an American contemporary,

"The author intensely American in the character of his talent, is probably never so spontaneous, so much himself when he represents the delicate, nervous emancipated young woman begotten of our institutions and our climate, and equipped with a lovely face and an irritable moral consciousness."

The popular idea of the American girl was one, which emerged in the context of a Victorian ideology of the feminine, which was similar on both sides of the Atlantic - critical was the idea of true womanhood! This was not totally new nor did it deny the range of feminine attributes from earlier periods, but the emphasis was different. Idealization of woman became heavily domestic in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the industrial revolution there was a growing contrast between the position of working class woman, increasingly employed outside the family and middle class women sitting in the newly conceptualized home with nothing to do. One can see as at least partly resulting from this leisure both the growing
demands for women's greater economic freedom and legal equality and an increasing emphasis on any ideas and reflections at all levels which justified the statuesque and persuaded women to remain in the private world of the home. To rationalize this domesticity, the notion of the separate spheres of the sexes was popular, spheres which were naturally different but equal in importance though not in reward,

"The nineteenth century was confident that it knew the difference between the sexes and that these differences were total and innate. Women were inherently more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men and were happier doing tasks, learning lessons and playing games that harmonized with their nature."5

Barbara Welter describes how the phrase 'true womanhood' is used continuously in contemporary material that is between 1820 and 1860, but never defined, rather like Lisa Appignanese's description of the word 'femininity'

The evocative power of the term 'femininity' makes it a word, which is generally if somewhat vaguely understood - even though little effort is made to decipher what exactly it means. As such it constitutes what Richard Barthes calls a 'myth': a statement which bears no 'direct' relationship to the object it describes (woman and evokes a range of suggestions which is culturally determined).6

Despite lack of definition Barbara Welter extracts four cardinal virtues in the true woman; piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. The very emphasis on the domestic sphere, which meant
marriage, and on the fact that women's claim to importance was their moral influence on men helps explain why the revolt, the alternative, was often conceived in terms of celibacy. The idealization of woman's moral influence in the domestic sphere obscured the glaring contradiction of ascribing woman a superior moral virtue and yet rendering that superiority inferior to masculine, legal, social and economic restraint.

Both the reflection on and rebellion against the notion of the domestic idyll and woman's place in it was essentially middle class. Middle class women neither went out to work, nor had any real function within the home. It was they who had the time and sometimes, the education to look beyond their 'separate sphere'. Yet the contemporary demand to live as a domestic paragon was only one of the two poles of response to the position of women.

Some of these ideas about women in Victorian America can be understood by a study of Alice James (1848-1892) the younger sister of Henry and William James, who did not become famous and did not produce any lasting work except a diary of the years. (1889-1892) Alice James's journal and letters display a rare gift for language, sharp wit, psychological acumen, and an intuitive grasp of political and economic realities. F.O. Matthiessen compared her 'wealth of inner resources' with Emily Dickenson's and Henry James wrote to William that their sister's journal constituted a "new claim for the family
reunion."

Alice James's story is interesting for what it tells us about a particular life and also for what it says about Victorian American Women, about James's family and about the phenomenon of neurasthenia in nineteenth century America. The conflicts in Alice's ostensibly quiet life were intense, between natural intelligence, energy and curiosity on the one hand, and the passive virtues of genteel femininity on the other, between the teasing adoration of the male Jameses and her sense of exclusion from their intellectual world; between an extravagantly loving, permissive, childlike father and a firm, practical managerial mother; between the sensuous education in Europe that Henry James senior provided for his children and a new England morality of self-control. Like many other upper and middle class women and men of her time, Alice James turned her social and personal conflicts inward and become 'neurasthenic', subject to nervous attacks and exhaustion, to fainting spells. Some Victorians managed to alleviate their suffering in marriage, writing or 'good works', others succumbed to invalidism and spent virtually their whole lives in bed. The experience and transcendence of this condition were the stuff of Alice James's life contending with 'her nerves' for thirty years, she managed to keep her head, her comic sense, interests in the outside world, personal attachments and a fierce integrity and she never gave way to self pity.
Henry James appreciated Alice’s writing and she was closest to him. Alice’s narration of her own life was interrupted for long periods by illness, Henry’s fire and the burning of her letters. Undoubtedly more of what she wrote is missing than collected, and the diary covers only the last four years of her life.

Through family correspondence much about Alice is known. That the Jameses were inveterate travelers and prolific letter writers is a great advantage since their correspondence is so full of articulate life. But this wealth of source material creates a new problem, a constant temptation to draw excessively on the accounts of the very significant, others in the James’s family. The powerful and well preserved voices of two of the American nineteenth century’s best writers threaten to drown out their sister’s less voluminous but nonetheless articulate account, just as the intellectual din at the family dinner table in the 1860’s kept her quietly in the background.

The process of getting to know Alice James indirectly through the mediation of relatives, friends, records and events is similar to that of reading a late Henry James novel where knowledge is in constant fluid motion between surfaces and depths and where what happens is an opening out of perceptions about what exists only in the play and range of individual consciousness.

Not much evidence is available about Alice James’s relations with her mother. Since the drama of Alice’s life is in many ways a private
interior one, the relations between mother and daughter are central to a full understanding of Alice. Almost ten years after Mary James died, Alice recorded in her diary:

“Even since the night that mother died, and the depth of filial tenderness was revealed to me, all personal claim upon her vanished, and she has dwelt in my mind as a beautiful illumined memory, the essence of divine maternity from which I was to learn great things, give all but ask nothing.”

And in 1890 on re-reading her parents’ old letters she found her

“Mothers words breathing her extraordinary selfless devotion as if she simply embodied the unconscious essence of wife and motherhood!”

“Extraordinary selfless devotion”, “the essence of divine maternity,” “give all but ask nothing.” These phrases do not reflect the image of the practical, rather domineering figure who ran the tumultuous James’s household with a firm hand, who was described by a family acquaintance as large florid, stupid seeming and who emerges in a series of terrifyingly powerful mothers in Henry James’s fiction. But Alice was not alone in conferring sainthood on her mother, “Henry Senior saw in his wife the personification of selflessness, which was the ultimate virtue in his moral pantheon, and the tyrannical mothers in the novels of Henry Junior were reserved for fiction, his language about his real mother is similar to Alice’s:

“she was patience, she was wisdom, she was exquisite maternity- - It was a perfect mother’s life ...to lay herself down in her ebbing strength and yield up her soul to the celestial power that had given her this divine commission.”
To an only daughter whose own essence did not draw her naturally along the path of selfless devotion and who possessed a great deal of energy and curiosity and ambition, it must have seemed impossible to measure up against such a holy ideal of virtue. It was probably also impossible to know that the divine selflessness itself was something of a myth.

In the biographies of Henry and William James, Alice is a significant but minor character, whereas both brothers and their father had major roles in her life. Can these men, who seemed in many ways larger than life while they lived and seem even more so now take on supporting roles in someone else’s drama without taking over the stage. It is a complicated problem. One tends not only to rely too heavily on the James’s men’s abundant and entertaining versions of the family saga, but also to be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of material about William and the two Henrys in their own works and biographies. How are these enormously complex and interesting lives to be fitted into Alice’s story without disastrous oversimplification?

For Alice James, the central drama is not a love story, but a struggle of character and spirit. Shortly before she died, Alice wrote to William apropos of the neurasthenia that had plagued most of her adult life,

“when I am gone, pray don’t think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else, had neurotic
science been born."\textsuperscript{13}

That is a useful plea to keep in mind, with reference not just to neurotic illness (Alice used the term in its pre-Freudian sense, to mean nervous disorder) but to the whole range of circumstances that kept many lives from being "something else". To live fully over in Henry James's phrase, "the growth, the change, the varying intensity" of perception in an obscure life is to use all the versions and exigencies of the past to approach the truth of private experience.

The above detailed discussion about Alice and her mother is necessary to understand the women characters portrayed by James in his short fiction. Both these women influenced his life and works. The discussion also shows the status and condition of women in the nineteenth century America, where women had to live their own private lives - it was not for them to understand or appreciate literature or art. Yet some women are not just props or decorative pieces but have a special drive and force in them.

Idealization of women became heavily domestic in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of industrial revolution, there was a growing contrast between the position of working class women, increasingly employed outside the family and middle class women sitting in the newly conceptualized home with nothing to do and then elite women were expected to be more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men. This was considered to be the 'true womanhood'.
Marriage was the highest expectation for them and they also had to be upholders of law and morality. In this context American girls were recognized as civilized women, provocatively youthful and egalitarian. They had to represent America in its social relations, customs, manners and forms. At the same time, they were also required to represent the different and changing America as free, easy democratic, young and rich. Innocence and frankness were the hallmarks of their personality. Women are portrayed in all their grandeur and gloom in the works of Henry James.

The tales of Henry James such as The Author of Beltraffio, The Lesson of the Master, The Real Thing, The Middle Years, The Figure in the Carpet and In The cage14 are essentially unrelated tales but contain vivid feminine characterization.

The Author of Beltraffio (1884) is a story about a writer. Paul Ambient, whose wife Beatrice, finds his works objectionable and fears that they will have a detrimental effect on their son Dolcino. While the narrator, a rather gushing admirer of Ambient, is visiting the couple, Dolcino falls ill. In an attempt to reconcile Beatrice to her husband, the narrator suggests that she read her husband’s novel. Beatrice complies and reads it over her child’s sick bed. Repelled by the text, she attempts to save her son from corruption by refusing to give him his prescribed medication. When Dolcino’s condition worsens, Beatrice repents and tries to save him, but it is too late and he dies as a
result of her actions. James reiterates his theme that art and women are irreconcilable.

Interestingly, Ambient in this story is a realist and believes in the true interpretation of life as he sees it. He is for the dictum art for art’s sake. On the other hand Beatrice distrusts any literature that lacks a moral or a didactic purpose. This story dramatizes the eternal conflict between artists and moralists.

Beatrice is seen as ‘Medea’ who does not flinch at the idea of doing away with her husband or child. She is variously labeled as a ‘Philistine’, ‘distrustful of beauty’ and art by different critics as Edel, Dorothea Krook as we see in the following conversation, 15

“Feverish! How in the world comes he to be feverish? Ambient asked.” “He was perfectly right this afternoon.”(64)

Beatrice must be very happy – she has an opportunity to triumph said my friend with a bright bitterness which was all I could have wished it.

“Surely not if the child’s ill! I ventured to remark by way of pleading for Mrs Ambient.” “My dear fellow, you aren’t married – you don’t know the nature of mothers.”(67)

This story also reflects James’s own ideas on realism that he put forward in his The Art of Fiction.16 More important, women in this story are figured from the nineteenth century masculine point of view as inferior beings who cannot understand or appreciate art.

Ambient perhaps I care too much for beauty – I don’t know, I doubt if a poor devil can. I delight in it, I adore it, I think of it continually, and I try to produce it, to reproduce
it. My wife holds that we shouldn't cultivate or enjoy it without extraordinary precautions or reserves. She's always afraid of it, always on her guard. I don't know what it can ever have done to her, what grudge it owes her or what resentment rides. (p. 77)

From Mrs. Ambient's point of view art and literature are subjects of disinterest as we see in the following lines,

"She gave a strange small laugh as she said, I am afraid you think I know much more about my husband's work than I do. I haven't the least idea what he is doing. In fact: I don't read what he writes."(65)

Ambient's sister Gwendolyn solely lacked any originality – she had vulgar impulses. She wished to be looked at, to be married and to be thought original. She retires to a sisterhood later on in the story. The narrator too feels that Miss Ambient is strange in her behavior.

Women, the narrator perceives, are incapable of understanding a 'little work of art' like Dolcino and so it is destroyed by a woman.

"She held him in her arms! she pressed him to her breast not to see him, but she gave him no remedies, did nothing the doctor ordered. Everything's there untouched. She has had the honesty not even to throw the drugs away! Marks sole, his adored little son was more exquisitely beautiful in death than he had been in life." (93-94)

The story can in effect be read as a disavowal of James's and Ambient's view that a novel cannot harm but can only be harmed. As Ambient intimates, young people should not read novels (56). But his concern is not for young people, it is for the text.

"Bad for them. I don't say so much but very bad. I am afraid for the novel." (60)
However despite its realist ethos the story implies that women can be affected by art. Ambient's work has corrupted Beatrice to such an extent that to all intents and purposes, she murders her child. Gwendolf, Ambient's sister, seems to be dangerously affected by his proximity to her. The narrator observes

"As there were plenty of people who disapproved of him totally, they could easily point to his sister as a person formed by its influence. It was quite possible to regard her as a warning, as she had done him but little good with the world at large."

This short story like *The Portrait of a Lady*, works to uphold a nineteenth century, Realist, Humanist status quo. In it women are figured as inferior beings who cannot understand or appreciate art. In Ambient's view, Beatrice's perception of a novel is a thing so false that it makes him blush. It is a thing so hollow, so dishonest, so lying in which life is so blinked and blinded, so dodged and disfigured, that it makes his ears burn. Further women are not only incapable of artistic appreciation but also barred from artistic production. Hence in Winner's view, Gwendolyn is an 'aesthete', not an artist. This interpretation is in accord with the narrator's for whom Ambient is in the original, and 'Gwendolyn' had the natural aptitude for an artistic development – she had little real intelligence: women's concerns are mundane, not conducive to fine literature. The narrator says of Gwendolyn, she had I believe, the unusual allowance of vulgar
impulses, she wished to be looked at, she wished to be married, she
wished to be thought original.

Woman, at least as she is represented in Gwendolyn is vulgar, and
as James has stressed in his essays, vulgarity has no place in art, not
even in Realist art. Woman is also a threatening figure, and she is
depicted as a sorceress and witch, as a creature who is uncontrollable,
and so who paradoxically, must be controlled before the incoherence
she engenders, runs rampant. This idea has material proof in Beatrice
and the narrator is also particularly critical of Gwendolyn: the truth is
that as the sequel proved, Miss Ambient had some of the qualities of
the sibyl, and had therefore a right to sibylline contortions. Indeed this
prophetess of ill,

"With her embroideries and her attitudes, her necromantic
* glances and strange intuitions, retired to a sisterhood."(357)

Women must be subdued, and they are pushed to the margin of the
text.

However, while women may be outside the artistic circle, they can
break in and destroy it. What the tale re-establishes, therefore is the
need for patriarchal order. Interestingly enough, Winner chastises
Ambient for abdicating his familial responsibilities. Although he
knows of his spousal incompatibility, he does nothing to correct it. His
awareness does not lead to action until it is too late, which suggests
that a concomitant of his artistic temperament of feeling life through
the imagination and responding to it as a spectacle - is a detachment from real life as well as a passivity in his role as a husband and father. Beatrice's success in keeping him from the child almost seems to suggest that he has abdicated familial responsibility and authority. When the male authority figure is removed, women are allowed to exercise control, with a devastating result, as the story dramatizes.

Since art, within Realist theory is a moral and does not corrupt, women are shown to be potential sources of evil. Thus art merely draws attention to what was corrupt in the first place, and reaffirms the Truth of its representation. In this elusion, the text attempts to show that literature only emphasizes the 'truth' about women, who are impaired agents themselves, and that it is women who corrupt art. Women not the text are the source of evil. It is not surprising then, that the narrative perceives that Dolcinos' is

"like a little work of art - a work of art who is misunderstood and then destroyed by a woman."

Clearly, if we refuse to follow the anti-feminine codes, the text cannot be resolved, for its portrait of femininity is not natural or given, but is contrived to support the ideological pre-suppositions of the tale. Nonetheless, the threat which women pose to art resurfaces in the next story The Lesson of the Master which appears to offer an alternative to the problem generated in The Author of Beltraffio when it suggests that artists must remain celibate - a solution which would eliminate the
danger of and further child murders.

In this there are two male characters Paul Overt and Henry St. George - the master and the disciple. The master is past his prime - both in his literary and personal life. His wife is sick and he blames his wife and family for his decline. He warns Overt of the dangers that matrimony poses to art and stresses that if Overt wishes to do something artistic he must remain single. Aware of Overt's passion for a woman whom he himself admires, Marian Fancourt, St. George insists that Overt must make a choice between marriage and art. Overt takes the master's advice and leaves England, and Marian, only to return two years later to learn that St. George is about to marry her himself. When Overt confronts him, St. George insists that his literary career is over and that his desire to save Overt has figured in his decision to become engaged. As in Author of Beltraffio James portrays the character of Marian Fancourt as one who is incompatible with art and artists. Women, he seems to assert, are destructive and incapable of artistic production. An artist must renounce life in order to create art. In James's scheme of things, women are either evil or marginal. They are emblematized as dragons or devils, however they are kept within the confines of the masculinist nineteenth century ideology trivialized and denied a presence.

There are similarities between The Author of Beltraffio and The Lesson of the Master. Both Overt and Ambient pen novels entitled
'Ginistrella' and each story contains a woman who burns, or who the writer fears will burn one of his books. Ambient is nervous when Beatrice reads his new manuscript,

"He was very much afraid she would burn up sheets, with his emendations of which he had no duplicate." (80)

In fact she does not, she destroys Dolcino instead. However while on the surfaces the women in the later story appear to conform to the pattern evident in The Author of Beltraffio, they also function in an allegorical fashion.

The Lesson of the Master is of particular interest, since it is noted for its open-ended conclusion. It is one of the works which Shlometh Rimmon cites as an example of James’s deliberate ambiguity19 two alternative readings that St. George is sincere and marriage is not conducive to art, and that St. George has lied, and has tricked Overt in order to gain Marian Fancourt. Rimmon argues that one cannot choose between the two interpretations because the story is locked, however,
perhaps more to the point and as she later asserts one does not need to choose between them. In this tale we find women are once again placed on a different pedestal. Marian Fancourt cannot herself achieve perfection’s, and the tale can also be taken as a warning that she may not be able to go in for it, as an artist’s wife and if we accept the master’s words, this is another consequence of her being a woman. As in The Author of Beltraffio women are destructive and incapable of
artistic production, Mrs St. George is so dismissive of her husband’s work that she riles Overt, didn’t she as the wife of a rare artist know what it was to produce one perfect work of art? How in the world did she think they were turned off?

Within the story - The Burned Book - the book that is destroyed by St. George – constitutes an absence which Overt is expected to fill. Peter Brooks argues: “No fiction of worth exists, so the persons become the art and the agreement to save one another become the agreement to invent one another. It is again an attempt to make something than nothing to justify a poetics of nothing. This poetics of nothing is indeed suggestive.” For ‘nothing’ within this story creates something. To carry Brook’s argument further it is absence which creates presence. Overt alludes to this in discussing ‘Ginistrella’.

“I have been out of England so much repeated absences during all these last years, and yet you write of it as well as if you were always here.” (230)

The absence England engenders is its successful presence. On the other hand something leads to nothing and as St. George indicates of himself.

“We’ve got everything handsome, even a carriage – we are prosperous, hospitable eminent people. But my dear fellow, don’t try to stultify yourself and pretend you don’t know what we haven’t got - - you would put a pistol - ball into your brain if you had written my books.”(166)

Overt’s renunciation of his choice, on his choice of nothing does,
as St. George has advised, creates something! At the end of six weeks he appeared himself to have learned St. George's lesson by heart - to have tested and proved his doctrine. (172) The something created is literature. He had been absent from London for years - two years which were a long period and had made such a difference in his own life through the production of a novel far stronger, he believed than must renounce life in order to create art, as Overt observes when he summarizes the elder writer's premise. What a false position, what a condemnation of the artist, that he's a mere disfaramonk and can produce his effort only by throwing up personal happiness. What an arraignment of art! Conversely, St. George, who gains Marian Fancourt and thus has something has published nothing at the conclusion of the story.

The pattern of nothing and something is illuminated through post-structuralist feminist theory for, from this perspective what is being privileged as the source of artistic creation is the Feminine "other" or that which subverts referential singularity. Because the Feminine other constitutes a space, an absence, it gives birth to the plurality necessary for the production of art.

If women are plural, it is because they are denied a single presence within the textual discourse. Within James's terminology, they are either evil or marginal. Adeline Tintner discusses their destructive aspects when she uses the ironic imagery, which the story employs to
arrive at the conclusion that women figure as devils and dragons. This section ends on the note of the burning of the book and the realization of both Paul Overt and the reader along with him that Mrs. St. George dressed in the color of the devil (red) is a lady dragon who like the city burning dragon of the Golden Legend, burns books. (Ironic 118) Tintner also Marshall's evidence to support her contention that Marian Fancourt is a nascent dragon and displays qualities similar to those of Mrs St George. In keeping with this argument, for St. George, even the feminine mercenary muse is a threatening figure! I think of that pure spirit as a man thinks of a woman, in some detested hour of his youth, he has loved and forsaken. She haunts him with reproachful eyes, she lives forever before him. As an artist you know I've married for money. I refer to mercenary muse whom I led to the altar of literature. Don't do that my boy, she'll lead you a life.

When they are not emblematized as devils women essentially cease to count. While a warning against women is the crux of St. George's argument, that warning becomes somewhat ludicrous in the light of women's textual insignificance. In the smoker's scene section 111, women become synonymous, with cigarettes. It is a great thing to have a wife who proves to one, all the things one can do without. One might never find them out for oneself,

"She doesn't allow me to touch a cigarette ... Have you got one yourself? Do you mean a cigarette? Dear no a wife: No and I would give up my cigarette for one." (236)
In effect then, while they may be dangerous creatures whom the artist must avoid, the text attempts to confine women within its rigid figuration and trivialize them. There may be a 'something' in St. George's view, but in fact because of the masculinist ideology of the nineteenth century Realist, Humanist theory, they are denied a presence. As Marian Fancourt notes,

"Ah perfection, perfection – how one ought to go in for it! I wish I could, 'Everyone can, 'In his way' In his way yes, but not in hers. Women are so hampered so condemned!" (251-2)

Women are limited and circumscribed by the text effort to stabilize the plurality they manifest in their function as 'other'. Hence, when St. George believes that they manifest a threat to him, it is because they constitute an absence, which engenders multiplicity. And this is a state, which threatens his Realist Perspective!

"Fancy an artist with a plurality of standards. To do it – To do it and to make it divine is the only thing he has to think about. Is it done or not is his only question." (169)

St. George, therefore abandons art, because he cannot contend with its feminine plurality. He becomes a reader a passive consumer within the masculine dictates of realism:

"Of course I have stopped writing. It's too late for the rest of my life, I shall only read you." (183)

If the masculine is that which is given linguistic priority, the Feminine is whatever subverts that hierarchization.
The story grants privilege to the referentially disruptive Feminine ‘other’ for out of the absence of certainty, grows art, for only absence, as the story indicates engenders plurality. The absence of any certainty with regard to St. George’s sincerity allows for the creation of The Lesson of the Master as well as for Overt’s writings within it. While this story is curiously non-committal on the success of Overt’s works – which again constitutes an absence, since the best answer to that perhaps is that he is doing his best but that it is too soon to say. This answer is deferred to the next story The Real Thing in which absence and plurality are celebrated as the only means of artistic production.

The Real Thing - though its key is that of light comedy, deals with the most serious problem any artist can pose to himself the nature of reality. James’s conclusion is not in the least original. Every writer, painter, sculptor who has the root of the matter in him has come to it. Goethe expresses it with lucidity when he says something to the effect that life and art are two different things and that is why we call one life and the other Art.

James came to write The Real Thing based on an incident. He was talking one day to George du Maurier.* The artist told him about a couple whose reduced circumstances had compelled them to propose themselves as models for his weekly illustrations of upper-class English life. They were impeccable in background and appearance. They wouldn’t have to pose to “make believe”. They were ‘the real
thing’ but hiring them would have meant the dismissal of his two professional models. There had not a drop of blue blood in their veins but they nevertheless “had had for dear life, to know how to do something.” The question, James goes on to recall struck me as exquisite, and out of a momentary fond consideration of it ‘The Real Thing’ sprang at a bound.23

The story then expresses amusingly the old truth that art is a transformation of reality not a mere reflection of the thing itself. Mrs Monarch is a true lady but for that very reason she cannot be a fine model of a true lady. “She was the Real Thing, but always the same thing.” The vulgar Miss Churm, on the other hand can represent anything including the gentility she lacks. The Monarchs are amateurs: Miss Churm and the little Italians are professionals.

James’s simplicity for this shabby – elegant pair precludes his making the point too explicitly, but it soon becomes apparent to the attentive reader that the real trouble with the Monarchs is that they are dead. They have not enough life in them to furnish a base on which transforming power of art may work. James says it audibly enough, but he says it,

“It was in their faces, the blankness, the deep intellectual repose of the twenty years of country – house visiting which had given pleasant intonations.”24

Whereas Miss Churm and the Italian though social outsiders, obviously have the principle of life active in them. They cannot be lady and
gentlemen for twenty years, but it is within the scope of their talent to be lady and gentlemen if need be for half an hour. It is not their faculty of mimesis alone that the artist draws on, it is their vitality, their flexibility, their humor, their understanding, crude as it may be, of the sinuous protean evasive nature of human character.

Thus, *The Real Thing* can be seen like all James’s stories, to be a moral, as well as esthetic comment or, as he would maintain, the two are one and the same.

According to Edel, *The Real Thing* is a testimony to the primacy of the imagination. He believes that James seems to say that ‘*The Real Thing*’ in art is not simply a learning of particular laws. For Edel, the story suggests that art is a transformation medium: ‘*The Real Thing*’ was simply itself photographic art transfigured reality. In this light, the suggestive qualities of Miss Churm and Bronte are more valuable because they are able to represent ‘types’ in the artist’s mind, which enable him to transform them into the ‘reality of his art’

According to Martha Banta: Mrs Monarch

“Significantly prefers receiving momentary compensation for modeling ha ‘silhouette’ not her face. Faces are the focus of a person’s particular identity where as outlines of the figure provide generalization that even if ‘sold’ preserves the privacy of an inner life. And since hers is a concentration of being ‘Mrs Monarch’ she is a simile not a metaphor; not a person able to act out ‘Mr. Monarch in approximation.”

Functioning as a simile, Mrs monarch denotes the concrete, she
along with her husband represents the masculine singular force in the
text. Miss Churm, according to Banta effects the metaphor, for a
metaphor occurs when one kind of thing quality or action is applied to
another, in the form of an identity instead of comparison. (Abrams
63). But because Miss Churm is deferral, her character slides and it is
plural and hence feminine. Her polyvalence is acknowledged when the
text depicts her as an ‘actress’ the value of such a model as Miss
Churm resided precisely in the fact that she did no positive stamp,
combined of course with the other fact that what she did here was a
curious and inexplicable talent for imitation. Her usual appearance
was like a curtain, which she could draw up at request for a capital
performance. This performance was simply suggestive. (245) Bronte,
like Miss Churm is also polygamous, and his multiplicity is apparent in
his language. He is ‘an Italian acquainted with no English word but
the artist's name, which he uttered in a way that made it seem to
include all others! (248)

It is plurality, which is conducive to art, as is suggested when the
monotypic Monarchs are unable to appreciate and decipher literature.
They had dipped into the most brilliant of our novelists without
deciphering many passages.27

Although Mrs. Monarch believes herself to be suitable for a ‘lady
in a book’ she is literal and signifies monotony, the real thing but
always the same thing. (244) She cannot be rendered artistically, the
narrator observes; I began to find her too insurmountably stiff do what I would with it, my drawing looked like a photograph or a copy of a photograph (244).

In its celebration of plurality, the tale undercuts its own Realist Premise. The Monarchs who can be ‘known’ within the work, lack the suggestiveness or plurality in which art delights. As a result the tale might be said to demonstrate the limitations of its own singular ethos, which attempts to confine language to one simple meaning. The narrator points out to the defects in Realism,

"The drawings you make from us, they look exactly like us."(249)

Mrs Monarch reminded me, smiling in triumph and I recognized that this was indeed just their defect. An exact reproduction, which is what realism at least professes to be, is insufficient. The ‘real’ the confined is to inadequate art, requires the multiplicity which the professional models – experts at imitation are able to convey. It requires the something that arises from nothing. But if this something arises from absence, it cannot be known, a situation which foregrounds its feminine properties. And the text frustrates attempts to decipher a singular meaning. Jack Hawley, the narrator’s friend, and artistic critic has removed himself from London in order to see! But what he sees is a value in art which cannot be articulated in language, something which only those in the know can perceive. Everyone else is an ass,
and the Cheapside people the biggest asses of all. Come don’t pretend, at this time of the day to have pretty illusions about the public especially about publishers and editors. Its not for such animals you works – its for those who know, coloro che sann so keep straight for me if you can’t keep straight for yourself. There’s a certain sort of thing if you tried from the first – and a good thing it is. But this twaddle isn’t it (253). Thus the tale thematically at least celebrates the polygamous Feminine nature of art, for it rejects the limitations posed by the masculine ‘real’.

The Middle Years is one of James’s favorite themes that of the relation between master and disciple. This afforded a special and private gratification to the mind of Henry James. Many of his stories, and this is one – that dramatizes a relationship lacking in his life. He had a few imitators and a few who like Edith Wharton, thought of themselves as his disciples, but with respect to their books, his sights were set too high to permit him to distribute more than affectionate praise. The Middle Years embodies one of the recurrent visions of James’s dream life.

Most of James’s stories about writers are diluted by – certain infusion of self-pity, arising precisely from James’s constant sense that he was spending his life dropping masterpieces into a void of indifference with an irony thereafter sharpened into mere irritation, he wrote of the vulgarity of ‘success’. Yet he never quite succeeded in
refining out of himself a hankering for that very success. The consequence of this impurity of attitude sentimental, deficient in the Socratic detachment of his finer work. In these stories, despite all his theories about the need for preserving 'the point of view', it remains that of Henry James in person, and a rather querulous Henry James at that.29

Where James draws most deeply on his own accumulated thoughts is in The Middle Years in which the author narrator is of the novelist's own age. Dencombe had been very sick, and picking up in his convalescence, his book of the year before, he has a fresh impression of his own work. Like James, he is a passionate corrector of his text, and thinking how much of his life it had taken, to produce so little art, what he longs for most is

"Ah for another go, ah for a better chance" (80)

It is not necessary to force a too close parallel with James's life, since his own health very precarious earlier, had developed by middle age considerable powers of endurance. Yet his sister's death in England in 1892 the year before this story had heightened his feeling of isolation, and it is out of isolation that Dencombe comes through to a renewed faith in creative possibilities, to the reassurance that there never is exhaustion in the abundance of material, "but only in the miserable artist." But he is not to have another chance. He recognizes that he is dying and says with the eloquence of James's own urgency,
"We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." (103)

Dencombe is cared for by Dr. Hugh. The countess who is Dr. Hugh’s patient and patron becomes jealous of the relationship between Dencombe and Dr. Hugh and threatens to delete Dr. Hugh from her will. Dencombe hearing of this sends the doctor away, but the emotional stress he undergoes overburdens his weak system. Dr. Hugh returns to Dencombe thereby losing his inheritance and attends at the writer’s deathbed. In this story too like the earlier ones discussed above, James portrays the character of a woman who is a threat to art. In various ways Decombe fights the onslaught of death by seeking a presence, both in life and in literature, which will enable him to display what he now knows. In this case, Dencombe is in a sense on the space of the Feminine for he is trying to create a presence from absence. In turn art is equated with the Feminine since one can know only absence or nothing. Thus the story points out attempts to ‘know’ and to discern ‘meanings’ are doomed to failure. Hence the tale privileges the Feminine over the Masculine made of textual production, for it foregrounds the unknowability of art.

Knowledge and absence are equated throughout the tale. When Dencombe receives his copy of The Middle Years, the text in fact creates an absence, for the book ceases to signify. The cover of The Middle Years was truly meritorious, the smell of the fresh pages, the
very odor of sanctity but for the moment he went no further. He had become conscious of a strategic alienation. While Dr. Hugh brings the review of the book to Dencombe

"They only frustrate the author, who couldn't read them."(73)

When the reviews are read aloud to him, Dencombe notes that their truth relates only to what is non existent! "Ah no, but they would have been true of what I could have done."(73)

The Middle Years depends upon an image of itself, the middle years for its existence. But The Middle Years is a negative image of the tale, for it dramatizes the story of an author who cannot produce the ideal text. As a result, The Middle Years maintains that the ideal text is unwritable. It thereby undercuts its masculine realist ethos and so demonstrates as does the next story The Figure in the Carpet, the fruitlessness of the search for the presence or something which will elucidate the absent, unwritable meaning.

The Figure in the Carpet, which appeared in 1896, is in effect a sort of compilation of the motifs that are examined so far. The tale revolves around the search for the meaning of the texts of Hugh Vereker, a famous author. The narrator a young critic who has just reviewed Vereker's latest novel, meets the writer at a house party. Vereker expresses disappointment in the article and explains that the narrator like all critics has missed the intended meaning of his work.
The narrator intrigued at the idea of a hidden figure in Vereker's carpet decides to uncover it. He is frustrated however and later tells his friend George Corvick of his attempt, in the hope that Corvick will be able to disclose what he cannot. In turn Corvick tells his novelist fiancé Gwendolyn Erme of the search. But they are all unsuccessful in deciphering Verker's figure. Corvick then decides to take a journalist's position in India, while he is there, the meaning becomes clear to him and he confirms his find with Vereker. Although Corvick stops the narrator's pleas for elucidation with the promise that all will be revealed in a forth-coming tale, he does agree to tell Gwendolyn after they marry. The two do marry, but on their honeymoon, Corvick is killed in an accident. Gwendolyn later admits to the narrator that she has learned of the secret and that she lives in it, but she refuses to reveal it to him. In the meantime, Vereker and his wife die, leaving Gwendolyn the sole living repository of the secret. She proceeds to publish two further novels, and marries another critic, Drayton Deane, shortly thereafter she dies in childbirth. When the narrator approaches Deane he professes ignorance as to the existence of the figure. The narrator although frustrated, perceives that his revenge on Gwendolyn is the widower's growing preoccupation with the absent figure.

The Figure in the Carpet has probably received more critical attention than any other Jamesian short story. Indeed the figure in Vereker's carpet, which functions as the text's absent centre, allows for
a multiplicity of interpretation since it can be easily adapted to very different modes of reading. The textual idea of a secret meaning leads the stories realist humanist critics to cite the substantiation of their belief that sensibility is requisite in the comprehension of literature. Leavis believes that ‘The Figure’ James bemoans is the state of literary appreciation, and he uses the author’s prefatorial reference to what Leavis calls his great unappreciated author (190) to berate other Jamesian critics for their lack,

“If he could have foreseen the criticism and appreciation, starting with Miss Rebecca West’s characteristic tribute, his work would receive in the two decades following his death he would hardly have been consoled.”(190)

Edouard Roditi following Leavis’s footsteps, also believes that the ‘moral’ of this story is that only fine minds can appreciate fine literature. He focuses on the narrator, who is placed in an unpropitious light because of his inability to discover the secret to substantiate his contention that ‘The figure’ is a continuing dramatic representation of the limited mind encountering a reality that is so far beyond it that as readers, we can appreciate the magnitude of that reality by participating in the attempts of that mind to cope with it.(364)

Warren G. French is more in his condemnation of the reading public, applies the narrator’s words to James’s tale as a whole and decides that the story, except to the few, will seem odd.
In effect these critics only perpetuate Vereker's assertion for a secret meaning, their criticism becomes a continuum of the story, recreating the idea that there is a secret in James's tale that only a privileged 'few' will be able to decipher and explain. Indeed their approach is paralleled in the elitist and the sexiest stance of Vereker and Corvick within the story. Vereker adheres to his belief in the inferiority of women when he announces that a woman will never find out the meaning (288) and the elitist Corvick decides that the figure isn't for the vulgar. However these characters's Masculine approaches are frustrated by the story, which become a manifestation or the elusiveness or the Feminine, which they decry. Corvick and Vereker assess literature from a Realist/Humanist perspective, but not necessarily that is the only perspective, for the figure offers alternative readings, readings which emphasize its self-reliance and critical stance.

Walter Isle who also sides with Corvick and Vereker, interprets the story as a critique of the limitations -Realist or Masculine, referential reading:

"The reference is to that form of interpretation which is concerned first and foremost with the meaning of a literary work. James's choice of subject shows that conventional means of access to literature must have had their reverse side and the revelation of this reverse side clearly sheds doubt on the means of access."

There is certainly support for Isle's interpretation in the story, though many critics do not agree with this interpretation. Certainly the
narrator approaches literature from a Realist/humanist referential perspective as is apparent in his insistence that the knowledge of life is essential to art. He assesses Gwendolyn's third book accordingly for he does not like it and contends that it is inferior to its immediate predecessor. He then queries, was it worse because she had been keeping worse company?(311). The problems inherent in his referential approach to art are clear for if the quality of the author's mind and experiences are apparent in the inferiority of a work, then the inferiority of its readers also becomes apparent if they cannot interpret it. When the narrator admits to Gwendolyn and Drayton Deane.

"I detested Hugh Vereker"(310), he is certain that his inability to find meaning betokens a lack in him. Thus, he says,

"I went away with moral certainty that as the door closed behind me Deane would remark that. I was awfully superficial." (510)

His hostess would not contradict him. Like Leavis the narrator seeks to extrapolate a meaning from the text; however as Isle points out, there are problems with this approach, for the narrator fills- the work does not offer him a detachable message, meaning cannot be reduced to a thing. The plausible norms of the nineteenth century can no longer function and the fictional text refuses to be sucked dry and thrown on the rubbish heap.
A realist mode of interpretation essentially reduces the text, either because as Isle notes, a meaning is extrapolated and the text depleted, or because the inability to find a single referential meaning can destroy one's appreciation. The narrator becomes so frustrated by Vereker's texts that he can no longer read them. I found myself missing the subordinate intentions, I had formerly found. His books didn't even remain the charming things they had been for me, the exasperation of my search put me out of conceit for them. A Realist reading limits the text through its insistence on a single unified meaning and through its condemnation of the reader who cannot uncover it. However while the tale foregrounds the limitations of this approach, it also suggests that there is no mode of reading which will decode the single meaning in the texts, and so privileges plural interpretation over singular efforts.

As Hillis Miller suggests, the figure itself is unreadable, at least by those who do not add meaning through reader participation. Hence Gwendolyn, who is quite incredibly literary you know—quite fantastically and who feels in 'Italics', and thinks in 'Capitals' cannot go outside the language of the text to supply meaning and does not uncover the secret. When Corvick accepts the idea of the figure—since it fell in so completely with the sense he had from the first that there was more in Vereker than meets the eye, the narrator observes that the eye, seemed what the printed page had been expressly invented to meet. Corvick calls the narrator spiteful because he has been
'foiled' but the narrator in effect, sees the problem with the figure, for if it is not in the texts, it is absent, a manifestation of the feminine other. Isle and Brook suggest that the reader must participate in the creation of meaning because of the gaps in the text. But if a meaning has to be supplied, then the text itself is indecipherable, that is if the figure is outside of the text and thus outside of language it is unknowable, for it derives from an absence which cannot be limited and indeed, despite Vereker's assertion that the meaning can be written, the text itself asserts that it is unwritable. Vereker insists that the figure is apparent in his novels, but he will not articulate it and Corvick dies before he can transmit it in his article. He does tell Gwendolyn, but she also refuses to communicate it, if she knows it at all. As Rimmon notes, Gwendolyn may not know and may only pretend that she knows to avoid the admission that she has been tricked into marriage in which case, the secret again constitutes a trap, both for Gwendolyn within the story and for the reader without.

The Lure that Hillis Miller locates in the single referential meaning attempts to confine the texts and to limit the play which absence necessarily engenders. This is the problem with Corvick's and Verker's realist method of interpretation, for it restricts the language of the text when it denies it. Its plurality curiously the desire to limit the text, leads to death for those who supposedly know or hold the secret. Thus if one tries to go outside of language as does Corvick,
one meets with absence in death. If one remains outside, one can live only with absence of unknowability. As the narrator finally asserts, I know what to think then, its nothing!’ while the narrator believes in and searches for truth incarnate in the figure, he also equates truth to absence when he remarks that Drayton Deane withheld the page he himself most feverishly sought. The withheld page holds the truth of the figure, which is the only truth present to him. He says Deane’s special tone was to tell truths that other people either ‘flunked’ as he said, or overlooked, but he never told the only truth that seemed to me in these days to signify. In his search for the absent Truth, the narrator ignores the polyvocality, which generates the plurality of the truth or meanings in Deane’s writing, just as he ignores the plurality of signification in Vereker’s texts.

The narrator’s attempts to know and to possess meaning is frustrated and The Figure perhaps in spite of itself, stresses the destructive nature of the Realist attempts to confine writing. The ultimate meaning leads not only to their deaths but also to the symbolic death of the text. Hence if James wished in this tale to chastise critics for their obtuseness, his text does just the opposite when it critiques the desire for clarity and suggests that to confine a work to a singular interpretation is to destroy it. While the author may privilege Masculine Realist interpretations, his texts subvert his theorem, for the idea, that absence or the Feminine other which engenders the plurality
or creation, can be killed through the insistence upon a single meaning, is reiterated in In the Cage which was written two years after The Figure in the Carpet. James once again reiterates the fact that women did not have the capacity to perpetrate art.

In In The Cage James begins to link, directly the plurality of absence with female representation, a link which will also be explicit throughout the novel of the major phase. In this tale, absent presences and margins are significant compositional elements and self-reflexively, are also factors relevant to the tale’s critical reception, for it is a marginalized story. It has been excluded from what is traditionally considered to be James’s canon, and because of the critical fervor surrounding other work produced during the same period, such as The Turn of the Screw and The Sacred Fount, it has largely been ignored. Therefore while it is present in James’s own critical assessments of his works, it sets in the margins of traditional Jamesian scholarship.

Its marginalization is ironically, also in keeping with its subject matter since In the Cage produced in 1898, is the story of an unnamed telegraphist who fantasizes about her customers and interprets their lives through her brief meetings with them and through their telegrams. Although the telegraphist is engaged to a grocer named Mudge, she is intrigued by the world of wealth she encounters and envisions and becomes attracted to Captain Everard, one of her customers. She
involves herself in his flirtation with Lady Bradeen and ultimately helps him to recover a telegram, which somehow threatens his relation with his paramours. By so doing however, the telegraphist inadvertently secures Everard’s marriage to her ladyship. Mrs Jordan, a friend of the telegraphist who arranges flowers in aristocratic homes, informs her that the Captain is in something ... something bad, and that he is not the hero the girl has believed him to be. The telegraphist returns to reality decides to marry Mr. Mudge next week and abandons her flirtation with the aristocracy.

The story along with The Princess Cassamassima and Brooksmith manifests a deviation from James’s customary subject matter, for it represents one of the author’s rare efforts to depict the working classes. However, although the novella initially appears to be more liberal than most Jamesian works, its cosmopolitanism has been questioned by Dorothea Krook who believes that because the telegraphist is such a refined specimen, and because the story derives from her observation of the upper classes its focus is still patrician.38 Certainly James’s remarks in the preface to the novels substantiate Krook’s contention. Since there are elitist overtones in his consideration of the question of what it might mean, wherever the admirable service was installed, for confined and cramped and yet considerably abled young officials of either sex to be made so free, intellectually range of experience otherwise quite closed to them, lest
the reader and critics believe that the telegraphist is unworthy of his interest in her and the important position he has allotted her in the tale. He notes that his authorial interest in personal character and in the nature of minds, any minds even those of simple souls is irrepressible. The only danger inherent in his critical approach to life and art is that he may impart the same quality to too many others, as he suggests may be the case herein. To observe and to examine therefore become the artist's province, and for James the author examines or criticizes as a means of possession,

"To criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in tune a religion with the criticized thing and make one's own."(155)

That James can concern himself with the telegraphists is only further proof that the large intellectual appetite projects itself on many things while the small projects itself on few. Hence he implies that critics, artists might have the capacity for intellectual curiosity, but that the telegraphist might not. Yet despite James's tendency to grant privilege to the creator, his protagonist even though she is only a marginalized telegraphist is engaged in precisely the same activity as the critic artist. She too can be seen as a Jamesian artist figure, and even though his Feminine Text itself subverts her Masculine Realist activity she also tries to appropriate in order to know. Jennifer Gribble contends that the telegraphic, parodies the artistic sensibility, indeed, in the serious web with which he takes her
imaginative embroideries, and her tendency to saturate details with significance she seems not so much an exploration of the artist's sensibility as a parody of it. Interestingly enough, when Gribble discusses the parody she perceives, she describes the telegraphist in language which is remarkably similar to James in his discussion of criticism. At the same time as she is constructing the code in which she can in some way possess that romance, she is assembling, from the Captain's behavior or from desultory scraps of conversation, a way of reading what she begins to describe as a relation between sir Lancelot and herself. And it is with the establishing of a 'truth' about this relation that the tale is mainly concerned.

The parallel that Gribble notes between the telegraphist and the critic artist may be unintentional on James's part, but her view offers new insight into the story, since In the Cage invents James's Realist contention that criticism as well as creation becomes a means of knowing and possessing reality. The text suggests that reality in fact has little to do with creation, which derives from an absence of knowledge, and that knowledge or the possession of facts, actually impedes the fictional process. Knowledge is thus reminiscent of the singular reality of the Monarchs in The Real Thing. The dynamic between Masculine and Feminine modes of creation and reception are explicit in the story and in its author figure. The telegraphist undercuts the conception of the artist as a mimetic purveyor of truth, since she is
the creator, as well as the reader and critic of her own novel reality, but the fictions she writes are plural interpretation not factual Realist representations. The multiple nature of the telegraphist's endeavour is clear for her fiction derives from absence. She dramatizes therefore, the power of polyvalence, although she herself is a referential reader. The tale, as a result merges the two approaches in a single plural character.

The telegraphist creates her fiction about the upper classes and Todorov comments upon the paucity of her basis for information,

"Indeed she has only three telegrams on which her reconstructions are based on this meager canvas, the telegraph operators imagination embroiders a novel Todorov asserts that she grasps only appearances not truth." (148), and believes that in the story itself "we can see only appearances and their interpretation remains suspect only the pursuit of truth can be present, truth itself, though it provokes the entire movement, remains absent."(12-15)

While truth may be absent it is absence which engenders creation. The telegraphist's lack of any 'real' knowledge of the aristocracy inspires her imaginative endeavor, the aristocracy function, in effect as an absent centre in the text, since it is only the telegraphist's interpretation of them that is present is in the presence in the story. In other words, it is difficult to know what the upper classes are doing they know only what the telegraphist thinks they are doing.

However it is the telegraphist's creative process that has been largely condemned by traditional critics. She is not, regarded in a
favorable light. Edel perceives her as unstable and asserts that we know the girl only as a troubled observer, using her inductive and deductive capacities to satisfy an insatiable curiosity about her environment. Along the same line E. Duncan Answell believes that she uses her fiction as a shield from reality: with the curious blend of fantasy and reality that characterizes her attitude toward her customers, she wants Everard to recognize her importance in life and yet by imagining herself as a character in a novel she carefully protects herself from personal involvement in that life. He dismisses the creative process in which she is engaged, when he observes that the material from which she weaves is all spun, from the feeble fantasies of her worthless fiction. Like James then, critics imply that the critical formalities of the real artist somehow have more validity and are more viable than those of the telegraphs.

The critical trend to denigrate the telegraphist arises at least in part, from her position in the tale and from her gender. The telegraphist is a marginal figure that is, she is poor and female, and she creates her fiction from an observation of her betters. The title In the Cage reinforces her marginal status, for she is literally in the margins of her fictional society and thus symbolically in the margins of the text. Yet from them she creates the text that becomes In the Cage, the margins, because they are margins lie in a Feminine space. Whatever is absent, or outside the posited inside, works in a passive Feminine
function to uphold and subvert the active signifying system. What the tale depicts is the inter-relationship of these structures since what it demonstrates is that the margins are as important to the text as the text is to the margin. The active masculine can exist only through its difference from the passive Feminine, just as the Feminine other is apparent only through its inscription as not what is posited as the norm. This interdependence is allegorized in the novels, in which margins assume an important position. The word margin is echoed throughout the tale, a situation which reinforced the idea that margins play an important role within it. The usage of 'margin' in *In the Cage* however is contradictory (a mirror of its Feminine status) for the term denotes enclosure, or lack of movement, as well as power and liberty, which engender freedom of movement.

‘Margin’ is used to betoken the confinement of the telegraphist in the cage of the telegraph office, she was so boxed up with her young men, and anything like a,

“margin was so absent that she was denied privacy.” (161)

Yet Everard her creation has the ability to alleviate her margin of confinement for when he looks at her through the bars

“the want of margin in the cage. ... Wholly ceased to be appreciable.” (173)

She establishes ‘margin’ of authority both over Mr. Mudge and over Everard. With Mudge, the ‘margin’ gives her power, she liked him
however to think her silly, for that gave her the margin which at the best she owned always required. Here margin with Everard is boundless,

"She had simply the margin of the universe." (173)

The brave margin which she establishes with the aristocrat disturbs her because it foregrounds her margin of privacy in the cage; yet it is her restriction in the cage which compels her to create her liberated relations with him. Her 'margin' of freedom thereby emphasizes his 'margin' of privacy — which engenders a further need to create the margin of freedom, and so on. It is her dissatisfaction with her marginal status and her removal from her fictionalized subjects, which effects her desire to create. As in The Middle Years inside and outside, and dependent upon each other or from the outside as the margin, the telegraphist creates the inside of her text, her relations with Everard, which only reinforce her marginalization from her creation.

Those characters who are on the outside — the telegraphist, Mr Mudge and Mrs. Jordan — perceive the world through their relation to what is, for them an absent center. Their language shapes their reality and cements their marginal position. The oleaginous, Mudge thinks in terms of his grocery trade and its relation to the upper classes; the exuberance of the aristocracy was the advantage of trade since the more flirtation as he might roughly express it the more cheese and pickles. (171) He is also struck with the concentration between the
tender passion and cheap champagne. (171) The flirtations he imagines effect the trade, which he supplies. But at the same time that he supplies the inner circle with goods, his distance from it is emphasized by his role as a supplier. He plies his trade in order that he may garner enough money to approach the inner circle, yet the nature of his profession (grocer) forever ostracizes him from it, for the center needs the margin as much as the margins need the center.

Mrs. Jordan, on the other hand thinks in terms of the flowers which she procures and arranges for the upper classes. Hence her former home bloomed in her discourse like a new Eden, (151) and she converted the past into a bank of violets. However everything for the marginal comes to be associated with and reduced to money. Since it is primarily money that keeps those on the margins outside which means more money,

"Let the P.O. simply bring you your letters. It would bring you lots, you'd see orders, after but by the dozen."(151)

In turn the telegraphist who has to count all day the words in the dictionary equates words to money and is dismayed at the profligacy of the rich,

"She had often gasped at the sums people were willing to pay for the stuff they transmitted the much loves the awful regrets, the compliments and wonderment's and vain vague gestures that cost the price of a new pair of boots." (153)

In her case it is words, which effect the gap between the inside and the
outside, a gap which she would like to lessen and which inspires her attraction to Mrs Jordan's trade.

While the telegraphist may hold words cheap they constitute her means of access to the aristocracy, whose behavior she assesses through their appearance in ha'penny novels. Because the ha'penny novels - for the reader absent texts are the basis of her knowledge of the upper classes - she thus derives knowledge from absence, and absence is always inherently unknowable. But the telegraphist does not acknowledge this and her knowledge becomes her power. She quite thrilled herself with thinking what with such a lot of material a bad girl would do. It would be a scene better than many in her ha'penny novels, curiously the telegraphist's behavior reflects Cixon's contention that mastery is inseparable from something bound up with woman, with the hysteric, her referential figure --- what's more, this conjunction power - knowledge and this division between the two seem to be on the order of myth with its mythic power and arbitrary nature. This myth is highlighted in the figure of the telegraphist who is often considered to be a hysteric by Realist/Humanistic critics and her desire to possess and to know ultimately is deconstructed by the text. Nevertheless she takes a Masculine approach to her subjects and uses the absent texts of the ha'penny novels to evaluate their behavior. She assumes that her information is accurate, and the novels become a means of assessing Everard's movements,
"That was the hour at which if the ha'penny novels were not all wrong, he probably came home for the night." (179)

Yet she begins to find that the reality she creates is more exciting than the fiction which she uses to create it. Therefore when she believes that Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen's affair is becoming dangerous, it beat every novel in the shop.

The knowledge she believes she possesses leads the telegraphist to create her own novel through the gaps or absences within the telegrams. The girl looked straight through the cage at the eyes and lips of Lady Bradeen that must so often have been so near his own—looked at them with a strange passion that, for an instant, had the result of filling out some of the gaps, supplying the missing answers in his correspondence. These gaps allow for creation, since they constitute absences, which she embroiders fiction to fill:

"The girl was missing the answer but there were yet ways in which, on the whole she pressed the romance closer by reason of the very quantity of imagination that it demanded." (150-1)

In turn the gaps or absence engender multiplicity since they allow for various interpretations and allow her to choose her own answers. Her false security in her knowledge of what is in effect, the story she has written grants her the ability to alter the text of Lady Bradeen's telegrams.

The fact that it is the names which the telegraphist changes in the telegram is intriguing, since names betoken possessions and
knowability. Yet the text works against these assumptions, and names slide. The telegraphist whose marginal status is reaffirmed by her lack of a name is called 'the girl', our young woman, and even the betrothed of Mr. Mudge. Her namelessness suggests her unimportance and her unknowability in the tale, yet she is the most important character. Since readers read the text through her point and if they know anything they know her conversely. Those characters who assume importance for her are really unimportant in the tale, since what is important is what the telegraphist creates about them in her fiction. Her aristocratic subjects therefore are unknowable, a fact which is signified by their multiple names. Their knowability suggested by their having names, is undercut because they have too many. Everard was sometime, Everard as he had been at the Hotel Brighton, and he was sometimes, Captain Everard. He was sometimes Philip with his surname and sometimes Philip without it. In some directions he was merely Phil, in others he was merely Captain. There were relations in which he was none of these things, but quite a different person 'the Count'. There were several friends for whom he was William. There were several for whom in allusion perhaps to his complexion he was "the pink". Once, once only by good luck, he had coinciding comically quite miraculously with another person also near to her, been "Mudge". In this tale, names and absence of them effectually signifies unknowability. The telegraphist does not have a
name and in a sense tries indirectly to forge one in her attempt to incorporate herself into the aristocratic centre of the text. But she remains on the margins, even though she is the author of her text and as such, she is thereby an unknowable quantity. Those on the inside have a plurality of names which frustrates her Realist attempt to know and to possess them.

The telegraphist's Realist approach to her creation is apparent in that she believes that she can know and possess her subjects through language. The communication that arises between her ladies and gentlemen allows her to read into the immensity of their intercourse stories and meanings without end. However, what she does not realize is that the appearance of knowledge depletes fiction because it limits it as *The Figure in the Carpet* has demonstrated. She believes that words are translucent and what she sees through them is what she 'knows' what swam between her and the words, making her see them as though rippled, shallow, sunspot water, was the great perpetual flood of,

"How much I know, how much I know."(181)

Hence from the telegraphist's perspective, knowledge is beyond language and holds it in check. Her metaphysical bent is clear when one perceives the conversation she holds with Everard as translucent. Thus give and take led her fancy that no form of intercourse so transcendent and distilled had even been established on earth.
Everything so far as they choose to consider it so, might mean almost anything. But the fluidity of language that allows anything to mean everything and thus also makes it impossible to know anything. The telegraphist comes to realize that her knowledge is an illusion. Then it was that, above all, she felt how much she had missed in the gaps and blanks and absent answers – how much, she had to dispense with: it was black darkness now, save for this little wild red flare. So much as that she saw and possessed what she sees and possesses is in fact nothing.

In her Realist desire for mastery, or her wish to integrate herself into the center, the telegraphist places too great an importance on her supposition that language is a means of knowledge and possession. She may supply answers, but her answers are inaccurate, a situation which suggests that it is wrong to insist on single meanings. Indeed if the telegraphist cannot know or possess what she perceives, through language, then neither can a Realist writer, who is engaged in exactly the same pursuit. So the telegraphist finds that meanings slide along with language and constitute a deferral like the telegram,

"It was delivered yet at the same time, don’t you know? It wasn’t.... I mean it was intercepted don’t you know?” (222)

The interception or the deferral leads to an undoing of right and wrong, and the concepts slide into meaninglessness,

"She put in by mistake something wrong ...But there’s
something in it ... that may be alright. That is if it is wrong don’t you know? It’s alright if it’s wrong."(223)

The plurality of language allows the telegraphist to create, but her insistence on supplying awareness limits the possibilities open to her characters. Her recovery of the telegram allows Lady Bradeen to ‘mail’ Captain Everard. As a result, she becomes the author of her own fate, for when she comments the Everard’s marriage, which precludes the possibility of an affair with him, she writes her own life as the wife of Mr. Mudge. The telegraphist’s desire to limit language ultimately impedes her creative process because she is distressed when she realizes that she is unable to ‘know’ anything but deferral,

“That is what it had come to ... all simply that she might hear of him, now for the lost, only through Mrs Jordan, who touched him through Mr. Drake, who reached him through Lady Bradeen.”(239)

Knowledge like language, effects a deferral, and she shrinks from the ‘abyss’ of unknowability. When Mrs Jordan asks if she knows anything her interlocutors had, in the cage sounded depths, but there was a suggestion here somehow of an abyss quite measureless. Like St. George in The Lesson of the Master, the telegraphist stops creating because her realist approach precludes a delight in multiplicity. She does not realize that it was the language’s plurality which allowed her to create initially and her longing for knowability leads her back to reality – which for the poor thing ... could only be
ugliness and obscurity, could never be the escape, the rise.

The story ends with the telegraphist looking forward to a future with Mudge and she reflects on the fact that it was Mrs Jordan’s fiancé, Mr. Drake, the butler, who at least settled the matter for her. Mr. Drake it would seem, is still involved in the fiction writing which the telegraphist has abandoned, since he and his new wife will continue to attach their interests to Mayfair. Again it is the absence of any real knowledge, which allows for creativity, but creativity does not engender Masculine knowledge or possession since it derives from the space of the Feminine other. While absence is, therefore essential to artistry, to confine language, as the telegraphist tries to do, is ineffectual and impedes the imaginative process.

Although the telegraphist ceases her textual fabrications and removes herself from direct relations with the aristocracy by marrying Mudge, the tale is open ended since it indicates that the fabrications will continue beyond its confines. Mr. Drake and Mrs Jordan remain in the margins, reflecting upon an absent center, and in their story it is from the margins that texts are constructed. Because of their exclusion, those in the margins can only speculate about the center, and their speculation, or their lack of knowledge leads them to formulate fiction about it. Then marginalized from their position of unknowability create the text about the center, and the text creates the center itself, for what In the Cage suggests is that without the margins
there is no centre and there is no text. The short stories examined in this chapter draw attention to the paradox of Realist Masculine creation, for they depict and reject the limitation of the ‘real’ which they supposedly represent, and instead portray the Feminine ‘other’ as the source of creation. While the earlier stories highlight the paradoxes within their own ideological framework, the later tales demonstrate that Realist/Humanist attempts to fix language are inefficacious, for then texts more overtly defer any final meaning and suggest that it is the language’s unknowability and fluidity - its Feminine qualities that are conducive to artistry.
NOTES


2. Ibid. P.58-59.


6. Elizabeth Allen op. cited p.113

7. Ibid. P.123.


10. Ibid. p.79. (Jan 29, 1890).


24. Ibid. P.334- 337.

25. Edel op. cited p.56.


35. Isle op. Cited p.133.

36. Rimmon op. cited p.74.


40. M.D. Zabel 'Introduction to Henry James' In the Cage and other Tales (Anchor books) 1958 p. 6-12.