To James the writer's biography reveals choices imposed by circumstances, or voluntarily made, which decide the point of view from which he invents his world. James sees certain aspects of a writer's life (where he lives and the kind of social and intellectual society to which he belongs) as positions from which he conducts a strategy of observing life and transforming it within his art.¹

This statement very aptly sums up Henry James's literary career and accounts for the richness of his insights into the human experience. We have his own statements about the art of fiction which offer us the vantage points from which to explore his artistic genius.

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative — much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius — it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.²


The experiences of belonging to a particular social and intellectual milieu provided Henry James with the material out of which he created an immense body of literature; 14 novels, 112 tales, numerous pieces for the theatre, essays of criticism and also a prodigious number of letters to both friends and family alike.

The main sphere of his literary creativity, however, was curiously restricted to a set of rich and idle people of both the continents who had great pretensions to art and culture. These are people who, besides being rich and highly civilized, are endowed with gifts of intelligence, imagination and fine sensibilities. They are presented through their personal relationships and the obvious situations of social intercourse. But this is only the social exterior of James's artistic probe into the human existence. He probes deeper into the consciousness of his protagonists and tries to establish their validity in the light of this consciousness. What he achieves in the presentation of these characters is best explained in his own words. In their characterization he employs "the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern,
the condition of feeling life in general ...". What ultimately emerges, therefore, is a complete interiorization of experience and informing the consciousness of the protagonists with a moral sensibility.

James's concern with the moral sensibility of his protagonists is however devoid of any conventional or religious emphasis. His attempt is to evolve a purely aesthetic-moral code of living which has to fit in the framework of the world he created, where life is conceived of in terms of a fine art. James also speaks of the indivisibility of the aesthetic-moral code as exemplified in his fiction. "There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very close together; ..." In the consistent exploration of the inner life of his protagonists, James tackles the most fundamental question of human existence — that of right and wrong. The validity and maturity of a Jamesian protagonist is therefore always in proportion to his or her achieving the state of moral consciousness.

The most interesting aspect of Henry James's fiction is that he explores the relevant themes of his

3Henry James, AF, p.11.
4Henry James, AF, p.21.
art through his heroines or female characters. In almost all of his novels and tales the most memorable protagonists are women. Commenting on this, Lisa Appignanesi says,

Looking at the spectrum of Henry James's characters, one is immediately struck by the number and importance of his female figures. From Daisy Miller and Catherine Sloper to Maggie Verver and Charlotte Stant, the central position in James's fictional canvas is given over to woman.5

In his own preface to The Portrait of a Lady, James quotes George Eliot's statement about women, "In these frail vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection."6 He further goes on to explain, with examples from Shakespeare and George Eliot why "the woman matters" in his own fiction.

Echoing the same view, Naomi Lebowitz remarks,

There was hardly a challenge in the whole of the novelistic process which appealed more to James than this of the vulnerability of his "frail vessels of consciousness", of the actual loosening of structural or societal supports around it (supports like set manners, shared...


consciousness in the subplotting or comic relief, which bolstered so many heroes and heroines from Shakespeare to George Eliot), so that the vessel might be for itself "sole mistress of its appeal."\(^7\)

The male characters, on the other hand, are dealt with in a subdued and perfunctory way which evoked this remark from J.I.M. Stewart.

His men, perhaps more than his women, are liable to be felt as only moieties of humanity. As individuals they are displeasingly and in the mass they are implausibly deficient in simple masculinity.\(^8\)

Going beyond the confines of this statement, one can say that James's women characters are interesting not merely because of their sex but because they are endowed with qualities which make them superior as individuals. James seems to view the female psyche as the ideal object of study for an aesthetic-moral resolution to life's innumerable problems. This attitude of James's can best be articulated in the words of Lisa Appignanesi.


Femininity is a call to being for James in that it is a call to inwardness and introspection, the prerequisite of all true relationship and action. When one is fully conscious of self, then and only then, one is. And being for James means being open to the whole assault of life — delimiting experience in no way — while intelligently grasping the significance of this assault. Thus the feminine, with its quality of an open and flexible sensibility and its insistence on both interiorization of events and personalism in relationships, introduces into the Jamesian world the possibility of full consciousness.9

In his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James stipulates,

> Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's consciousness ... stick to that for the centre; put the heaviest weight into that scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself ... press least hard, in short on the consciousness of your heroine's satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributory only to the greater one.10

It is true that James makes this remark with specific reference to the heroine in *The Portrait*, but this maxim seems applicable to all of his other heroines too. Because they are created in such a mould, there are just no male counterparts in his fiction for a Daisy

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9Appignanesi, p. 80.
10Preface, p. XIII.
Miller, Bessie Alden, Francie Dosson, Euphemia Cleve, Christina Light, Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer, Verena Tarrant, Olive Chancellor, Fleda Vetch, Maisie, Nanda Brookenham, Madame de Vionet, Milly Theale and Maggie Verver, or even for a Mme Merle, the governess in The Turn of the Screw, Rose Armiger, Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant. These women of James's all possess qualities which make them far more interesting protagonists than his male characters.

Out of the impressive bevy of James's heroines, six young girls have been selected for study because their careers seem to embody James's life-long preoccupation with a proper understanding of the inner self, of the realm of human consciousness. The careers of these heroines span almost the entire creative period of James. Daisy Miller of the nouvelle of the same name and Euphemia Cleve of Mme de Mauves are two of James's early creations and their stories are two of his best known tales. Catherine Sloper of Washington Square belongs in a category by herself, in the sense that her story is set in an all-American milieu. But in the overall scope of this study, Catherine Sloper's plight
proves to be a milestone in the Jamesian heroine's encounter with the complexity of human motives and in the assertion of her individuality. The creation of Isabel Archer of The Portrait of a Lady is still regarded by many readers to be James's greatest achievement. In this novel, the Jamesian heroine is presented in the fulness of her moral awareness and integrity. The other two heroines, Milly Theale of The Wings of the Dove and Maggie Verver of The Golden Bowl belong to that period of James's artistic maturity which Mathiessen calls The Major Phase. Though all of these heroines of James are innocent American girls beguiled and bewildered by Europe, Milly Theale's odyssey in this bewitching country is the most beautiful and tragic at the same time. In contrast Maggie Verver remains the most prosaic version of the young Jamesian heroine whom the author so consistently portrayed in novel after novel throughout his career.

It is no mere coincidence that all these girls happen to be American girls. The significance of this fact lies deep rooted in James's concern in his "complex fate of being an American." This concern resulted in
the evolution of the most important theme of his art: the Europe - America tension of his international theme. The Jamesian heroine is an innocent and inexperienced ingenue representing the youthful exuberance of America. Inspite of her material possessions this young girl hankers after an elusive, ideal existence beyond the horizons of her provincial background and looks to Europe as the desired Utopia of such an existence. But at closer contact she discovers that the glimmer of the civilized and sophisticated facade is provided by the glint of avarice in the European eyes for American opulence; she also discovers that the impressive framework of genteel society is devoid of any human warmth. She would have been totally devoured by so much "sterile dilettantism" but for the redeeming fact that her moral integrity is unassailable. Though she is vulnerable because of her lack of experience, she proves to be invincible because of her moral vigour.

The fact that James makes all his heroines rich can be viewed in itself as a metaphor for the rise of America as an affluent nation in the late
nineteenth century. The principle implied in the metaphor is that James's heiress has a greater scope for cultivating higher interests and finer moral sensibilities because of her affluence which frees her from the restrictions of having to strive after the basic amenities of life. Her odyssey to Europe is, therefore, undertaken with great expectations of achieving the full flowering of her personality.

The irony inherent in the Jamesian heroine's destiny lies in the fact that the very condition which is supposed to give her the opportunities for developing her personality proves to be the cause of her undoing. She is entrapped, body and soul, by the European man because he wants to possess her wealth which he can do only by manipulating her vulnerability.

The vulnerability in the heroine comprises of her lack of true comprehension of people, of their motives and hence of human relationships in general. She may be a millionaire's daughter or may inherit millions but she remains extremely naive with regard to her wealth. She tends to take it much too much for granted and therefore fails to place it in its proper
perspective in the affairs of life. Material well-being is no doubt a prerequisite for the cultivation and nurturing of gracious living, but on the other hand, lack of it can trigger off negative responses in the human psyche, especially so in the case of people who have a whole civilized and expensive lifestyle to maintain. These impoverished individuals who feel that they have a tradition, a culture to perpetuate by whatever means they can think of, are the Europeans who victimise the naive, innocent American heiress for their pseudo-cultural motives. In the context, of the much-vaulted international theme of James's fiction, this aspect in the psychology of the aggressor's mind is an important point to remember. It is because of this pseudo-cultural aura which envelopes the European personality that the young, impressionable American girl finds him irresistible. She views him as the exalted being from the enchanted land of culture and civilization who must be a 'fine gentleman' or better still, 'a specimen apart' from all other ordinary mortals.

The European's apparent concern and dedication to all things cultural is no doubt a result of his tradition but somewhere along the evolution of this
'specimen', the vital, moral core of aestheticism has been subsumed by the merely material manifestation of this way of life. The tragedy for the Jamesian heroine rests on the inevitability of her commitment to the European before she can discover this painful truth. That she is such a ready victim to this beguilement is truly an index to her psychology.

Just as much as the European is trying to acquire a means to ensure his continued state of culture and civilization, the American heiress too seems to attempt at a refinement of her condition by accepting what he has to offer her. By whatever name we may try to gloss over this pathetic attempt at acquiring culture, it remains a fact that this too is a form of self-aggrandisement. But the crucial point to remember is that hers is an attempt at a refinement of the inner personality rather than one's outward circumstances. One can even venture to state that the American girl's aim is to attain a culture of the inner self whereas the European concern remains static at the level of society only. This is exactly what Isabel Archer intuitively grasps as the inherent flaw in the personality of Mme Merle, whom she calls a "social animal."
Because of this quality in the heroine's psyche, James's vision transcends the international conflict within the American encounter with Europe and he directs his probe inward into the sensibilities of the protagonist. As the evolution of the Jamesian heroine progresses, one realizes that the international conflict has been a means to an end. It is as though this conflict becomes the spring-board for James's subsequent probe into the human consciousness and his examination of the aesthetic - moral code of living. As Euphemia Cleve asserts, reality is not outside but "in the nameless country of one's mind" where national or cultural concerns must be eschewed for the sake of a moral vision of life.

However, it is true that James gives his analysis a slightly American tilt, in the sense that the question is presented from the American point of view. Edmund Wilson goes so far as to say that it is America which really gets the better of it in Henry James. But in the final analysis it would seem that neither America nor Europe gets the better of it in James because what he presents in the end is something which transcends questions of nationalities and culture and directs one's
attention inward to the self, to the essence of one's being. Starting from the heroine's uncertainties about her outward circumstances, the process of discovery is brought full circle when the final analysis rests upon the self's validity in respect of herself as well as the outside reality.

The first step towards this new vision of the heroine is given when James presents a totally new interpretation of the concept of innocence and evil. Innocence for James does not merely mean the absence of evil. It means a complete lack of awareness of the self as well as the outside world. Because of this, the innocent heroine's overall understanding of people and events tends to be superficial. Her vision therefore becomes myopic and with her generic inferiority complex, she believes that everything on the other side of the ocean is better, superior and therefore worth cultivating.

Evil for James, on the other hand, is purely ontological. He conceives of it as one person's conscious attempt to deny the other its freedom of individuality. Evil, James seems to say, is that state of the mind from where all human considerations have been
left out. In such a state, the human spirit has been deadened to such an extent that it would not stop at manipulating and dominating another self if such an action would procure the desired objective.

Discussing James's concept of evil, J.A. Ward gives an a-religious and humanistic definition of 'sin' which seems to correlate to James's own view of evil as he exemplifies it in his fiction.

Improper intervention in the life of another is virtually the only sin that interested James. Specific human actions, considered in isolation from other matters, are never in themselves evil (in this respect James is a moral relativist), the only criterion is the injury of another person. But in James's world of complex social relationships human action does not take place in a vacuum, and the choice of one person inevitably results in either good or evil for others.11

In the European sensibility cultural and material concerns overwhelm the human element to such an extent that it displays a callous disregard for human values. Mere social and cultural distinctions cannot substitute this essential value and James shows that it is through

a moral re-awakening in the consciousness of an individual that this value can be restored. If there is a re-affirmation of the American point of view, it is in this context because in the end it is the moral vitality of the American heroine which triumphs over the evil inherent in the European sensibility. Yvor Winters is more definitive about this particular aspect of James's fiction.

There is further evidence that James conceived this moral sense to be essentially American, moreover, in the fact that the moral phenomenon and its attendant dramatic formula alike were first defined in the early American period of his art, and that they were most fully and richly developed in his last great masterpieces, The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl.12

This then is the intellectual and psychological framework which is super-imposed on the social material of James's fiction. The principle of development of the Jamesian heroine is to be viewed with this framework in mind. The attempt in this study will be to trace the gradual evolution of the Jamesian heroine from her humble origins in Schenectady, her sojourn in an alien

12Yvor Winters, Maule's Curse Seven studies in the History of America Obscurantism, (Norfolk, Conn, New Directions, 1938), p.170.
culture in Europe, her marriage and subsequent betrayal, to her ultimate triumph in The Golden Bowl when she emerges as the mistress of her world. This evolution is therefore the process of the heroine's psychological re-ordering and her triumph is the final coherence given to this process. From the beginning, the heroine senses that there has to be a special quality in one's life, over and above one's material circumstances. She hankers after this elusive quality, the absence of which constitutes a void in her life. The pathos inherent in such a sensibility is that all the time, that which she seeks elsewhere is within herself only.

The heroine naively believes that this missing quality can be obtained from other people, other societies and other countries. In the earliest example, Daisy Miller seeks for "society" in Europe thinking it is something readily visible and easily definable. She does not yet comprehend that it is altogether a complete way of life, a life which is so alien to her. Mme de Maupes vaguely senses this but erroneously believes that merely being born into the right society is enough to guarantee a person's moral worth. Isabel Archer and Milly Theale too seem bent on the same course of
discovery. Isabel especially, has a highly idealized concept of the kind of life she thinks desirable and which she mistakenly seeks for in the civilization of Europe.

Her notion of the aristocrat's life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment.13

In an extreme version, Milly Theale wishes to remain in an ethereal world from where she would not have "to go down — never, never to go down!" Even Maggie Verver, the most pragmatic of the heroines, longs for "the golden bowl without the crack in it" which would be a symbol of her happiness with her prince.

Because of her idealistic expectations of life, the heroine is always disillusioned and her career ends on a tragic note. Daisy Miller dies, wrongly condemned; Euphemia Cleve has the suicide of her husband to haunt the remainder of her days and Catherine Sloper is psychologically maimed for life because she believed in "human affection." Isabel Archer who wanted to "affront

her destiny" goes back to her husband and to a life in which, she knows for a certainty, "the vital principle of one" would be "a thing of contempt to the other." Milly Theale too dies forlorn and betrayed by the people dearest to her. And even Maggie Verver has to settle for the golden bowl with the crack in it.

In the successive stages of the development of the Jamesian heroine the gradual awakening of her consciousness is portrayed. Her intuitive grasp of the desired quality of life to fill the void in her is correct as far as her vision defines it. She has a certain vision of what life should be and proceeds to discover it in the civilization which she has idealized in her mind as the epitome of that life. But as she comes into direct contact with this way of life, she realizes how her ideals have misled her. There are serious cracks in the apparently glittering facade of this idealized society. But having accepted this other way of life she has to evolve a new world-view which will sustain the moral core of her essential being and at the same time fulfil her commitments. The evolution of this world-view is possible through the heroine's acquisition of a new consciousness which she has gained
at the expense of her innocence.

This new world-view stands for a synthesis best elucidated in the final analysis of the career of Maggie Verver of *The Golden Bowl*. Until this point in the study of the Jamesian heroine, her consciousness has consistently tended to veer more towards the visionary and the poetic. But as Maggie comes to terms with "the golden bowl with a crack in it" the heroine's consciousness displays a certain pragmatism. This aspect of her new consciousness accepts the fact that the notion of a synthesis implies a certain element of compromise which will always fall short of the ideal. Perhaps this accounts for a certain poetic disillusionment in the overall characterization of Maggie but then one has always to bear in mind that an element of deterioration is an obvious corollary of growth and development. The initial concept of the Jamesian heroine as a symbolic princess among her peers is given validity in the portrayal of Maggie Verver who is a real-life princess. The heiress-princess retains her millions as well as her prince but brings about a new dimension to the relationship. The emptiness of a hyper-cultural sensibility is now suffused with a new human warmth.
and the void in the heroine's psyche is replaced by a new consciousness which enables her to perceive herself in perfect objectivity thus freeing her of the vulnerability of an unaware self. This state is to be understood as being not merely conscious but being morally conscious about life itself. Lisa Appignanesi sees this quality as exclusive to the Jamesian heroine.

It is only by being fully conscious, by fully seeing, that James's characters can fully be. But to fully see means that life must be led according to the principle of successive aspects. Only the individual who is capable of flexibility, of an open-ended existence devoid of absolute values, can experience the fulness of felt-life and exemplify the Jamesian ethic. To reach the heights of being and consciousness, one must see into the depths. Only the feminine with her "inwardness" is capable of this.14

In a study of this sort where the entire analytical energy has been focused on these heroines, a discussion of the biographical influences upon their creation is inevitable. It is a generally accepted view that James's Albany cousin Mary (Minnie) Temple was a model for certain heroines like Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer and Milly Theale. James's own account of his

14Appignanesi, p.31.
attitude towards this lady would bear ample testimony to this fact. Writing about her in his autobiography, James infuses his reminiscences with a quality which transcends the merely personal element and creates an aura of poetic grandeur around her personality which enables the reader to understand how James caught the essence of Minnie's being and immortalised it in so many of his heroines. He speaks of "the immediacy of the impression she produced," and goes on to testify,

She was really to remain for our appreciation, the supreme case of a taste for life as life, as personal living; ...  

Mary Temple's memory remained for James "an essence that preserved her still."  

If I have spoken of the elements and presences round about us that "counted," Mary Temple was to count, and in more lives than can now be named, to an extra-ordinary degree; count as a young and shining apparition, a creature who owed to the charm of her every aspect (her aspects were so many!) and the originality, vivacity, audacity, generosity, of her spirit, an indescribable grace and weight - if one might impute weight to a being so imponderable in common scales. 

15 Edited with an Introduction by Frederick W. Dupee, Henry James, autobiography, (New York, criterion Books, 1956), From the section Notes of a Son and Brother, p.283. Hereafter cited to this section as Notes. 
16 Notes - p.283. 
17 Notes, p.282. 
18 Ibid.
James speaks of the memory of Minnie as the experience which provided him with the felicity of the personal, the social, the 'literary and artistic' almost really the romantic identity ..." 19 Her untimely death was a great blow to both his brother William and himself.

... she would have given anything to live — and the image of this, which was long to remain with me, appeared so of the essence of tragedy that I was in the far-off aftertime to seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it, a particular occasion aiding, in the beauty and dignity of art. 20

If the memory of Minnie Temple provided James with the raw material to create his heroines, his artistic genius transformed this personal experience into a "sacred fount" of inspiration with which he was able to subsume the personal experience with a poetic insight and transcend the boundaries of a limited sensibility into a universal experience of a certain quality of life which all his heroines embody. Because of this, he was able to overcome the obviousness of the questions of mere nationalities and cultures and transport the scene of his internationalism into the very heart of human existence.

19 Notes, p. 281.
20 Notes, p. 544.
In such an existence, the Jamesian heroines, the "frail vessels of consciousness" seek to evolve a meaningful life-style where "human affection" has to have equal ratings with grand manners and fabulous possessions in a society which puts little premium on the former. This society invariably victimizes the innocent heroine but in terms of the reality of the inner life, she merges victorious, a fact which signals the ultimate vindication of James's aesthetic - moral code of living.

The main endeavour of this study will be to trace the author's analysis of such an achievement in the context of the highly sophisticated and civilized society where all his heroines are placed.