

**The Poetics of Renunciation: The Jamesian Tradition of
Recognition in Modern and Contemporary Transatlantic Novels**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Heidelberg Center of American Studies and my supervisors, Prof. Dr. Dietmar Schloss and Prof. Dr. Günter Leypoldt, for their encouragement and support. The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the consistent counsel of Prof. Dr. Dietmar Schloss, professor of American literature and culture at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (the HCA), Heidelberg, Germany. I feel greatly indebted to Professor Schloss for his careful assessment of my work. We had many insightful, productive, and constructive conversations during my stay in Heidelberg, which were helpful for my intellectual and academic development. I extend my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Günter Leypoldt, chair of American literature at the English Department of Heidelberg University, Germany. Professor Leypoldt carefully read and commented on my thesis. He was always helpful and supportive whenever I had academic requests. I am thankful to Dr. Heiko Jakubzik, who unwaveringly provided help and good advice. I would also like to thank Sebastian Tants-Boestad, who kindly commented on some of my papers and manuscripts. We had delightful conversations and outings, and I found him to be a deep thinker and a genuine friend.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One - Framing the Recognition Plot Proper ..	5
Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i> and the Genesis of the Recognition Plot	6
<i>Oedipus Rex</i> : An Aristotelian Case of Error and Action	11
<i>The Verdict</i> : The Epitome of a Recognition Plot Proper	16
Chapter Two – Theory	26
Henry James and Recognition	27
<i>The Ambassadors</i> : The Recognition of “the Passive”	35
Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and the Subject's Radical Passivity	39
Aesthetics in Levinas	41
Chapter Three - <i>The Ambassadors</i>: The Author's Quest for Recognition	49
Placing <i>The Ambassadors</i> in James's Oeuvre	52
Elementarism and the Water of Consciousness	61
Error and Blindness: A Man of “Types” and the Mental Gestalt of Impressions ..	66
The Hero's Shrinkage and Scenic Recognition	72
Chapter Four - The Theater of Deceit: Blindness and Recognition in Edith Wharton's	
<i>The Age of Innocence</i> ..	80
The Library of Life	90
Blindness: Newland's Error	96
Recognition: The Scenic Ending and the Dramatic Effect	102

Chapter Five - The Warmest Congratulations: An Elegy for a Non-existent Myth in Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>The Remains of the Day</i>	110
The Sense of Judgement and the Moral Status of the Employer	128
Anagnorisis: A World about to Collapse	135
Chapter Six - Fictive Imagination and Vascular Dementia in Ian McEwan's <i>Atonement</i>	140
The Mayhem of Minds and Fictive Imagination	144
Recognition and Vascular Dementia	154
Afterword	162
Bibliography	165

Introduction

Moments of recognition are pervasive in fiction, drama, myths, movies, and folktales. Recognition scenes were the crucial constituents of the ancient theater, and their utilization dates back to the Age of Antiquity. It is due to this fact that Philip Kennedy and Marilyn Lawrence, in their opening statements of the book *Recognition: The Poetics of Narrative*, consider recognition as “large as the narrative itself” and as “the very signature of a narrative” (vi). They maintain:

We should remind ourselves that some, perhaps a majority, of the founding texts of the Western canon are utterly dependent on recognition. Genesis, the life of Jesus (the Gospels), the Greek tragedies, the Hellenistic novels, the plays of Shakespeare, and the whole romance tradition taking us up to the eighteenth century — as well as texts that choose to undermine romance — are often themselves recognition stories. It is like an unshakable, selfish gene of literature. (4)

Even though “recognition” is an important and ubiquitous element of narrative structure, there is not a large body of criticism on the term. Perhaps the most renowned scholar who foregrounded the term in the 1980s is the Italian literary critic Piero Boitani whose groundbreaking discussions on recognition in Shakespearean tragedy and Medieval literature became inspirational sources for later commentators. Interestingly, the British critic Terence Cave published his seminal work *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* in the late 1980s as well. Unlike Boitani’s works — *English Medieval Narrative of the 13th and 14th Centuries* (1982) and *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (1989) — Cave’s *Recognitions* offers a more expansive historical view of the term, which covers a large time span beginning with the Ancient Greek drama and ending with modern and post-modern fictions of the twentieth century. I use Cave’s work as one of the primary sources for the

current study. The other noteworthy work is Teresa G. Russo's *Recognition and Modes of Knowledge* (2013), an interdisciplinary work that offers a wide range of discussions from various disciplines, such as social theory, philosophy, politics, and psychology on recognition. The word's connotation is so rich that even if we address recognition in a purely literal sense, we still face difficulties finding a clear-cut definition for the term. As Russo posits in the opening statements of her book:

The simplest type of anagnorisis discussed by Aristotle is recognition by scars, birthmarks, or tokens, as in the story of Odysseus. In other literary conceptions, recognition takes place and leads to a revelation and a gain of knowledge: here we encounter Thomas Aquinas's quidditas-claritas, James Joyce's notion of epiphany, T.S. Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative," William Wordsworth's "spots of time," Ernest Hemingway's "moment of truth," W.B. Yeats's "great memory," Giuseppe Ungaretti and Giorgos Seferis's "moment," and Marcel Proust's "petite Madeleine." (xiv)

Due to the term's broadness, I narrow the scope of my investigation to the Aristotelian sense of the word. I discuss the importance of recognition for Aristotle and its unique place in the poetics of the narrative. After that, I highlight a specific type of recognition plot in modern poetics that is Aristotelian in its fundament; however, in this particular type, the recognition scenes do not lead to the other components of the Aristotelian recognition plot like "reversal" and "action." Here, I posit that Henry James, to a great degree, was preoccupied with the theme of recognition, and James's treatment of the concept is similar to what Aristotle propounded in *Poetics*. However, in James, the recognition does not end in the "reversal" of circumstances and the protagonist's drastic "action." Instead, we are confronted with semi-passive protagonists who are at a loss regarding their subjectivity,

agency, and ability to undertake purposeful actions. Then, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenology of aesthetics, I investigate the Jamesian renunciation pattern in recognition fictions like Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001).

Recognition — in the Aristotelian sense of the term — signifies a revelatory moment in the narrative's peak when the hero discovers a crucial truth that has been hitherto overlooked due to ignorance. That is why Aristotle defines recognition as "a change from ignorance to knowledge." It is as if the veil of blindness is withdrawn from the protagonist's eyes, and he finally sees the blatant truth. We have to bear in mind that not all the recognition narratives that conform to Aristotle's definition of recognition were considered successful fictional versions by the Greek philosopher. As we will argue, recognition is a term that Aristotle and other commentators approached cautiously. The cautiousness emanates from the fact that "recognition is reputed to be an implausible contrivance, a shoddy way of resolving a plot the author can no longer control" (Cave 1). However, Aristotle believed that if the components of the recognition scene are appropriately assembled — in a way that their arrangements do not defy the logic of the narrative's events — the recognition moment not only appears natural to the overall dynamic of the plot but also helps the dramatist to inculcate the elements of surprise and excitement in the audience. That is why Aristotle singles out recognition as the essential element of high tragedy. However, there is also another more profound element lying at the core of recognition that is the primary source of Aristotle's attraction to the concept. Recognition is a highly philosophical concept closely bound up with the epistemological dilemmas of the narrative. The whole process of the hero's error-making, his *hamartia*, his resistance to acknowledging the truth, the moment

of discovery, the way the truth is unfolded, and the way the hero reacts to the gained knowledge are all epistemological issues that the Greek tragedians tried to *mimic* from real life. As Larsen asserts: “Recognition is not merely a reflection of the narrator’s attempt to excite the audience; however, it also serves as a vehicle for dealing with epistemological dilemmas that are principal elements in certain types of plot” (25).

Therefore, this thesis aims to offer a comparative study of some of the highly prestigious modern and contemporary novels that, to a great degree, comply with James’s conceptualization of the recognition plot. Still, before determining the Jamesian recognition pattern and emphasizing its canonical place in the history of the transatlantic literature — or perhaps world literature — I reckon we have to familiarize ourselves with the term’s background and its components and specify the sort of epistemologically-oriented recognition plots that entail the recognition scenes as the central element of the narrative.

Chapter One

Framing the Recognition Plot Proper

Aristotle's *Poetics* and the Genesis of the Recognition Plot

Aristotle's *Poetics* is one of the earliest known books focusing solely on literary theory. The book was written as an attempt to study the mechanics of recreational arts, mainly the ones that dealt with the versicular forms of narration. It is interesting to know that the Greek philosopher did not write *Poetics* primarily to instruct the poets and dramatists of his time or to set standards for the later generation of poets; quite the contrary, he stated that his main purpose for undertaking such task was for the sake of his own amusement. In Aristotle's view, human beings derive pleasure from gaining knowledge about their surroundings; therefore, he claimed that his primary purpose for writing *Poetics* was to understand the *tekhnê*, i.e., the skill or craft of the poetry of his day. But why did Aristotle favor poetry over other art forms such as painting or sculpture? Among his explanations, he mentioned two main reasons for selecting poetry as the subject of interest. The first is that poetry, in both written and oral form, is an enjoyable form of *mimêsis*, i.e., imitation, that exploits a rhythmic language and is accompanied by a melody. The word *mimêsis*, translated as imitation or likeness, is crucial to understanding Aristotle's overall argument. Aristotle considered "*mimêsis* as a microcosm or simulation of reality itself" (Potolsky 327). He believed that the urge to imitate in human beings is, in part, to satisfy the "innate desire for knowledge." He contended that "human beings are by nature prone to engage in the creation of likenesses and to respond to likenesses with pleasure, and he explains this instinct by reference to their innate desire for knowledge"¹ (Heath xiii). However, one could argue that other kinds of art, such as painting, architecture, sculpture, etc., are also different forms of

¹ There are quite a few English translations of Aristotle available at the moment. I used Malcom Heath's translation of *Poetics* from the *Penguin Classics* series. I also consulted George Whalley's translation from McGill-Queen's University Press and Anthony Kenny's translation published by Oxford World's Classics which I equally found helpful and informative. However, for the sake of consistency I stick to Heath's translation.

human endeavor to create replicas from the surroundings, which can be equally enjoyable activities like producing poetry. Aristotle's second reason in poetry's defense gives a certain prominence to poetry *vis-à-vis* other forms of imitative art. He viewed poetry as a powerful form of imitation, which not only has the capacity to recount what has happened in an elaborated manner but can also *envisage* what would happen concerning human relations in accordance with the rules of necessity and probability. This notion alludes to the "universality" of poetry in *Poetics* (Heath 16). Therefore, Aristotle considers poetry as an authentic artistic medium that can capture the intricacies of human relations, and at the same time, it has the capacity to surpass history by prognosticating what will happen in the future. It can be inferred then that Aristotle assumed poetry has the potential to roam the realm of limitless possibilities while history is limited to the stories and occurrences of the past.

Since Aristotle's tutor, Plato, was the poets' number one arch-enemy who reserved the "right" for himself "to banish"² the lyric and epic poets and the tragedians from his "ideal" state in *Republic*, Aristotle's defense of poetry came with profound circumspection (Reeve 311). Plato censured poets for their role in obstructing reasoned discourse in societies by imitating the vulgar instead of emulating the ideal, which would lead human beings to "a state of decay and moral wretchedness" (Sherman 253). Unlike Plato, Aristotle extolled the cathartic effect or the "pleasurable relief" (Heath xlii) of poetry — which he associated predominantly with tragedy — underlining that the poets imitate the "imaginative truth" and not the vulgar (Butcher 170). However, since imitative poetry deals with endless assumptions, Aristotle singled out those literary modes which are, in his opinion, closer to reality. He considered the dramatic mode "the purest form of poetic imitation" and tragedy

² This is part of Socrates's answer to Glaucon in Book 10th of *Republic*: "Be aware that hymns to the gods and eulogies of good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. For if you admit the honeyed Muse, whether in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law and the thing that has always been generally believed to be best—reason" (Reeve 311).

as a superior form of imitation to epic (Heath xvii). Aristotle offered a few reasons for his verdict. For example, the drama was performed on a stage, while the epic was told only through narration. Also, the length of events in a drama was advised to be restricted to a single day, whereas the time aspect in the epic was “unrestricted” (Heath 9).

Aristotle then considers tragedy superior to comedy because the former is the imitation of the life of admirable people while the latter deals with the affairs of the inferiors. Therefore, a large proportion of *Poetics* is dedicated to studying the “formal elements” of tragedy. From the elements Aristotle associated with tragedy,³ he paid exclusive attention to the tragic plot. The Greek philosopher believed that since the poet produces an imaginative reality, the way he fabricates the truth should sound believable to the audience. As a result, “the structure of the events” (Heath 11) was considered “the soul of tragedy,” while characterization was regarded as the second important element (Heath 12). In other words, in Aristotle’s view, the fabricated reality has the potential to supersede the apodictic truth as long as poets know how to limit their imagination and try to narrate the story in a way that appears as real as possible to the audience. It can be surmised that for Aristotle, the veracity of the story was not considered the supreme virtue of tragedy; rather, the unity of the plot was the most crucial factor that could rescue the story from falling into the cesspool of mediocrity. Therefore, it was “the duty of the poet (...) to tell lies *skillfully*”⁴ (Butcher 171).

From there on, Aristotle enumerates different attributes of tragedy⁵ and clarifies certain poetic concepts concerning tragic plays. In most cases, he applies the ideas to

³ Aristotle mentions elements like spectacle, character, diction, song, reasoning, and plot.

⁴ Italics added.

⁵ He applies many of these concept to tragedy later in *Poetics*.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*,⁶ which he praised for having a complex plot. Concepts like *mythos*,⁷ *ethos*,⁸ *opsis*, *hubris*, and others germinated from Aristotle's investigation, which remained the core ideas in many literary studies ever since. Even though Aristotle puts heavy emphasis on the terms like *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, they still have not received enormous attention from the literary scholars of Western literature. While there has been a large body of works on concepts like *mimêsis*, *katharsis*, or *hamartia*, I believe *anagnorisis* is the most neglected, or in the words of Terence Cave, "the least respectable," term in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1).

Aristotle's elaboration on *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* is part of a discussion he has on the *metabasis* of the plot. *Metabasis* indicates a shift in the plot's trajectory or a change in the course of action when the narrative reaches its crux, and from there, it slowly heads toward the denouement. What segregated the simple, tragic plot from the complex one was that the *metabasis* of the former does not contain *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, while the latter benefits from having *anagnorisis* or having both at the same time. Translated as recognition or discovery, *anagnorisis* "is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune" (Heath 18). Aristotle mentions that "recognition is best when it occurs simultaneously with a reversal, like the one in *Oedipus*" (Heath 18-19). Aristotle also defines *peripeteia*, or a reversal, as "a change to the opposite in the actions being performed" (Heath 18). As MacFarlane posits, we have to bear in mind that recognition and reversal "are not mutually

⁶ Aristotle also mentions Sophocles' *Iphigenia* and Theodectes' *Lynceus*.

⁷ Plot.

⁸ The morality aspect of a character.

exclusive” (380). for Aristotle, their simultaneous occurrence could form the “finest” kind of tragic plot. However, recognitions with no reversals were considered “contrived artifices” that “do not come about from the very construction of the plot” (MacFarlane 380).

Aristotle mentions six types of recognition in *Poetics*. The first kind encompasses congenital features related to physical characteristics (a scar) or accessories (a necklace). “For example, Odysseus is recognized by means of the scar both by the nurse and the swineherds” (Heath 26). Aristotle categorizes this type of recognition as the simplest or “least artistic,” which usually arises from “the lack of ingenuity” on the poet’s side (Heath 26). The second type of recognition is the one that is “contrived by the poet,” like revealing one’s identity out of the blue either to the characters of a play or to the audience. For example, Orestes reveals his own identity in *Iphigeneia*. Aristotle finds this type of recognition “inartistic,” too. The third, fourth, and fifth types of recognition come through “memory,” “inference,” and “false inference,” respectively (Heath 26-27) Aristotle saves the best for last. He reckons that the best recognition of all is the kind that “arises out of the actual course of events” and through the course of actions that seem “probable,” like Oedipus’s grand discovery about being Laius’s son and the process through which this recognition occurs to him (Heath 27).

In the story of *Oedipus*, all the narrative elements are exploited to maximize the impact of the discovery scene. This ancient Greek tragedy is so well-known and oft-cited that I do not see the necessity to provide an end-to-end plot summary. However, it is imperative to provide the reader with an Aristotelian outlook of *Oedipus Rex*.

***Oedipus Rex*: An Aristotelian Case of Error and Action**

Oedipus Rex has a special place in the literature of the Western canon. Even after Sigmund Freud published an interpretation of it in his seminal book *Die Traumdeutung* (1899), the play drew more attention to scholars from various disciplines. Freud's psychoanalytical approach regarded *Oedipus Rex* as an epitomic work that entails the inborn and hidden taboos of the human psyche, like incest and patricide. However, for Aristotle, the supreme virtue of *Oedipus* lies within the infallible structure of the play. In the words of the renowned British literary scholar Roger David Dawe, Sophocles managed to create "a masterpiece that in the eyes of posterity has overshadowed every other achievement in the field of ancient drama" (2). But what sort of quality does make *Oedipus* an everlasting masterpiece?

At its core, *Oedipus* is an epistemologically-driven narrative about an individual's persistence in discovering a self-destructive truth. The play's sublimity lies in the fact that — unlike in mystery fiction — the truth is at hand from the beginning of the narrative. Fatalism and the knowledge-gaining process are the concepts that Sophocles foregrounds. The tragedy recounts the story of Oedipus, king of Thebes, on a quest to find the murderer of Laius, the former king. When the oracle at Delphi informs Oedipus that the plague in Thebes is the consequence of the escape of Laius's murderer, Oedipus vows to find and punish the culprit. The noteworthy aspect of the play is Oedipus's persistence in finding the murderer when others discourage him from doing so. For example, when Tiresias is summoned to Oedipus's court, the blind prophet advises Oedipus to abandon his search because death and destruction would await him. The two get into a quarrel, and Oedipus derides Tiresias for his eyesight disability; in a moment of sheer anger, Tiresias retorts that Oedipus is the blind one and not him. Upon leaving the palace, Tiresias mutters that Laius's killer is a brother and father to his own children and husband and son to his mother. The

prophet's last utterance instills the idea in Oedipus's mind that Creon, his brother-in-law, might be the killer. Therefore, he sentences Creon to death. Jocasta, the former wife of Laius and now that of Oedipus, intervenes and begs the king to spare her brother's life, telling Oedipus that he should ignore the prophets' nonsense. As proof, she recounts a prophecy by the oracles that never became true. She tells Oedipus that years ago, an oracle prophesized that Laius would be murdered by his son; the prophecy was not fulfilled because bandits murdered Laius on his way to Delphi.

Jocasta's story worries Oedipus because he remembers that he accidentally killed a man on the road to Delphi years ago. The king then sends for a shepherd, who was the sole witness to Laius's death. Seeing Oedipus's apprehension, Jocasta asks her husband about the cause of his anxiety. He tells Jocasta that many years ago, a drunkard told him in Corinth that he was not the true son of his father, Polybus. Oedipus then went to Delphi and asked the oracle about his true identity. The oracle refrained from giving him a clear answer; instead, Oedipus was told that he would soon kill his father and marry his mother. The fear of such prophesy compelled Oedipus to leave Corinth forever. He tells Jocasta that upon leaving Corinth, he got into a quarrel with a man who matched Jocasta's description of Laius and accidentally murdered the traveler.

The shepherd arrives at the court. While the chorus, Jocasta, and the shepherd try to discourage Oedipus from pursuing the matter, his persistence in questioning the shepherd leads to discovering the blatant truth. It is revealed that Oedipus is the son of Laius and Jocasta. When Oedipus was an infant, his parents gave him to the same shepherd because they feared that Oedipus would kill Laius. The shepherd then passes the infant to a Corinthian shepherd, who worked at the court of king Polybus. Oedipus discovers that the prophecy has been fulfilled and that he is the one who killed his father and bewed his mother.

From this point onward, the shift in the narrative circumstances leads to consecutive and hurriedly-executed actions; Jocasta hangs herself in the palace's bedroom; Oedipus takes a sword and tries to disembowel his wife and mother. The sight of his mother's dead body makes him cry in despair. He then removes two long gold pins from his mother's dress and blinds himself. Creon becomes the new king of Thebes and promises to take care of Oedipus's daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

It is conceivable why Aristotle thinks highly of Sophocles' play. *Oedipus Rex* perfectly fits into the Aristotelian model of high tragedy when *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* co-occur and complement one another. It is essential to take notice of the centrality of the recognition moment and how the recognition leads to the impulsiveness and hyperactive behavior of the characters, especially the protagonist. As Cave posits: "In the definition of peripeteia, the word *prattomenon* is clearly related to Aristotle's notion of action (*praxis*) as that which is represented by the plot. (...) A shift or turn in the 'things being done' suggests a change of relations within the action rather than a change in the life or intentions of a particular character" (Cave 32). We also have to note that an inseparable element of these impulsive actions is the assertion of the hero's subjectivity or the imposition of his will. Considering other classical recognition tragedies such as *Othello* — which also portrays an epistemologically-driven recognition tale of error and blindness — we face a similar hyperactive ending once the Moorish general recognizes that he has been fooled by his trusted ensign, Iago. Like Oedipus, Othello is devastated by the heavy burden of the truth as he cannot bear to see the body of Desdemona lying dead on their marital bed. However, once he acknowledges his error of judgment, he tries to compensate for his mistake, act according to the gained knowledge, and reverse the circumstances by stabbing Iago and committing suicide. Even the delusional and decrepit protagonist of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* feels a duty to *act* once his sanity is restored at the end of the novel. Quixano

— whose sanity is affected by reading chivalric romances of the 14th and 15th centuries — tries to act in accordance with the truth once he acknowledges it. At the end of book II of *Don Quixote*, Quixano becomes physically ill. However, he miraculously recovers his sanity and becomes aware of the truth on his deathbed. Then he dictates in his will that his niece shall be disinherited if she marries a man who reads chivalric romances.

Also, in Aristotle's favorable model, the change of speed in the action sequence is accompanied by a shift (reversal) in kinship relations: "The *metabasis* denoted by this last phase is characterized, then, in the specific instance of anagnorisis, as being brought about by a change of affective or kinship relations, itself brought about by a change of knowledge" (Cave 33). In the case of Oedipus, the revelation of the truth has affected the relationship between Oedipus and his kins, such as Jocasta and Creon. Oedipus's error (*hamartia*) emanates from *hubris*; he takes pride in the notion that he is free from misdeeds and misjudgment. Therefore, the central theme of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the theme of blindness, to blindly acquitting oneself of wrongdoing and accusing others of transgression.

In the above segments, I tried to foreground the centrality of recognition (*anagnorisis*) as a rosary thread that can bring and hold all the crucial elements of the narrative together; that is the reason why Aristotle dedicates a considerable part of *Poetics* to discussing different forms of *anagnorisis* and their possible emotional and structural impacts on the narrative as a whole. Cave also suggests the idea of the centrality of recognition in *Poetics* by considering *anagnorisis* and "the figure of poetics as a whole":

But there still seems to be a good case for saying that, in the Aristotelian tradition of antiquity, anagnorisis is not only a structural feature of complex epic and tragic poems. It is also a focus for reflections on the way fictions as such are constituted, the way in which they play with and on the reader, their distinctive marks as

fictions—untruth, disguise, trickery, ‘suspense’ or deferment, the creation of effects of shock or amazement, and so on. The commentators are led to these reflections almost unwittingly by the imbrication into the Odyssey of instances of story-telling, by the latent possibility of reading Odysseus as a surrogate—and no doubt cleverly disguised—narrator. And the stories that are told are characteristically, in their content or their effect, recognition stories. It already seems that anagnorisis can become, by means of an almost imperceptible emphasis, the figure of poetics as a whole. (46)

Before narrowing down the argument to a specific mode of the recognition plot, which is the focal point of my argument, I reckon I have to offer my reader a better grasp of what I mean by the “recognition plot proper.” This is due to the fact that many narratives employ recognition scenes excessively to fabricate momentary excitement in the audience. Especially in the more recent forms of story-telling, like tv-shows and movie franchises, we see a surge in the utilization of recognition scenes. These types of recognition moments are used as contrivances to create suspense and, as a result, elongate a storyline that no longer has the capacity to stretch. Therefore, in contemporary pop culture tv-shows, the recognition scenes are used as cliffhangers embedded in the plot structures by the writers and producers to keep the audience on the edge of their seats for extended periods. However, the purpose of this study is to investigate a variant mode of the recognition plot proper that is foregrounded by Henry James and adopted by later generations of literary fiction writers ever since James wrote *The Ambassadors*. In this light, I argue that the structure of James’s fiction — especially in his later years — heavily relies upon a central moment of recognition. Furthermore, James’s treatment of the recognition plots, together with the poetics of his recognition novels, is Aristotelian to a great degree. To clarify what I mean by “recognition

plot proper,” I offer a contemporary example from a screenplay by the American playwright David Mamet that strictly follows the Aristotelian vision of the finest recognition plot.

The Verdict: The Epitome of a Recognition Plot Proper

Based on the best-selling novel by Barry Reed, *The Verdict* (1982) is an American trial film that follows the story of an ill-starred lawyer by the name of Frank Galvin who gets involved in a do-or-die case against St. Catherine Labouré hospital, a religiously-established institution under the direct supervision of the Archdiocese of Boston, Massachusetts. Portrayed by Paul Newman, Galvin is an alcoholic ambulance chaser who once worked in a distinguished law firm, Stearns and Harrington. Framed by his own boss for jury tampering, Frank spent a short while in jail; however, he got away from getting disbarred. Later, due to the allegation, he got sacked by the firm, and his wife left him. Frank’s background story underscores how corrupted institutions can play with individuals’ lives.

Since Frank’s ousting from the firm, his *fidus Achates* and former associate, the aged and retired lawyer Mickey Morrissey, throws cases in Galvin’s way every once in a while; nevertheless, the sun does not set on Frank’s streak of bad luck as he lost all the four cases he received in the past three years. Now, being hired as the plaintiff attorney by Sally and Kevin Doneghy, Galvin sees the light at the end of the tunnel. Looking like a hassle-free “moneymaking” case, Frank thinks that he has the chance to salvage his career and restore the lost prestige. The case concerns the medical malpractice of two highly reputable doctors in the operating room by the names of Robert Towler and Sheldon Marx. In particular, Dr. Towler, the expert anesthesiologist of the hospital, forgets to read a patient’s admission form before the operation. Due to Towler’s negligence, the young Deborah Ann Kaye, Sally

Doneghy's sister, gets deprived of oxygen for a few minutes. Consequently, she suffers from permanent brain damage, which leaves her in a vegetative state for good.

Assured by his expert witness that winning the case would be as easy as pie, Galvin rejects a settlement offer of 210,000 dollars, which Bishop Brophy, the archdiocese, puts forth as compensation. Another time, the presiding judge, Judge Hoyle, invites Galvin and Ed Concannon, the lead defense attorney, into his chambers and persuades Frank to accept the settlement offer to avoid further hassles. Still, Frank refuses to take the settlement money. Therefore, in the hope of restoring justice, Frank decides to try the case in court without informing the Doneghys about the settlement offer.

A few days before the commencement of the trial, Frank notices an alluring woman at a local bar, a place of his usual hang-out. He approaches the woman and offers her a drink. The woman turns him down politely; however, she approaches Frank upon leaving the bar and lets him know she is interested in him. The next time Galvin sees the woman at the bar, he ditches his partner Mickey, telling him: "I'm gonna get laid." He approaches the woman again. The two flirt for a while, and Galvin succeeds in persuading her to have dinner with him. Even though the flirt scene looks simple and is brief, there are subtle hints that make the viewer suspicious about this mysterious woman. In his flirtatious state, Frank tells the woman that "you came back to see me tonight." Knowing the fact that Frank tries desperately to charm the woman, the viewer may not take this last utterance seriously; however, the almost-empty-looking bar implies that Frank's assumption may not be too implausible; this means that either the woman arrived at the bar in a late hour or she arrived earlier, and she stayed late. Also, the woman makes herself available to him by saying that her "ex-husband was a lawyer," which makes us more suspicious of her. The two have dinner at the bar and spend the night together at Frank's apartment. From that point, Laura

Fischer (played by Charlotte Rampling), a woman in her mid-thirties, enters Frank Galvin's life as his inamorata. This is where the plot's complication begins.

Having an appointment in advance, Frank goes to visit his expert witness. The secretary informs him that Dr. Gruber is spending his vacation in the Caribbean, and he will be out of reach for a week. Knowing that the disappearance of his trump card will cost him losing the case, Galvin rushes to Judge Hoyle's house late at night, asking for a trial postponement. The judge, who formerly had egg on his face when Frank turned him down in his chambers, repays the favor by rejecting Frank's demand. Calling Frank "Mr. Independent," the judge tells Frank that he should have taken Concannon's offer in the first place. Trying to untie the Gordian knot he knotted with his own hands, Frank contacts Concannon's men to get the settlement money. However, he is informed that Concannon has withdrawn the offer.

Gradually, it becomes evident to the viewer, not to Frank, that Concannon and his team are aware of Frank's every move. For example, when Frank substitutes the expert witness, Concannon is immediately apprised of the change. And since Dr. Thompson, the new expert witness, is an African American, Concannon suggests that a colored attorney should sit with the defense team on the day of the trial. Also, Concannon is informed by his associates that Galvin came back empty-handed from his visit to Maureen Rooney's apartment, suggesting that someone was tailing Frank when he went to Rooney's apartment.⁹

The trial occurs as scheduled, and Frank and his expert witness perform poorly in front of the jury. After Galvin discharges Dr. Thompson, we see Frank and Mickey in their

⁹ Rooney is the operating-room nurse who refuses to testify for the defense.

office, where Mickey tries to comfort Frank by saying: “There’ll be other cases.” Having his face covered by his hands, Frank keeps repeating: “There are no other cases. This is the case.” However, it is at this point that the film unravels why Frank is always a step behind Concannon. The next scene shows Concannon in his office, writing a check and pouring whiskey for a late-night visitor. While Concannon starts his monologue, the visitor’s identity remains concealed from the viewer:

Concannon: I know how you feel. I know you don’t believe me, but I do. I’m going to tell you something I learned when I was your age. I had prepared a case. Mr. White asked me, ‘How did you do.’ (beat) I said, ‘I’ve done my best.’ He said, ‘They don’t pay you to do your best. They pay you to win.’ (beat) That’s what pays for this office. (beat) And that’s what pays for the pro bono work that we do for the poor. And for the kind of law that you want to practice. And that’s what pays for your clothes and my whiskey, and the leisure that we have to sit back and discuss philosophy. (beat) As we’re doing tonight. (beat) We’re paid to win the case. (...) You finished your marriage. You wanted to come back and practice law. You wanted to come back to the world. (...) Welcome back. (Mamet 90-91)

The camera then slowly shifts to the visitor; it is Laura Fischer, sitting “impassively” on a couch with tears in her eyes. Concannon then offers her a glass of whiskey and puts the check inside her purse. It is revealed to the viewer that Laura was the infiltrator feeding information to Concannon’s team. So, while Frank was running around in circles like an agitated madman, he was ignorant that he shared the same bed with the enemy. The scene in Concannon’s office plays the role of a recognition scene for the viewer, where we discover why Glavin is always a step behind Concannon; however, the protagonist is still in the dark, and the emphasis here is on the protagonist’s recognition and not the audience.

Therefore, the things I said so far were meant as an overture that sets the stage for discussing Galvin's recognition scene in *The Verdict*.

The check becomes a sign that unmask the truth about Laura. When Mickey runs out of cigarettes, he searches Laura's purse, and there he discovers the official envelope of Concannon, Barker & White law firm. It is rather a low probability that the check in Laura's purse becomes an apparatus that blows her cover; however, since it has been done masterfully by the scriptwriter, the final result appears very convincing and natural to the viewer. One of the points of strength of *The Verdict* is that this whole process of revelation does not seem like an unrealistic contrivance. It is due to the fact that there are a couple of scenes in the screenplay which are designed to develop a friendly dynamic between Mickey and Laura; for example, earlier in the film, we see the two drink beer together while Mickey is telling Laura about Frank's past. This scene not only adds extra depth to the protagonist's character but also shows Mickey and Laura in a private conversation while Frank is absent. There is another scene in Galvin's office when Laura tries to tell Frank the truth and redeem herself. This scene also serves a dual purpose. The first is that it adds humane dimensions to Laura's character, where we see her wrestling with her fears, doubts, and regret, or perhaps she is truly in love with Frank. We also see Mickey asking Laura for cigarettes, which shows Mickey and Laura often smoke cigarettes together. Therefore, when Mickey opens Laura's purse to get a cigarette, such behavior does not appear abnormal to the viewer. Mickey sees Concannon's name on the envelope, leading to the disclosure of Laura's disguise.

To avoid confrontation with Laura, Mickey quickly puts the letter back into her purse. However, he flies to New York to tell Frank about Laura's duplicity. The following scene shapes the narrative arc of the film. We see Mickey standing restlessly outside Hotel

Sheraton. Frank arrives by cab, inquiring why Mickey hastened to visit New York: “What’s the matter? Are you lost or something?” Mickey takes Galvin’s arm: “Frankie, we gotta talk.” Mickey’s voice gradually fades and gets lost in the city’s noise as he unveils the truth to his friend. The overwhelming city’s noise takes the form of pandemonium, implying how deafening and unimaginable the truth could sound in Frank’s ears. The two walk together for a short while; Frank stops suddenly, and it is evident that he is astounded by this belated discovery. He immediately leaves Mickey and runs toward the restaurant where he is about to meet Laura. The following describes the aftermath of Frank’s discovery:

INTERIOR. NEW YORK HOTEL RESTAURANT - DAY

LONG SHOT of Laura seated at a table alone.

ANGLE

Galvin at the entrance to the restaurant looking at her. He walks over to her slowly.

ANGLE - CLOSEUP

Laura, looks up, sees him, smiles. Her smile fades, *she sees that he knows.*¹⁰

ANGLE

¹⁰ Italics added for emphasis.

Laura getting up from the table. We SEE her back, and Galvin approaching. We SEE her shoulders droop, beaten. He draws closer. Galvin comes up to her, his face a mask of pain and confusion. She sighs, starts to speak. Stops. Beat. They look at each other -- he starts to speak, cannot. He knocks her to the floor, she upsets the table. A large man at the next table starts to restrain Galvin.

LAURA

(as if in shock)

It's all right... it's all right...

it's all right... it's all right... (Mamet 106-7)

The whole mechanism of the plot was designed to propel the viewer up to this crucial point. Therefore, one of the film's central themes could be regarded as the theme of "blindness." Like Oedipus, who blindly sought the killer of Laius, unaware that he himself was the murderer, Galvin ceaselessly seeks the solution to his misfortunes elsewhere while he is blind to the fact that the culprit is inside his house. The fact that Frank's inamorata takes the role of the backstabber evokes the tradition of classical tragedies where kinship betrayals were the critical concepts of drama, especially tragedies. Therefore, the *anagnorisis* in *The Verdict* is given a full Aristotelian *metabasis* treatment. The recognition scene is positioned near the end of the narrative, and it evokes tension and excitement. Furthermore, two critical changes happen in the course of actions; the first is the shift from ignorance to knowledge, and the second is the change from friendship to enmity.

The recognition scene is quite unique; like a man approaching a feral beast, Frank cautiously proceeds toward Laura when he sees her at the other end of the restaurant. There is an expression of perplexity and doubt on Newman's face as if Frank was trying to read Laura's mind and understand this stranger. The camera slowly zooms in on Laura's face. She smiles at first; however, the smile gives its way to a mixture of awe and fear. Even though not a single word is uttered between the two, Laura knows that Frank has found out the truth. In turn, Frank becomes certain that what he has learned about Laura is true. Of course, such scenes, like many other discovery scenes, put forth epistemological issues and questions about how the individual accesses knowledge. Both Laura and Frank come to a new understanding of one another; however, the scene's beauty lies in the fact that not a single word is exchanged between the two to facilitate the recognition(s). Frank gathers his strength and slaps Laura; she does not show resistance, and the scene ends there.

In the next scene, we see Galvin and his partner on a plane back to Boston, where Mickey divulges Laura's motive for betraying Frank: "I talked to Johnnie White at the Bar Association. The broad used to work for one of Concannon's partners in New York a while ago. She wanted to move to Boston. How badly did she hurt us, Joe?" (Mamet 107) In the end, Frank tracks down Kaitlin Costello, the nurse who admitted Deborah Ann Kaye to the hospital. Kaitlin testifies against Dr. Towler, and the jury find the hospital guilty of malpractice.

I offered a semi-detailed reading of the film to emphasize a point that I reckon is the core idea of my discussion. Even though *The Verdict* has a modern story that addresses the social troubles and injustices that institutions and corporations afflict upon individuals, the underlying narrative structure follows a traditional recognition plot. The film became an instant hit when released in 1982 and received five Academy Awards nominations, including best-adapted screenplay. One should consider that the film owes its success

hugely to David Mamet's well-crafted script and skillful characterization. Regarded as one of the greatest dramatists of our age, Mamet transforms the core concepts of Aristotelian tragedy into a modern atmosphere. I can mention at least the three core tenets of Aristotelian high tragedy in *The Verdict*, namely the "recognition," the "reversal," and "the theme of blindness." Frank is portrayed as a drunkard, indicating that this person lacks sobriety or vigilance.

Furthermore, Frank uses lubricant eye drops now and then, which implies that something is wrong with his vision or perception of the truth. However, when the hero discovers the truth, he tries to act accordingly, and that is when he fights back and slaps the enemy. And finally, we see the reversal in the circumstances where the hero's misfortunes end; he is sober at last and succeeds in turning around the story's outcome. Both Mamet and Newman succeed in portraying a befuddled idealist who wanders about court halls and corridors, trying to find an escape route to free himself from the clutches of a powerful and corrupted institution. However, he is unaware that the more he struggles for a way out, the deeper he gets entangled in the morass. Therefore, *The Verdict* can be regarded as an excellent example of a recognition plot, where all the fictional elements and techniques are employed by the screenwriter to lead the narrative to a single moment of recognition where the hero discovers that he has been hitherto suffered either from a critical error of judgment or from a distorted perception of the truth. It should be emphasized that Galvin's dramatic slap can be regarded as an assertion of his subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the discovery of the truth. Like his fictional predecessors — Oedipus, Othello, and Alonso Quixano — Galvin acts or reacts to assert his will and reverse the circumstances; this action is precisely the substance that is eliminated in the Jamesian tradition of recognition. In the next chapter, I discuss another type of recognition in modern fiction which is Aristotelian in its fundament;

however, it deviates from the norms of the classical format of the recognition plot proper in several ways.

Chapter Two

Theory

Henry James and Recognition

Henry James has become the dominant literary figure for many fiction writers and critics of the 20th century. While reading a collection of essays by the celebrated English novelist Graham Greene, I came across a line or two that I found intriguing. Like many other writers, Greene exalts James as a pioneer that sets new standards in the history of storytelling; he writes: “Henry James ranks with the greatest of creative writers. He is as solitary in the history of the novel as Shakespeare in the history of poetry” (Greene 30). The analogy between James and Shakespeare would seem fallacious to many; however, Greene’s statement evokes certain exoticity about the similarities that James and Shakespeare have with one another. Shakespeare’s tragedies conform — to a great extent — to the norms of the Aristotelian definition of high tragedy. Works such as *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and others are all centered on the theme of the human being’s fatal error, a misjudgment of the situation that leads to the inevitable downfall of the hero. It is true that the differences between the Shakespearean drama and the Jamesian novel seem more noticeable than their similarities; however, the notion of human error or the error of judgment is as central in James as it is in Shakespeare. The first published short story by James, “A Tragedy of Error,” hints at the preoccupation of the novice author with the Aristotelian notion of *hamartia*.

Even though James never admitted that he wrote the story, his most well-known biographer, Leon Edel, claimed to have “discovered” the story based on the evidence that he offers in one of James’s biographies entitled *Henry James: The Untried Years 1843–1870* (1953). “A Tragedy of Error” was “published anonymously in the long-defunct *Continental Monthly*” in February 1864 (Edel 291). The short story has a simple narrative line, and its plot twist is woven into the denouement with a lack of ingenuity; maybe these

were among the reasons that James rejected his authorship of the story. The story recounts a simple love triangle; an adulteress and a ferryman plot against the disabled husband; however, due to a fatal error of judgment, the woman's lover is murdered by the ferryman, and the wife is doomed to live with the disabled husband.

It also should be taken into account that, during his career, James had suffered from the repressed desire to have a successful career as a dramatist. He even converted two of the successful fictions of his early years into plays, *Daisy Miller* and *The American*. Between 1890 and 1895, James wrote a few plays, many of which remained unproduced. It was his traumatic experience on the opening night of *Guy Domville* in the London theatre that, more or less, marks the end of his career as a playwright. *Guy Domville* is about a bachelor who renounces the pleasures of the world of matrimony and vows to become a priest; such a stoic attitude and renunciation theme recur in later James. After the end of the performance, James went on the stage to take a bow, where the author got ridiculed and jeered at by a considerable portion of the crowd. Somerset Maugham, who was a medical student at that time, attended the event and clearly captured the accounts of James's humiliation in his collection of essays, *The Vagrant Mood*: "He [James] confronted the hostile audience, his jaw fallen so that his mouth was slightly open and on his countenance a look of complete bewilderment. He was paralysed"¹ (197). James never forgot the horrors of the incident and,

¹ There is a chapter in Maugham's *The Vagrant Mood* which is entitled "Some Novelists I Have Known." A considerable amount of this chapter is allotted to James and the première performance of *Guy Domville*. The following is the extended version of Maugham's impression of the ending of the performance: "The play was a dreadful failure. The dialogue was graceful, but perhaps not quite direct enough to be taken in by an audience and there was a certain monotony in its rhythm. Henry James was fifty when he wrote the play and it is hard to understand how such a practiced writer could have invented such a tissue of absurdities as was that night presented to the public. There was in the second act a distressing scene of pretended drunkenness which gave one goose-flesh. One blushed for the author. The play reached its tedious end and Henry James was very unwisely brought on the stage to take a bow, as was the undignified custom of the time. He was greeted with such an outburst of boos and catcalls as only then have I heard in the theatre. From my seat in the dress circle he seemed oddly foreshortened. A stout man on stumpy legs, and owing to his baldness, notwithstanding his beard, a vast expanse of naked face. He confronted the hostile audience, his jaw fallen so that his mouth was slightly open and on his countenance a look of complete bewilderment. He was paralysed. I don't know why the curtain wasn't immediately brought down. He seemed to stand there

somehow, did not allow himself to forgive the “vulgar” and “brutal” audience of the London theatre. In a letter that he wrote to his brother William on January 9th of 1985, he remembers his involvement with the London theatre as a horrifying experience: “The thing fills me with horror for the abysmal vulgarity and brutality of the theatre and its *regular*² public” (James and Edel 280).

Henry Popkin postulates that it is at this point that James feels a certain crisis in his career as an artist. To resolve the crisis, James seeks a fitting and refined audience. Therefore, he abandons writing “for the commercial stage” for the sake of writing for “the theatre of his mind’s eye.” Popkin maintains:

Disheartened by the necessity of being amusing and intelligible to dull audiences which had been trained in the very worst of traditions, James returned to the art of fiction. In his subsequent novels he emphasized more than ever the theatrical, the dramatic, and the scenic. One of his major novels, *The Awkward Age*, is a “described drama.” Many more, including *The Ambassadors*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, and *What Maisie Knew*, are told from the point of view of a single, extraordinarily perceptive observer. This “centre of consciousness” is the ideal audience that James never found in the London theaters. Although the sensitive observer, he appreciates and interprets all the subtle acts and words that eluded the gross sensibilities of the theatergoers for whom James previously wrote. The individuals who view the action of *The Ambassadors* and the other late novels are more than mere characters, even

interminably while the gallery and the pit continued to bawl. There was clapping in the stalls and the dress circle, and he said afterwards that it was enthusiastic but there he was mistaken. It was half-hearted. People clapped in protest at the rudeness of pit and gallery, and out of pity because they could not bear to see the wretched man’s humiliation. At last George Alexander came out and led him, crushed and cowed, away” (Maugham 197-198).

² My emphasis.

more than mere narrators. They are the perfect audience that existed only in James's imagination. And the action they are watching, the play they attend, is always an ideal drama, a drama so rich and so subtle that James never dared to offer it to the Philistines of the pit. It is performed by actors who are created by the imagination and who are therefore much superior to the imperfect mummers of the professional theatres. (Popkin 69)

Even though James's lack of success as a dramatist impelled him to re-pursue his career as a novelist, he does not abandon the idea of himself as a dramatist altogether. While crafting *The Spoils of Poynton*, James's first novel after quitting the stage, we see the author's tendency to transform the medium of drama into the novel form. This is a note that James wrote in early 1896: "I mustn't interrupt it too much with elucidations or it will be interminable. It must be as straight as a play — that is the only way to do it" (Edel and Powers 159). Therefore, the late James returned to the novel while he was highly preoccupied with a different narrative form. His later novels conspicuously follow the melodrama tradition in their characterization, dialogue, style, and excessive portrayal of human sentiment. In the words of Christopher Greenwood, the later James's insistence upon the dramatic mode emanates from his desire to attain "a kind of performative efficacy" in his novels; a performative efficacy that he found to exist only in "the stage's narrative power" and nowhere else (3).

In particular, James's late trio — *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) — are novels of manners that are based on melodramatic elements. Here, I want to emphasize the two salient features of James's later works, namely the process of "inwardness" of actions and the pivotal place of recognition scenes. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks offers an insightful look into

James's technique of composition in the author's later years, which Brooks labels as the inward "adventure of consciousness." Brooks ascertains that the absence of external action in later James is compensated by the excess of action that takes place within the consciousness of the characters: "In [James's] later novels, the melodrama of external action will tend to be more and more suspended in favor of a stance, from the outset, within the melodrama of consciousness" (Brooks 157). Brooks mentions *The Portrait of a Lady* as an instance "where all of Isabel Archer's career is framed in terms of choices and the terms of choice are themselves progressively polarized and intensified, so that Isabel's final decision to return to Gilbert Osmond in Rome is freighted with lurid connotations of sacrifice, torture, penance, clausturation" (157). In the preface to the novel, James highlights Isabel's moment hyperactive consciousness as a deliberate attempt to show to his reader "what an 'exciting' *inward life*³ may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal" (28). As Brooks maintains: "Here, the stuff of consciousness becomes explicitly dramatic and exciting" (157).

We must bear in mind that in his melodrama of consciousness, James remains devoted to the attributes of the drama of Antiquity. In particular, in his later novels, not only does James try to emulate the style and tone of performative fiction, but he also, from time to time, touches upon the concepts of (high) tragedy that Aristotle highlights in *Poetics*. As Cave posits: "If there was eventually to be a poetics of the novel, James certainly counts as its most sophisticated precursor; at the same time, there are moments in his writings about plot and character where he is perceptibly using Aristotelian terms of reference" (428). Cave is not the only literary critic that associates the (later) James with tragedy and Aristotle; Frederick C. Crews's *The Tragedy of Manners: Moral Drama in the Later Novels of Henry*

³ My emphasis.

James (1957) and Jeannette King's *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel: Theory and Practice in the Novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Henry James* (1978) discuss the transference of the tragic vision of life that existed in the dramas of the Antiquity and Renaissance to the novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Especially, one can claim with a high degree of certainty that the Aristotelian recognition and the epistemologically-driven plots were the primary artistic preoccupation of the aged author. The intense, dramatic episode in part four of *The Golden Bowl*, where Maggie Verver smashes the crystal bowl on the marble floor, can be evidence of such preoccupation. The way Maggie discovers the liaison between her husband, Prince Amerigo, and her step-mother, Charlotte Stant, Maggie's odyssey in Bloomsbury street and in the antique shop, the *antiquario's* recognition of Prince and Charlotte's in the photographs, and the *flaw* that Prince sees in the bowl while shopping with Charlotte in part one of the novel or his reaction at the sight of the broken bowl on the mantle, all in all, indicate that James strove to fabricate a recognition plot proper where epistemological dilemmas and the process of knowledge-gaining are foregrounded. In the preface of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James divulges his artistic preoccupation with the recognition scene of the novel and the crucial role it plays in the overall structure of the plot:

The interest was to be raised to its pitch and yet the elements to be kept in their key; so that, should the whole thing duly impress, I might show what an 'exciting' inward life may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal. And I cannot think of a more consistent application of that ideal unless it be in the long statement, just beyond the middle of the book, of my young woman's extraordinary meditative vigil on the occasion that was to become for her such a landmark. Reduced to its essence, it is but the vigil of searching criticism; but it throws the

action further forward than twenty 'incidents' might have done. It was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. She sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night, under the spell of recognitions on which she finds the last sharpness suddenly wait. It is a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as 'interesting' as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate. It represents, for that matter, one of the identifications dear to the novelist, and even indispensable to him; but it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair. It is obviously the best thing in the book, but it is only a supreme illustration of the general plan. (28)

“The landmark occasion” that James refers to is the episode in chapter forty, where Isabel returns to her house in Rome after a city stroll with Pansy. There, she suddenly catches a glimpse of her husband, Gilbert Osmond, who is engaged in a conversation with Madame Merle, a family friend, in the drawing room. While the man and the woman fail to notice the newcomer's presence, Isabel seems to grasp quite a lot of information from the overall atmosphere and *mise-en-scène* of the room. Below is the description of Isabel's initial impression of the moment:

Isabel passed into the drawing-room, the one she herself usually occupied, the second in order from the large antechamber which was entered from the staircase and in which even Gilbert Osmond's rich devices had not been able to correct a look of rather grand nudity. Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she

interrupted it. Madame Merle was there in her bonnet, and Gilbert Osmond was talking to her; for a minute they were unaware she had come in. Isabel had often seen that before, certainly; but what she had not seen, or at least had not noticed, was that their colloquy had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them. Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her. Her head was erect, as usual, but her eyes were bent on his. What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them. There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it. Madame Merle had seen her and had welcomed her without moving; her husband, on the other hand, had instantly jumped up. He presently murmured something about wanting a walk and, after having asked their visitor to excuse him, left the room. (550-551)

Isabel discovers the existence of a mutually relaxed attitude between Osmond, her husband, and Madame Merle, a family friend, implying a sort of intimacy that goes way beyond platonic love. James mentions that such a recognition moment is the “best” thing in the book, and the whole narrative is “designed” in such a way as to propel the reader to such a crucial moment of recognition. Interestingly, by using the word “seeing,” James refers to the ancient theme of blindness and error of judgment, the central theme of the

epistemologically-driven plots. And at last, James even acknowledges that not only does he think highly of such a way of plot fabrication but also states that the recognition moment (the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*) and a plot based on epistemological dilemmas are “indispensable” constituents of his fiction.

So far, the primary purpose of my discussion was to set the stage for the things I want to argue in the follow-up. In the following, I want to single out James’s *The Ambassadors* as a pivotal work that sets new poetic norms for many modern and contemporary literary fiction.

The Ambassadors: The Recognition of “the Passive”

If birth certificates were issued for novels, the Aristotelian drama would be registered as the conceptual parent for Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*. In the preface of the book, James points out the artistic preoccupation that led to the birth of *The Ambassadors*: “The material of *The Ambassadors*, conforming in this respect exactly to that of *The Wings of the Dove*, published just before it, is taken absolutely for the stuff of drama; so that, availing myself of the opportunity given me by this edition for some prefatory remarks on the latter work, I had mainly to make on its behalf the point of its *scenic*⁴ consistency” (xliii). However, the thing that separates *The Ambassadors* from other James’s later (melo)dramatic novels — at least on the surface — is the author’s claim about the supremacy of *The Ambassadors* over his other works: “Fortunately, thus I am able to estimate this as, frankly, quite the best, ‘all round,’ of all my productions” (xxx). Also, in chapter seven of *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*, Terence Cave draws attention to James’s *The Ambassadors*, a novel that

⁴ My emphasis.

encompasses a recognition scene proper. Cave begins the chapter with an interesting remark: “The absence of an established poetics of the novel throughout the heyday of the genre makes it difficult to argue that individual writers intentionally created new conditions for the operation of recognition plots.” James then is regarded as a novelist that his fictions “carry explicit memories of a theatrical *mise en scène*.” Especially his later ones are “patently structured — dramatically structured — in terms of knowledge” (428).

Unlike *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, there is only one dominant “centre of consciousness” in *The Ambassadors* through which the story gets narrated, and that is the consciousness of Lewis Lambert Strether. James constructs the structure of the narrative around the protagonist who is an ordinary man. The plot line is also straightforward compared to the other two novels in the trio. Strether embarks on a mission to Paris on behalf of a wealthy woman, Mrs. Newsome — an old widowed matriarch to whom Strether is engaged. He has to convince Mrs. Newsome’s only son, Chad Newsome, to break the emotional tie with a much older married woman, Madame de Vionnet, and return to Woollett to take charge of the family business. After visiting Chad and Madame de Vionnet, Strether is amazed at seeing the young man’s refined mannerisms. Therefore, he concludes that the nature of Chad’s attachment to the woman must be “virtuous.” However, Strether vows to send Chad back to the U.S. once he discovers that the youth has become corrupted due to his involvement with the Parisian woman. The moment of recognition arrives: Near the end of the book, Strether takes a day trip to the countryside outside of Paris. He stops at a country inn placed on the riverside to have supper. While waiting for his dinner, a boat emerges from the river’s bend; the man is rowing while the woman is sitting with a parasol. Strether recognizes the couple: It is Chad and Madame de

Vionnet. James fabricates the structure of this episode with a close similarity to the recognition episode in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

In *Portrait*, Isabel only sees Osmond and Merle moments earlier than the couple takes notice of her; however, those brief seconds are enough for the protagonist to discover the presence of a sort of carnality in the room's atmosphere; Osmond has a reclining posture on a deep chair while looking at his lady-love who is standing in front of the fireplace. In *The Ambassadors*, Strether also notices the couple seconds earlier than the couple could manage to see him. Before the couple can arrange their postures, the protagonist senses the presence of a physical quality between the man and a woman, and that is the eye-opening moment for him when he discovers that he has been fooled all along by Madame de Vionnet and Chad. Again, similar to what happens to Isabel Archer's mind in *Portrait*, Strether's mind enters a highly meditative state on the same night; he infers that the way the couple had dressed that day was so casual, which meant that they stayed together in a close-by inn, perhaps for days. James writes:

He moved, however, from the consideration of that quantity — to say nothing of the consciousness of that organ — back to the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed. That was that, in his vain vigil, he oftenest reverted to: intimacy, at such a point, was *like* that — and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like? It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; (*The Ambassadors* 466)

Interestingly, Strether's recognition leads to a series of successive renunciations; he rejects the world of judgment and decision-making. His only decision is the reason-defying act of distancing himself from his social entanglement. Here, we observe a sharp contrast between Strether and other Jamesian fictional heroes like Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver. Unlike

Strether, Isabel's and Maggie's discoveries lead to decisive actions determining reasonable and justifiable denouements for the novels. In contrast, the revelation of the truth in *The Ambassadors* ends with a loss of agency and a form of passive behavior. It is worth mentioning that *The Ambassadors'* protagonist "was named after Louis Lambert, a minor novel by Honoré de Balzac about a young intellectual who slides into mysticism and insanity" (Hutchison 32). The protagonist's name choice clearly emphasizes the fact that James was after constructing a recognition plot proper with the absence of the hyperactive denouement where the character strives to maintain the status quo instead of acting in accordance with the discovered truth or the gained knowledge. In the end, Strether refuses to take Chad back to the U.S., and, as a result, he breaks his ties with Mrs. Newsome. Strether also rejects the possibility of a carnal relationship with Maria Gostrey, Strether's Parisian confidante, who offers herself to Strether and claims that she would do anything in the world for him.

Applying Brooks's "inward adventure of consciousness" to the ending of *The Ambassadors*, how can we explain the character's passivity in the narrative's denouement? A few commentaries on James over the past years posit that James's perspective is essentially phenomenological. Most notably, Paul B. Armstrong's *The Phenomenology of Henry James* claims that the representation of "the process of knowing" in the novel form was the central artistic goal for the author. Armstrong asserts that James's "treatment of consciousness has long been regarded as a turning point in the history of the novel. It moves away from the conventions of realism towards the preoccupation with the process of creating and construing meaning that is one hallmark of modern fiction from Joyce through Woolf and Beckett and beyond. The art of the novel, according to Henry James, is 'the art

of representation.’ But his most innovative fictions pursue representation in a way that challenges and ultimately changes it by exposing its epistemological foundations” (206).

I also want to further investigate Strether’s eventual passivity in *The Ambassadors* — and that of other protagonists in some other notable works of fiction that follow the Jamesian recognition pattern — using Emmanuel Levinas’s phenomenology of the aesthetics to shed light on the hero’s passive attitude in some modern and contemporary recognition plots.

Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and the Subject’s Radical Passivity

Levinas’s thinking about aesthetics has not drawn the same critical attention as his debate on ethics; this is partly due to the fact that aesthetics encompasses a minor body of Levinas’s oeuvre and partly because the philosopher often reiterated his immutable dictum: Ethics as first philosophy (*L'éthique comme philosophie première*) — a phrase that Levinas is most identified with. However, it is almost impossible to read Levinas and ignore the abundant aesthetical references that he makes to literature, painting, sculpture, and art in general. Except for Jill Robbins’s book, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*, a monumental work on Levinas’s aesthetics in the 1990s, the remaining body of criticism on the subject belong to the first two decades of the twenty-first century, denoting a surge of interest among scholars. Mainly, I am referring to the works of commentators like Benda Hofmeyr, Richard A. Cohen, Matthew Sharpe, and Daniel Marcelle, who have published insightful works on Levinas’s aesthetics in recent years. But why does his discussion on aesthetics keep attracting attention if Levinas himself had a disparaging attitude towards art and aesthetic enjoyment? I reckon there are three main explanations for the current interest in Levinas’s aesthetics.

First and foremost, Levinas's aesthetics has certain affinities with a platonic axiological devaluing approach towards art, artist, and artistic object. Second, it can be considered as an antithesis to the Age of Enlightenment's dominant view that views art as a representation of reality; instead, Levinas labels aesthetics as "de-worlding," "eroding," and "world-obscuring" (Sharpe 37). That said, I believe that there is also a third reason which has been touched upon by the critics but has remained unexplored; as Hofmeyr suggests: "This might be a productive course to investigate if we separate [aesthetics] from the ethical significance it has for [Levinas] and take it in a *strictly ontological sense*"⁵ (Hofmeyr 9). Since Levinas himself discussed aesthetics as an adjunct topic to his more well-known ethics, Hofmeyr calls for examining Levinas's aesthetics in a separate and strict "ontological" manner. This is the objective and scope of my argument to provide my reader with an ontological treatment of Levinas's aesthetics. To this aim, I briefly discuss Levinas's theory of the "face" and then expand the idea to his philosophy of aesthetics.

Levinas considers a human face a primordial, absolute, and self-signifying force that defies understanding and interpretation. Hence, in his view, it is indigestible to the subject's ego. The face of an indigent human being has such magnitude and power that it can hit the subject like a paralytic shock — a thunderbolt that takes away the willpower of the human agent and makes him radically passive. According to Levinas, this "is a passivity more passive than all passivity" (Levinas *Otherwise than Being*, 15). The philosopher argues that this passivity opens up the possibility of an ethical bond between the subject and the infinite other human being that manifests itself in the subject's peremptory obedience towards the other where the subject would not be "able to escape responsibility" (Levinas *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 17). However, the concept of the face in Levinas is not confined to

⁵ My emphasis.

the other human being's visage; on the contrary, the face should be regarded as a metaphor that represents the infinite and absolute part of the insoluble existence of the other human being that arrests the subject's intentionality and would not allow the subject to evade the responsible attitude towards the non-familiar, needy human being. As Burggraeve asserts: "The 'face' is precisely that which radically and infinitely exceeds the 'countenance,' not as inaccessible but as exceptionally vulnerable" (43). Therefore, the face in Levinas "is not the appearance of [a] person"; also, it is not confined to "a collection of features given to visual perception. [The face] has no parts, no components. It is basic and ... 'self-signifying.' The face means what it is—imploring, a plea of the weak to the powerful, of the poor to the rich. The face is the way the other person, as the imposing presence ... presents [himself] to me" (Morgan 64). This is the significance of the "face" in Levinas, an irreducible force that appropriates the subject's intentionality and commands him to become self-sacrificing for the sake of the infinite non-I. And as discussed above, the ethical face-to-face encounter with a needy and strange human being results in the form of radical passivity of the ego. Levinas censures aesthetics; however, for him, aesthetics also has such a power that it can arrest the ego's intentionality and result in the subject's "fundamental passivity."

Aesthetics in Levinas

Contrary to his theory of ethics, Levinas considers aesthetics as a virulent and derailing element. He asserts that there is an absolute rhythmic quality of existence that can arrest the ego by remaining unspeakable, mystifying, and unintelligible. He does not even have an optimistic approach towards art and artist because he believes that art has the power to create surplus realities — which he addresses as "shadows" — by granting face to a non-infinite

object. In one of his later seminal articles, “Is Ontology Fundamental,” the philosopher poses a highly engrossing rhetorical question: “Can things take on a face? Isn’t art an activity that gives things a face? Isn’t the façade of a house a house that is looking at us?” (Levinas “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” 10). In short, Levinas tackles the issue that can a notion, a concept, an object, a painting, a thinking picture⁶ or a mental image, etc., attain such arresting power that paralyzes the ego’s intentionality and leads to a radical passivity of the subject — the same commanding effect that the face of a needy stranger has over the subject. In works like *Existence and Existents*, “Reality and Its Shadows,” and “The Transcendence of Words,” Levinas addresses this question from a phenomenological approach.

The philosopher begins his discussion on aesthetics, basing his argument on the fundamental phenomenology of his predecessors such as Descartes, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger — a similar approach to Kantian Transcendental Idealism that views a human being’s ego as an agent that constantly engages in practical sense-making processes with the familiar and unfamiliar material objects that occupy human beings’ world. While Levinas stays within the bounds of traditional phenomenology, he attempts to resolve the issues concerning deeper aspects of human beings’ existence. Those enigmatic aspects that are as real as solid objects and yet mystifying and intangible; for Levinas, aesthetics belong to such an impenetrable realm. He refers to aesthetics in the traditional sense of *aesthesis* (a sensation without form) that has the power to open a new intangible dimension for the subject — A dimension Levinas calls the *il y a*. Meaning “there is,” *il y a* is “a limitless and world-less being in general that is indifferent to individual beings and threatening for the

⁶ I am using Hofmeyr’s terminology.

subject in its hypostasis, the advent and occasion of its own existence” (Marcelle 181). The philosopher then discusses that art is one of the activities that can create such a dimension.

Taking painting and poetry as examples, Levinas argues that the subject’s aesthetic enjoyment confronting an artistic object arises from an exasperating act of apperception due to the fact that the art-like quality of the object (a poem, a painting) cannot be meaningfully ascertained through the content which it represents. And this is because any artistic object is intentionally made in a way to dodge assimilation. Therefore, what engages the ego is not the meaning, sign, speech, or “said”; rather, it is the mystifying, indigestible quality that resists interpretation. Levinas argues that the basic function of the artist is to disengage a piece of reality from its existential environs. This underlying aesthetical disengaging act “brings about the coexistence of worlds that are mutually alien” (Levinas *Existence and Existents*, 54-5). Even in photography, which can be considered the most *authentic* form of art, this “aesthetic function” happens: “The way of interposing an image between ourselves and the thing has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world” (*Existence and Existents* 52). Levinas labels this process of extraction in artwork as the process of “de-worlding,” which makes the artwork “exotic” and “foreign” with the content that it represents. He writes: “By creating beauty out of nature, art calms and quietens it. All the arts, even those based on sound, create silence” (Levinas “The Transcendence of Words,” 147). Therefore, he believes that this “exoticism” of art leads the ego towards the aesthetic element, not the mimetic content that the work represents.

Levinas argues that in poetry, the “word cannot be separated from meaning. But there is first the materiality of the sound that fills it, by which it ... is capable of having *rhythm*,⁷ rhyme, meter, alliteration, etc.” (*Existence and Existents* 52). Therefore, for

⁷ My emphasis.

Levinas, it is the gnomic rhythmic materiality that makes poetry resistant to translation. As a result, a “detachment from objective meaning” is the eccentric and indispensable quality of art because “in art the sensible qualities which constitute it do not lead to an object but are in themselves” (*Existence and Existents* 52). However, as Hofmeyr contends: “This detachment that the image effects from reality or the object, which Levinas insists upon, does not mean that he somehow disavows the obvious resemblance with the represented object. An image differs from a symbol, a sign, or a word precisely by the very way it refers to its object: resemblance. A sign is ‘pure transparency’ because it opens our eyes to what is signified, whereas the image is opaque” (Hofmeyr 5). Levinas postulates that art is an activity that diverts the intentionality from the real and authentic towards an aesthetic *mise en abyme* of opaque hollows, which he calls the “rhythmic gait” or “musicality” of existence. “The ecstasy of musicality carries the subject away and becomes a ‘passage to anonymity.’ The aesthetic experience is anonymous in the sense that the subject has lost its freedom and cannot retreat to some depths within itself; it is being transported to exteriority. The bubble of interiority has become invaded by exteriority,” which is the reified sensational element (Marcelle 183). That is why in “Reality and Its Shadows,” Levinas writes that “to insist on the musicality of every image is to see in an image its detachment from an object” (5); and later in *Existence and Existents* he reiterates this point by considering music as the highest form of art arguing that “in music the way a quality can divest itself of all objectivity seems completely natural” (53).

In “Reality and Its Shadows,” Levinas bases the premise of his discussion on a Kantian Transcendental Idealism, arguing that “the concept is the object grasped, the intelligible object. Already by action, we maintain a living relationship with the object, we conceive it, we grasp it” (“Reality and Its Shadows” 5). However, he maintains that it is

exactly this “relationship” that is “neutralized” in the artistic image. An “aesthetic existence” then engulfs the representational object that “marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity. (...) An image is [therefore] musical” (“Reality and Its Shadows” 3). In Sharpe’s words, the functionality of art is to “put us in touch with the level of ‘reality’ before the phenomenological world”; a world that leads the subject to an aesthetic enjoyment so that “even the most utilitarian of tools and tasks release their elemental essence.” Therefore, a “doubling” or “resemblance” of reality substitutes the reality itself. “In Levinas’s more dialectical thought, the aesthetic image, in its materiality, shows up how reality itself is always already doubled within itself between itself and its own image or shadow” (Sharpe 36).

What we have learned so far is that the aesthetic experience in Levinas is, in many ways, parallel to his theory of ethical engagement with the Other. In the former, the incomprehensibility of the *aesthesis* leads to an aesthetic experience, whereas in the latter, the irreducibility of the infinite non-I leads to the epiphany of the face. They both lead to similar forms of radical passivity that make the act of bond-breaking with the exteriority impossible for the subject. Interestingly, in a recent study, Stephanie Belmer analogizes “the Levinasian ethical dimension to Adornian aesthetic experience”⁸ (30). In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno introduces his concept of “shudder” in this way:

Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image. What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder’s own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the

⁸ In her article, Belmer does not touch upon Levinas’s aesthetics which is perhaps due to her unfamiliarity with the topic.

reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. *Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness.*⁹ That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins *eros*¹⁰ and knowledge” (Adorno 331).

“Shudder” in Adorno’s aesthetic theory evinces a sort of inescapable erotic intimacy between the subject and the aesthetic element. There is a passage in “Reality and Its Shadows” that reveals the similarities between Adorno’s idea of “shudder” and Levinas’s elaboration of the aesthetic experience: “But they [the musicalities] impose themselves on us without our assuming them. Or rather, our consenting to them is inverted into a participation. Their entry into us is one with our entry into them. Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it” (“Reality and Its Shadows” 4). Therefore, the rhythmic quality of existence in Levinas takes the form of an Adornoian *constant* “shudder,” where the ego is engaged in the process of give and take with the sensation or the aesthetic element. As a result, “instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in the sensation itself, and it is this wandering about in sensation, in aisthesis, that produces the aesthetic effect” (*Existence and Existents* 47). And in this reciprocal process, the subject is feeding an illusory mental (transcendental) image with the expectancy or receiving “shudder” or aesthetic pleasure.

⁹ My emphasis.

¹⁰ My emphasis.

As discussed above, since, for Levinas, ethics is prioritized over aesthetics — and his mode of thought also follows an ethical form of utilitarianism — the philosopher evidently denounces the aesthetic approach toward the world by comparing it to the act of “feasting during a plague.” As Marcelle puts it, “the danger [for Levinas] is double — there is the possibility of the loss of one’s self and subjectivity in the ecstasy of enjoyment, on the one hand, and the danger of irresponsibility, on the other” (184). Therefore, Levinas shows a quasi-Platonic disparaging attitude toward aesthetic enjoyment at the end of “Reality and Its Shadows”:

Here we rejoin the most common and ordinary experience of aesthetic enjoyment. ... To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace - such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. ... evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak. It is as though ridicule killed, as though everything really can end in songs. We find an appeasement when, beyond the invitations to comprehend and act, we throw ourselves into the rhythm of a reality ... The world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. (Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadows,” 12)

Even though Levinas seems hesitant to grant the face to anything but a helpless stranger, he concludes his paper “Is Ontology Fundamental” with yet another rhetorical question that he is not willing to certify: “We wonder whether rhythm’s personal gait — fascinating, magic — is not art’s substitute for sociality, the face, and speech” (Levinas “Is Ontology Fundamental,” 10). As Hofmeyr asserts: “Levinas seems to confirm in no uncertain terms

our suspicion that an image might be invested with the power to induce radical passivity — the very impact of the face” (5). Jill Robbins also postulates that “there is such a similarity between the subject’s exteriority to itself in the mode of aesthetic absorption, and the exteriority of the face of the other which speaks infinity, and which commands me” (77).

Levinas’s phenomenological investigations follow the tradition of his predecessors, where a human being is considered an agent or a subject that constantly engages in practical and rational sense-making processes with the objects of his environs. Levinas’s theory of ethics is based on the premise that since the face of a strange needy human is a powerful cryptic presence, it resists interpretation, and as a result, it breaks the subject’s chain of practicality and intentionality that ends in an ethical bond between the subject and the needy stranger. Interestingly, as discussed above, aesthetics is also considered by Levinas as a chain-breaker of everyday’s intentionality because the ego is engaged with an inscrutable sensation that also resists assimilation. Lost in the aesthetic element, the subject remains remote from the world of meaning, giving in to a sensuous pleasurable “shadow” of the reality that derails the subject from reason and practicality; when “the circuit of intentionality is broken and our gaze becomes lost in the aesthetic element” (Marcelle 183). Therefore, reality surpasses itself, and our practical interest in things becomes disinterested. In the following chapters, I discuss the protagonists’ disinterested (passive) attitude in this light, where the subjects renounce the material world to safeguard the illusory aesthetic mental images.

Chapter Three

The Ambassadors: The Author's Quest for Recognition

He found on the spot the image of his recent history;
he was like one of the figures of the old clock at Berne.
They came out, on one side, at their hour, jiggled their
little course in the public eye, and went in on the other side.
He too had jiggled his little course—him too a modest retreat awaited.
(*The Ambassadors* XXXXVI)

A glance at the table of contents of *The Notebooks of Henry James* offers an interesting insight into James's oeuvre. While the contents of *The Notebooks* are divided into twelve chapters,¹ only one finished novel of James is mentioned by name on the content page; that novel is *The Ambassadors*. A considerable portion — almost fifty pages — of *The Notebooks* is allocated to the “project for *The Ambassadors*,” which alone signifies the work's importance to its creator. James wrote the novel in praise of life and “living,” with the “shining” theme of *carpe diem* as its core message. The “germ” of the story originates from an anecdote that Jonathan Sturges² — a young, ambitious writer and a friend — told James in 1895. The anecdote recounts the epiphany of a middle-aged bachelor who, after his first sojourn in Paris, realizes what he has “missed” in life, advising his young companion to seize the day before it's “too late” (Bennett 14). James reflects on this epiphanic moment in *The Notebooks*:

¹ It includes his non-fiction writings from 1888 to 1911.

² Sturges is believed to be the inspirational source for the creation of the character of Little Bilham in *The Ambassadors*.

Well, this is what the whole thing, as with a slow rush the sense of it came, made him say:—‘Oh, *you’re* young, you’re blessedly young—be glad of it; be glad of it and *live*. Live all you can: it’s mistake not too. It doesn’t so much matter what you do—but live. This place and these impressions, as well as many of those, for so many days, of So-and-So’s and So-and-So’s life, that I’ve been receiving and that have had their abundant message, make it all come over me. I see it now. I haven’t done so enough before—and now I’m old; I’m, at any rate, too old for what I see. Oh, I *do* see, at least—I see a lot. It’s too late. It has gone past me. I’ve lost it. It couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me—for one’s life takes a form and holds one: one lives as one can. But the point is that *you* have time. That’s the great thing. You’re, as I say, damn you, so luckily, so happily, so hatefully young. Don’t be stupid. Of course I don’t dream you *are*, or I shouldn’t be saying these awful things to you. Don’t, at any rate, make *my* mistake. Live! (James, *The Notebooks* 374)

James even integrates Sturges’s anecdote into an important episode of the novel. In Book Fifth, Chapter II of *The Ambassadors*, when Strether attends an afternoon party at the house of the great sculptor Gloriani, he advises Little Bilham — a starving artist and a close friend of Chad Newsome — to make most of “the affair of life,” otherwise he would end up being someone like Strether himself, a person full of regrets about the wasted chances of the past. However, James’s novel seems to *suffer* from an unresolvable thematic dilemma due to the fact that the knowledge, experience, and realization — or whatever one may call it — that are gained by the protagonist in the course of the narrative do not seem to entice Strether to come to a pragmatic decision. Instead, James’s fifty-five-year-old wayward hero abandons the practical sense of his life altogether by gradually spoiling the established relationship with his well-off fiancée Mrs. Newsome as well as rejecting the proposal of having an affair

with his expatriate *ficelle*, Maria Gostery. Assuming that the overriding thematic concern of *The Ambassadors* is about living life to the fullest, Strether's intense renunciation then seems quite contrary to the original idea of the novel. In this regard, do we have to consider the protagonist's extreme renunciation a fictional fallacy? If not, what does "life" or "living" mean to Strether?

Placing *The Ambassadors* in James's Oeuvre

Aside from the fact that the author regards the novel as his best work, *The Ambassadors* has interesting inherent qualities that make the novel an ultimate representation of James's artistic preoccupations. For example, *The Ambassadors* deftly incorporates some elements and themes from James's early and middle periods. Besides "A Tragedy of Error," — which I already mentioned in the previous chapter — James's 1903 novel strongly resembles his first major novel *Roderick Hudson* (1875); *Roderick* deals with a law student in Northampton, Massachusetts, who abandons academia and travels to Europe to pursue sculpting, his artistic ambition. Indulging himself excessively in the world of art and aestheticism, Roderick, the title character, is eventually driven to madness and dies in the heart of Europe on the road to Interlaken, Switzerland. In *The Ambassadors*, James deliberately hints at *Roderick Hudson* by resurrecting Gloriani — an esteemed sculptor and a minor character that first appeared in *Roderick Hudson* — after 28 years. Gloriani, who "serves as a link between the artistic and social worlds" (Hopkins 65), is a character that Strether envies because he knows that he never had and never will experience a life similar to the life of the sculptor.

Name-wise, there is also a similarity between Nora Lambert, the heroine of *Watch and Ward* (1871), and Lambert Strether. Like *The Ambassadors*, *Watch and Ward* recounts

the protagonist's intellectual development and maturation process. Nora is an orphan who, similar to Strether, is engaged to her benefactor, Roger Lawrence. Aside from self-references to the earlier period, *The Ambassadors*, on the thematic level, touches upon James's international theme of the New World versus the Old; a theme that, for the first time, was best manifested in *The American* (1877), where Christopher Newman, a successful American businessman, visits Europe on a Grand Tour in pursuit of finding a prospective wife. Also, the confrontation of the *naive* moneyed American and the sophisticatedly cultured, yet decadent, Old Europe is a theme that is well-ripened in *Daisy Miller* (1878). Furthermore, even though *The Ambassadors* may not be traditionally viewed as a work of James that predominantly deals with the topic of "women," the novel is intensely preoccupied with Madame Marie de Vionnet's predicament — a thirty-eight-year-old married countess whose disreputable family ties gave her a craving for public respect and social acceptance. When Strether realizes that Maria Gostery and Madame de Vionnet were best friends in their school years in Geneva, the Woollett's ambassador enquires why the confidante did not apprise him of her friendship with Marie. Miss Gostrey informs Strether about Mme. de Vionnet's marital complications; however, the ficelle reassures Strether that Mme. de Vionnet has remained so inordinately "amiable" in social circles "that nobody ha[s] had a word to say" (191). "Full of dark personal motive," Marie's mother betrothed her daughter to the "brute" Comte de Vionnet. Due to the count's secured financial status, Marie's divorce was considered "impious and vulgar," and Mme. de Vionnet, who has a daughter approaching the age of marriage, is compelled to remain in a loveless marriage, living separately from the count. In this regard, Marie de Vionnet belongs to the Jamesian category of modern women — like Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Verena Tarrant of *The Bostonians* (1886), Kate Croy of *The Wings of the Dove*, and Charlotte Stant of *The Golden Bowl* — who is stuck in the never-ending triangular dilemma

of money, love, and morality. She is a woman whose passionless marriage drives her into a liaison with a much younger perverted man.

With *The Ambassadors*, James returns to his chief “melodramatic” concern, which is the *scenic* consistency of a recognition plot proper. An artistic preoccupation that, more or less, started to show itself in his major works in the 1880s with *Washington Square* (1880), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and then reappeared in his later phase with the works like *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). However, the major difference between *The Ambassadors* and the rest of the works is the fact that *The Ambassadors* is narrated from a third-person limited point of view with an unchanging focalizer. Selecting such a non-shifting POV allowed James to foreground the epistemological issues of the plot while underscoring Strether’s struggle to apprehend the truth. In the novel’s preface, James points out that his prime artistic purpose for writing the book was to “demonstrate” the process of “vision.”

The word “vision” here not only indicates the individual’s cognitive understanding of his surroundings but, at the same time, it implies the process of arriving at a sort of self-understanding as well; James writes: “The answer to which is that he now at all events *sees*; so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision” (“The Ambassadors” 308). Even though the concept of “seeing” always remains a central thematic concern in James, the italicized *seeing* — that James often uses in the prefaces to his later works — has a grander significance in that it entails not only knowledge but also self-understanding. In other words, *The Ambassadors* is James’s last major attempt to *rectify* what he missed to portray earlier in his career regarding the thematic preoccupation with “seeing” and “knowing.” In fact, in its fundamental aspects, *The Ambassadors* is not the most avant-garde

of all James's productions. The *innocent* personage (hero) that James utilizes in *The Ambassadors* is reminiscent of the artistic practice that the author undertook a few years earlier; in *What Maisie Knew* (1897), James divulges a squalid world of licentiousness and adultery in front of the innocent eyes of a six-year-old girl and asks the reader what does Maisie understand from all the masquerade of promiscuity that is going on around her? The author's answer is: "*rien!*" Therefore, regarding the epistemological aspect in the earlier novels of Henry James, seeing does not necessarily equal knowing. Thus, *The Ambassadors* stands out as a unique "production" in the author's large oeuvre, and this singularity emanates from the fact that the novel is a resultant of two of James's lifelong artistic ambitions. The first is the mind's cognitive process; those intermediary moments between seeing a phenomenon and the mind's seizure of knowledge (knowing), even if the process leads to a faulty understanding. The second is the dramatic representation of the plot's central events, which James labels as the "scenic" medium. And the only way that James could tie these two aspects together — vision and scenic — is to configure the plot around one grand recognition scene. In the preface to *The Ambassadors*, James points out that all the elements of the narrative are employed in such a way as to be at the service of the grand dramatic recognition scene; in this way, the discovery scene has its maximum effect on the reader: "Nothing can exceed the closeness with which the whole fits again into its germ" (James, "The Ambassadors" 308). Also, in a letter to the Duchess of Sutherland³ that James wrote on December 23, 1903, the author encourages the seemingly reluctant reader to keep reading — even at a relatively slow pace — with the hope that the aesthetic "charm" of the novel would eventually show itself to the reader:

³ Lady Millicent Fanny St. Clair Erskine, who married to the fourth Duke of Sutherland, was an acquaintance of James and a literary enthusiast.

Take, meanwhile pray, *The Ambassadors* very easily and gently: read five pages a day – be even as deliberate as that – but *don't break the thread*. The thread is really stretched scientifically tight. Keep along with it step by step – and then the full charm will come out. I *want* the charm, you see, to come out for you – so convinced am I that it's there. (James, *Letters Vol IV* 302).

It can be inferred from James's advice that the interconnection between the elements of the narrative is devised in such a way that if the "thread" of the narrative is not broken for the reader, the "charm" of the work will eventually reveal itself; hence, the aesthetic fulfillment will be achieved. By the "charm" of the narrative, James refers to the maximum aesthetic and dramatic impact of the recognition scene that he placed near the end of the novel.

As discussed earlier, even though the story has a recognition plot proper, the recognition leads to passivity and inaction. This passivity phenomenon should be viewed in light of the overall "inversion" process that James concocts to draw a distinction between *The Ambassadors* and his earlier works. As Robert B. Pippin points out astutely:

The Ambassadors presents again such a triangular sketch, but, as if to confirm how self-consciously and seriously James takes such a structure, deliberately, almost painstakingly, inverts most of our expectations (expectations that his own fiction teaches us to have) about the heiress, fortune hunter, and deceiving friend. Now the young American heiress is an heir, Chad Newsome, and not at all a passive object. The friend is not a female but older and male, Lambert Strether. The presumed European fortune hunter is now a woman, Madame de Vionnet. The tyrannical father is now a tyrannical mother, Mrs. Newsome, and not onstage, but offstage. The complex, deliberate gender reversals are only the beginning. There are reversals and inversions everywhere. The presumed fortune hunter is not taking advantage of the

heir; the heir, in effect, is deceiving the “fortune hunter,” who genuinely and selflessly loves the heir (but not vice versa) (...). These inversions create a complex setting, to say the least, in which James raises both the questions of dependence, power, and freedom in modernity on the one hand and, (...) the question of the resolution (if any) within such a world of moral ambiguity and moral meaning in Strether’s initial and ultimate relation to Chad on the other. (Pippin 149-150)

As Pippin notes, James deliberately shatters the reader’s expectation by distancing the novel from the fictional norms that were in practice in the 19th century, and in doing so, he inverts or reverses not just the fictional aspects of his earlier works but the customary elements of the 19th-century fiction in general. However, the inversion in *The Ambassadors* does not happen only on the content level. Regarding the plot composition or its poetics, so to speak, *The Ambassadors* also goes through a fundamental structural change in the sense that its resolution does not conform to the pattern of a conventional recognition narrative; rather, when Strether realizes that he has been fooled by Chad and Mme de Vionnet, this recognition does not lead to a reversal of decision or action on the part of the protagonist. Instead, he insists on his earlier plan that Chad and Mme de Vionnet should get married. To investigate the protagonist’s radical passivity in the novel’s finale, we have to take a closer look at the novel’s plot to understand better why such passivity is so unorthodox.

Labeled as a comedy of manners, dark comedy, and even satire, *The Ambassadors* narrates the story of a middle-aged New Englander named Lambert Strether, who is dispatched to Europe to undertake a mission on behalf of his widowed and wealthy fiancée, Mrs. Newsome. The mission aims to convince Chad Newsome, his fiancée’s supposedly wayward son, to break ties with a much older Parisian married woman, Madame de Vionnet, who has been living separately from her husband for years. But why does Strether accept

becoming an ambassador of a business that is not his own? Strether is an editor of an intellectual magazine (*Woollett Review*). The magazine's financial survival heavily depends upon Mrs. Newsome's wealth. She promised to marry Strether if he succeeded in bringing her son home from Paris to help run the family business. Early in the story, James unveils the extreme importance of this mission to the reader. In particular, at the end of Book Second, Chapter I, when Maria Gostrey insists on knowing what is at stake if Strether fails to bring back Chad, the man's answer is quite dramatic and telling:

She kept him a moment, while his hand was on the door, by not answering; after which she answered by repeating her question. "What do you stand to lose?"

Why the question now affected him as other he couldn't have said; he could only this time meet it otherwise. "Everything." (*The Ambassadors* 64)

Strether arrives in Paris assuming that Madame de Vionnet is a degenerate European woman who seduces the American youth through her charms and stylish Parisian lifestyle. When Little Bilham, Chad's friend, tells Strether that the relationship between Chad and Mme de Vionnet is "a virtuous attachment" (150), and after the ambassador sees how the Parisian woman is refined and exquisite, he labels her as *femme de monde* who is supposedly sinless and innocent. There are three main reasons why Strether sees everything in black and white: The first is the undeveloped immature American naivete that is reminiscent of fictional prototypes like Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, who are unfamiliar with the complex aspects of the Old World. James describes Strether in *The Notebooks* as follows: "He is an American, of the present hour and of sufficiently typical New England origin [who] has always, in all relations and connections been ridden by his 'New England conscience'" (*The Notebooks* 374-375). The second reason is that Strether's logic in judging others is based on categorization and "types." For example, in Book Four, Chapter I, Strether is really

confused to see that his first assumption about Chad being a “pagan” does not accord with his later impression about the young man being a refined gentleman:

The devil of the case was that Strether felt it, by the same stroke, as falling straight upon himself. He had been wondering a minute ago if the boy weren't a Pagan, and he found himself wondering now if he weren't by chance a gentleman. It didn't in the least, on the spot, spring up helpfully for him that a person couldn't at the same time be both. There was nothing at this moment in the air to challenge the combination; there was everything to give it on the contrary something of a flourish. It struck Strether into the bargain as doing something to meet the most difficult of the questions; though perhaps indeed only by substituting another. (134)

This categorical way of thinking impairs Strether's perception of the truth, and even though there are early indicators that the relationship might not be “virtuous,” Strether's mind makes an extraordinary platonic love bond out of an ordinary bodily relationship — in other words, making idols out of the ordinary results in the classic tale of the error of judgment. As Sarah Churchwell points out: “From one perspective the whole plot is driven by a category error” (Xix). However, Strether's ignorance does not only emanate from naivete and a categorical way of thinking. There is also a third reason that I want to foreground here, and that is the aestheticization of Mme de Vionnet and Paris. Interestingly, in *The Notebooks*, James points out that new dimensions enter Strether's life after he gets acquainted with Mme de Vionnet:

And yet it's not in the least that he has fallen in love with her, or is at least likely to do so. Her charm is independent of that for him, and gratifies some more distinctively disinterested aesthetic, intellectual, social, even, so to speak, historic

sense in him, which has never yet been à pareille fête, never found itself so called to the front. (392)

Strether associates Mme de Vionnet with a transcendental aesthetic quality; thereby, she attains an existence as an ideal romantic figure in his imaginative mind. Seeing the novel from such a standpoint has an interesting, revealing effect; for example, Strether's last remarks to Mme de Vionnet at the closure of the book prove to be highly significant. In Book Twelve, Ch. II of *The Ambassadors*, Strether pays a last visit to Mme de Vionnet's house. Shamefaced and distressed, the woman tries to rehabilitate the demolished bond of trust between herself and Strether:

“What's cheerful for me,” she replied, “is that we might, you and I, have been friends. That's it—that's it. You see how, as I say, I want everything. I've wanted you too.”

“Ah but you've had me!” he declared, at the door, with an emphasis that made an end. (487)

Here, Strether's last utterance has a double meaning: On one hand, it can be seen as a quip or sarcasm, which implies the fact that Mme de Vionnet had succeeded in fooling Strether for so long; on the other hand, it can indicate the imaginary existence of Mme de Vionnet in Strether's mind — An imaginary presence that Strether's ego interacted with and is based on an illusory mental image that he himself created. The question is, from when and where does this imaginary presence take shape in Strether's mind, and why? In the following, I will apply Levinas's theory of aesthetics to the novel and discuss why the grand recognition scene does not end in a grand finale.

Elementarism and the Water of Consciousness

James's works have attracted the attention of many critics and literary scholars. Perhaps the most superficial explanation for the tremendous amount of critical attention that James received would be his prolificacy and the five decade span of his literary career. Another reason would be the gradual emergence of writer-authors in the nineteenth century — like Balzac, Eliot, and Hardy — who had not only revolutionary ideas and a fixed theoretical understanding of thematic elements and narratorial approaches but also had a strong critical sense of their own works and their peers. James, in his early and middle years, belongs to the elite circle of Realists and Scientific Naturalists, who predominantly claim that the novel is the most authentic art form in regard to real life, and oftentimes, more real than the reality itself.⁴ In this respect, it is apparent that a large body of criticism on James has been shifted towards comparative works between James and his contemporary literary figures; David Gervais's *Flaubert and Henry James* (1978), Richard Freadman's *Eliot, James and the Fictional Self* (1986), Michael Anesko's *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells* (1997), Rob Davidson's *The Master and the Dean: The Literary Criticism of Henry James and William Dean Howells* (2005), and Angus Wrenn's *Henry James and the Second Empire* (2009) — which discusses the influence of French nineteenth-century novelists like Balzac and Feuillet on James's outlook on fiction — are some of the notable comparative criticism on James.

The third reason for the abundance of critical books on James is the booming growth of academic institutions in the twentieth century. The predominant critical approach to James, up until the 1970s, was the mixture of the traditional hermeneutical methods with

⁴ The seminal article, "The Art of Fiction" (1884), and the short story, "The Real Thing" (1892) are written in the light of James's advocacy of "fiction" as the most authentic medium that captures the reality *vis-à-vis* photography.

the biographical aspects of the author's life.⁵ However, the fact that James, in his later years, distanced himself from the mainstream literary movements of the late nineteenth century and became a rather experimentalist or avant-garde writer is the key reason for the critical interdisciplinary attention that he has received. With the beginning of the 1980s, a new wave of criticism on James emerged, claiming that James's outlook — in his last phase — on fiction and narration is predominantly philosophical and, in particular, phenomenological. Paul B. Armstrong's *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (1983), John Carlos Rowe's *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (1984), Judith Ryan's *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (1991), and Merle A. Williams' *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing* (1993) are some of the works that tackled James's fiction through the scope of phenomenological hermeneutics, literary Impressionism, and psychoanalytic empiricism. There is a consensus among all these critical debates that James's fictional style, in his latter period, shifts toward what Judith Ryan calls "elementaristic presentation," a technique that tries to capture the essence of human sensations and prioritize the importance of human impressions over narrating the incidents of the plot. As Ryan writes: "[James] began to develop a style in which subjectivity is dissolved and 'world' and 'self' are reduced to a loosely associated bundle of elements — a style in which things and sensations have equal valency within the entire complex" (Ryan 858). By the "bundle of elements," Ryan means a series of sense-impressions that continuously supersede each other and make a pool of impressions as a whole or a gestalt

⁵ Several books were introduced to the market under the influence of such an academic mindset: Rebecca West's *Henry James: A Critical Biography* (1916), Joseph Warren Beach's *The Method of Henry James* (1918), F. W. Dupee's *Henry James* (1951), Michael Swan's *Henry James* (1953), Leon Edel's *Henry James* (1960), D. W. Jefferson's *Henry James* (1960), Bruce R. McElderry's *Henry James* (1965), S. Gorley Putt's *Henry James: A Reader's Guide* (1966), Robert L. Gale's *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Henry James* (1972), and Harry T. Moore's *Henry James* (1974).

mental image. To better understand what Ryan means by elementarism, we can also consult Susan M. Griffin's *The Historical Eye*.

In her insightful work, *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James*, Susan M. Griffin draws on William James's idea of the "water of consciousness." Griffin posits that in his late works, Henry's style emulates his brother's theory of the liquidity of consciousness. The "water of consciousness" notion implies that human consciousness is not a place for a series of continuous, distinct ideas; rather, it is considered a pond that each impression is like a droplet that falls into it:

[William] explicitly disagrees with Alexander Bain's associationist insistence that "the stream of thought is not a continuous current, but a series of distinct ideas." Instead, [William] James calls for "the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life." And he argues that not only are most of our thoughts vague "*feelings of tendency*," but even the resting places, the nouns, are continuous with the surrounding "water of consciousness. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead." Strether's first viewing of Maria Gostrey's apartment illustrates this liquid continuity of the perceptual stream: "It was the innermost nook of the shrine—as brown as the pirate's cave. In the brownness were glints of gold; patches of purple were in the gloom; objects all that caught, through the muslin, with their high rarity, the light of the low windows. Nothing was clear about them but that they were precious." What he sees is a continuous whole. There are resting-places (the glints, the patches, the objects), but they are immersed in their surroundings (in the brownness, the gloom, the light). Rather than a series of discrete ideas, one replacing

another, William James describes a changing flow in which perceptions “melt” into one another “like dissolving views.” Gazing at the crowded scene in Gloriani’s garden, Strether finds that “he had just made out, in the now full picture, something and somebody else; another impression had been superimposed.” There is no break.

Idea does not succeed idea, but impression flows over impression. (Griffin 36)

Griffin argues that James’s style — especially in his late works — is influenced by his brother’s psychological phenomenology and the artistic movement of Impressionism, which was in vogue in the second half of the 19th century. For example, in impressionistic paintings, colors and objects often melt into one another using techniques like cross-hatching, stippling, and dry brushing; therefore, the emphasis is taken away from objects and *things* and is placed instead on light, color, and the overall impression. Similar to Impressionism, the “water of consciousness” concept considers the non-stop flow of impressions as a substitute for the sequential consciousness of discrete facts or ideas; therefore, it is the sensuous impressions that flow on top of each other while the mind is feebly trying to catch up with each input (impression) that the ego perceives. In this mode, the function of the mind is similar to a *viseur* which captures each perceptive instance that comes along its way, and the task of the author or the artist is to select or find the most sensitive *viseur* through which the incidents of the material world (the surroundings) are captured. In this regard, Lambert Strether can be regarded as the most sensitive and imaginative of all of James’s characters. In Book Third of *The Ambassadors*, James hints at how Strether’s ego tries to grab every minute impression that comes along its way while standing in a street of Paris: “He had known nothing and nobody as he stood in the street; but hadn’t his view now taken a bound in the direction of every one and of every thing?” (95) This high power of sensitivity is also noted by two of James’s well-known

commentators; while R. P. Blackmur considers Strether as “a realist with too much imagination” (216), David McWhirter postulates that the high perceptive power of Strether resembles the high level of sensibility of its creator:

At the beginning of *A Small Boy and Others*, Henry James announces the simple yet extraordinary basis upon which he intends to confront the task of autobiography: “I think,” he writes, “I shall be ashamed, as of a cold impiety, to find any element altogether negligible.” In the *modus operandi* proposed here, as in so many other respects, James closely resembles that most autobiographical of all his characters, Lambert Strether. Strether, like his creator, is one of those for whom no facet of experience is without import: what James once said of himself in *Notes of a Son and Brother* – that he possessed “an imagination to which literally everything obligingly signified” – is perhaps even more fundamentally true of Strether. Strether responds with the same mysterious urgency and intensity to even the most superficial and evanescent phenomena. As a man of “monstrous” imagination, he is unwilling or unable to discount any sensation or perception, no matter how slight (McWhirter 13).

Therefore, in *The Ambassadors*, James tries to narrate the incidents of the novel through the lens of a character whose most distinctive attribute is the high level of sensitivity towards the affairs of his surrounding. Also, since all of these impressions drop into the pool of consciousness, they make a unified gestalt of impression, forming the individual’s (aesthetic) experience as a whole. In other words, a mental image (gestalt) is created due to the consecutive perceptive instances (impressions) that supersede one another and fall like droplets into the pond of consciousness. Each droplet or impression then sinks and dissolves into the pond of consciousness. Therefore, the mental gestalt or the pool of consciousness

becomes a reservoir for the inconcrete, vague impressions accumulated over time and form the aesthetic experience as a whole. These ambiguous sensations are very close to Levinas's theory of aesthetics; they are formless sensations that capture the ego's intentionality and override the actualities of life. In the following, we can see how the aestheticization of Chad and Mme de Vionnet and the canonization of their relationship are the reasons for Strether's blindness to the fact that the couple's relationship was not platonic.

Error and Blindness: A Man of "Types" and the Mental Gestalt of Impressions

When Strether arrives in Paris, he is sent on a wild-goose chase by Little Bilham and Mme de Vionnet, who both suggest that Chad is in love with Jeanne. However, once the protagonist realizes that Chad is in love with the mother, he still insists on maintaining the status quo based on the assumption that the relationship is "virtuous." Strether's persistence in safeguarding Chad and Mme de Vionnet's relationship edges the novel towards becoming a farcical stage show. It is plain that Strether does not want his mission to end. Even when Chad is ready to break ties with Mme de Vionnet, Strether asks him to postpone his decision because this means prolonging the protagonist's residence permit on European soil. There are two main reasons for Strether's blindness or error of judgment and his insistence on maintaining the status quo.

It is Strether's New England Puritan blood that views everything in black and white. In one of the first *tête-à-têtes* that the New Englander has with Maria Gostrey, the author unveils how Strether sees himself as a fitting appointee for the mission because he is a savvy veteran in distinguishing different types of people: "He viewed his job it was 'types' he should have to tackle" (*The Ambassadors* 47). When Maria suggests that Chad's mistress might be "charming," Strether promptly responds that the woman is "base, venal—out of

the streets” (*The Ambassadors* 48). At such an early point in the novel, Strether has not seen Mme de Vionnet, and there is no evidence that the woman is vile; however, Strether’s Puritan conscience tends to create clear-cut binaries, and this fact makes him prone to get blindsided and backstabbed by his *fidus Achates*; for example, Strether fails to notice Waymarsh’s movements behind his back. It is Waymarsh who works as a double agent, reporting to the POCOcks about Strether’s every move in Paris, and it is Little Bilham who tries to derail Strether from finding out the truth. Strether’s pre-judgment about the devilish nature of Mme de Vionnet has its root, again, in the *clichéd* binary of the new, innocent American versus the old immoral Europe. However, the beauty of James’s craft is that he implicitly informs the reader that Chad is a descendant of a long lineage of swindlers; in fact, the young man’s father and grandfather are considered the infamous people of Woollett who gained their wealth through illicit means. Assuming that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, the reader can foresee that Chad has ended up becoming a charlatan like his father. Nevertheless, Strether fails to bring this fact into his calculations.

Still, there is also no reason for the sanctification of Mme de Vionnet and her relationship with Chad. Once Strether sees the young man’s refined mannerisms, he completely disregards the fact that this polished façade could be part of the lovers’ masquerade. Instead, Strether deems the relationship as something holy and does his best to protect it. My emphasis is that Strether aestheticizes Mme de Vionnet in the sense that, to him, she is elevated to the rank of a saint. Still, this aestheticization process is part of a larger revolution that occurs inside Strether.

In his first “rendezvous” with Maria Gostrey in the garden of the Hotel in Chester, an unidentifiable “element” enters Strether’s consciousness. On his way to meet Maria, Strether feels a new yet undefinable sensation overcoming him: “Nothing could have been

odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then" (*The Ambassadors* 10). Whatever this new sensation is, its immediate impact is to cut the cord between Strether and Woollett. It nourishes a sense of disengagement from the protagonist's sense of duty as the representative of Woollett by opening up new dimensions of enjoyment and escape.

James several times refers to the sense of escape surrounding Strether's consciousness amid the raptures of his impressions. For instance, in one of his morning strolls in Paris, the sight of the city impregnates his imaginative mind to the extent that the "cup of his impressions" overflows, and subsequently, he feels that "the air had a taste as of something mixed with art" (67-68). But what is interesting is the aftermath of the arousal of this "historic" or "escapist" sense and the effect that it has on the consciousness of the character. Afterward, when Strether tries to read Mrs. Newsome's letters in the loneliness of his apartment, he finds it most difficult to gather his thoughts because he finds himself so distant from everything Woollett due to this new escapist sensation that overcame him hours ago:

He read the letters successively and slowly, putting others back into his pocket but keeping [Mrs. Newsome's] for a long time afterwards gathered in his lap. He held them there, lost in thought, as if to prolong the presence of what they gave him; or as if at the least to assure them their part in the constitution of some lucidity. Her friend [Mrs. Newsome] wrote admirably, and her tone was even more in her style than in her voice—he might almost, for the hour, have had to come this distance to get its full carrying quality; yet the plentitude of his consciousness of difference consorted perfectly with the deepened intensity of the connexion. It was the

difference, *the difference of being*⁶ just where he was and as he was, that formed the escape—this difference was so much greater than he had dreamed it would be; and what he finally sat there turning over was the strange logic of his finding himself so free. (69)

Suppose we take into account Levinas's argument on the power of aesthetics and the derailing effect that it can have on the individual. In that case, this aesthetic enjoyment always provides a temporary escape route for the protagonist. In each of these fleeting episodes, Strether feels a form of freedom, a freedom that pushes back his ambassadorial duties to the background of his consciousness. The aestheticization of Mme de Vionnet as an ideal romantic figure interweaves with the piquant existence that Strether experiences in Paris. Strether does not view the Parisian woman as an ordinary human being; rather, he conceptualizes her as a romantic idol. There are several instances in the novel where Mme de Vionnet evokes this aesthetic sense in the protagonist. For example, in Book Seven, Ch. I, Strether, fortuitously run into Mme de Vionnet in the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame*. The woman is sitting alone; she is in a meditative state as if she were praying. Looking at the woman from a distance, Strether is so impressed by Mme de Vionnet's "graceful" posture that he immediately compares her figure to the statues of the holy saints in the cathedral. She becomes so statuesque for him as if she were a romantic heroine who jumped out of an old book of a sentimental love story: "She was romantic for him far beyond what she could have guessed" (248). Labeling this romantic heroine as *femme du monde*, Strether's psyche inadvertently creates a binary between Mme de Vionnet and Mrs. Newsome: "She was a woman who, between courses, could be graceful with her elbows on the table. It was a posture unknown to Mrs. Newsome, but it was easy for a *femme du monde*" (254). This

⁶ My emphasis.

aesthetic, “historic,” and ancient sense is aroused in Strether every time he meets Mme de Vionnet. For him, she becomes a “goddess,” a “nymph,” or “Cleopatra in the play.” (226-227). To emphasize the binary between the restrictive Woollett and the aesthetic Paris, James makes an interesting allusion to Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607). Strether is compared to Mark Antony, one of the triumvirs of the Roman Republic, who gets lost in the love of Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt and a temptress, and subsequently ignores his wife in Rome as well as Rome’s domestic problems. In the words of U. C. Knoepfelmacher, who reads James’s protagonist in light of the Shakespearean predecessor, “Strether hovers between two hostile worlds, a world of strict codes and observances and a world of amorality and laxity” (335). Knoepfelmacher’s assertion is true to a great extent because James himself identifies his protagonist’s biggest problem as a “failure to enjoy” at the beginning of the novel (18). However, similar to the Roman general, the exposure to this aesthetic world proves to be semi-fatal for the Jamesian protagonist.

Therefore, Strether’s sense of reason is lulled by the exposure to the aesthetic world of Paris. He does whatever he can to maintain this inward drama whose romantic heroine is the Parisian countess: “At the back of his head, behind everything, was the sense that she was—there, before him, close to him, in vivid imperative form—one of the rare women he had so often heard of, read of, thought of, but never met” (*The Ambassadors* 210). Paris — and France, in general — becomes the central stage for this sensuous mental drama. As Tessa Hadley posits: “France is invoked in James’s *oeuvre*, in his cultural mapping, to stand for the sensual and the beautiful, for pleasure” (89). This inward drama is heightened when Strether walks around the city; there are moments when the consciousness is most sensitive toward its surroundings, and it captures the subtle nuances of the incoming impressions. In such *elementaristic* episodes, Paris is represented as the stage of this inward drama, and

James often mentions words such as “dramatic” and “play” to emphasize the imaginative theater that is going on in Strether’s mind:

It was the evening hour, but daylight was long now and Paris more than ever penetrating. The scent of flowers was in the streets, he had the whiff of violets perpetually in his nose; and he had attached himself to sounds and suggestions, vibrations of the air, human and dramatic, he imagined, as they were not in other places, that came out for him more and more as the mild afternoons deepened—a far-off hum, a sharp near click on the asphalt, a voice calling, replying, somewhere and as full of tone as an actor’s in a play. (260)

Therefore, Strether — who at the beginning of the novel claimed that the goal of his mission is to “protect” Chad “from life” (61) — reverses his initial decision and tries the best he can by “making up late” for what he “didn’t have early” (282-283). Strether becomes the director of his mental romantic drama with the sole purpose of uniting the platonic lovers. Joan Bennett is among the critics who see one of the main “conflicts” presented in the novel between the “morality of self-denial and of self-fulfillment.” Bennett writes:

Hitherto Strether has believed that the good life is one in which the sense are never indulged: his inherited puritan code of self-denial inculcates regular attendance to business (that is to say money-making), scant leisure, restrained appetites. All this is challenged as he discerns the value of discriminated sense-pleasures of eye, ear, and palate. He perceives values he has hitherto ignored as he observes the beauty of Mme de Vionnet’s dress or her room. He becomes aware of visual beauty as he looks at Paris or her environs; he becomes aware of social values in civilized conversation, and the aesthetic values in music, literature, architecture, pictures. (16)

However, in the end, when Strether realizes that the world of “visual beauty” is also deceptive and lie-infested, his metamorphosis is so substantial that he rejects reverting to his former state, which was Mrs. Newsome’s puppet. In a symbolic move, the Jamesian hero “shrinks” from his duties and stays aloof from both of these seemingly contradictory worlds.

The Hero’s Shrinkage and Scenic Recognition

In Book Tenth, Ch. I, when Chad throws a lavish party to introduce the POCOcks to his Parisian friends, Miss Barrace reminds the protagonist of his duty to sort things out between Chad and Mrs. Newsome: “It all depends on you. I don’t want to turn the knife in your vitals, but that’s naturally what you just now meant by our all being on top of you. We know you as the hero of the drama, and we’re gathered to see what you’ll do.” Strether responds that “he’s scared at his heroism” and that “he shrinks from his part” (391). This remark from Strether indicates the passive attitude of James’s hero. Interestingly, James ties this passivity to the overall structure of the plot in the sense that even the grand recognition scene is not enough to infuse action into the hero. Here, James’s ingenuity and the originality of his plot structure emanate from the fact that even though the author employs a traditional narrative line for his recognition plot, he unexpectedly breaks away from the conventional norms of such plots by refraining from designing a customary closure for the narrative. What baffles the reader is the fact that, against her expectation, Strether’s extreme renunciation obscures the overall message (if there is any) of the story. H. J. Raleigh, one of the critics who tackles James’s oeuvre through a sociological perspective, postulates that the “passivity” in James does not have its roots in the author’s social or cultural background; Raleigh claims that it is a “trait” unique to James’s fiction as it is related to the author’s “vision of life”:

Many of these characteristics can be and have been accounted for by critics in sociological terms. For example, individualism and acquisitiveness are pre-eminently American traits and to point this out is to say that the novels of James reflect the culture into which he was born. But the passivity and the tenuous and ambiguous quality of experience are hardly accounted for by a comparison with nineteenth-century American society, and it is these two traits which so distinguish James' vision of life. (54)

Also, in a thought-provoking reading of the novel, Thomas R. Deans tackles the issue of Strether's passivity through a psychoanalytic perspective. Deans suggests that Strether's inadvertent "voyeuristic" look at Chad and Marie de Vionnet, sitting intimately on the boat, functions as a sort of "traumatic" primal scene⁷ for the protagonist's psyche, reactivating Strether's sense of "castration anxiety" (Deans 235). As a result, this "phobia" is the main reason for Strether's drastic social resignation. Nevertheless, renunciation should not be considered an unconscious response; I emphasize that it must be viewed as a decision consciously made.

After the nature of the relationship between Chad and Mme de Vionnet is revealed, Strether has a *tête-à-tête* with Miss Gostrey. Maria cannot fathom how Strether could have let himself be fooled by the lovers. Strether's response is quite telling in this episode:

"I had phases. I had flights."

"Yes, but things must have a basis."

"A basis seemed to me just what her beauty supplied."

"Her beauty of person?"

⁷ In Freud, "primal scene" is referred to the moment that the child sees or phantasizes coitus between his parents. According to Freud, this discovery induces both excitement and fear (castration anxiety) in the child.

“Well, her beauty of everything. The impression she makes. She has such variety and yet such harmony.” (496)

Strether admits that his reasoning was not based on evidence; rather, he established his reason on aesthetic impressions that he perceived from Mme de Vionnet’s character. Also, stating that he had “phases” or “flights” implies he was mentally experiencing some sort of ecstatic enjoyment that was caused by the “beauty” of the impressions. A little later, Strether regards this “mental experience” as phantasmagoric: “I moved among miracles. It was all phantasmagoric” (497). To show what happens to Strether during these “flights,” James chooses a unique and interesting word. While dictionary sources define phantasmagoria as “characterized by or pertaining to a dream-like blurring of real and imaginary elements” or “a shifting series of phantasms, illusions, or deceptive appearances, as in a dream or as created by the imagination,” James’s authorial intent is a reference to a technique that was in vogue in the Romantic period (“Phantasmagoria Definition & Meaning”). Phantasmagoria was a technique of representation in the horror theatre of the 18th and 19th centuries in that an operator used one or more magic lanterns to project frightening images such as skeletons, demons, and ghosts onto walls, smoke, or semi-transparent screens — typically using rear projection to keep the lantern out of sight. This technique of creating illusory images on the stage became popular in Europe primarily because of the surge of interest in the supernatural and uncanny elements. Simply put, in order to create phantasmagoric images, somebody was behind the curtain, operating the projector and directing the show to create an illusory image and distort reality for the sake of excitement. Interestingly, in *The Ambassadors*, Strether is both the projectionist and the spectator, and the illusory image that he projects makes him blindsided about the truth.

James situates the recognition scene near the ending phase of the narrative. Both Chapters III and IV of Book Eleven are the essential parts of the dynamic of the recognition

process; while the moment of revelation occurs in the latter, the former is equally important because the slow pace of the action in chapter III maximizes the shock element of the discovery scene in the subsequent chapter. When Strether takes a vacation in the rural areas outside Paris, the landscape strikes him to be similar to one of the paintings by Emile-Charles Lambinet. He had seen the painting by Lambinet a few years ago at an auction in Boston and could not afford to buy it. Strether feels to be in such “harmony” (451) with the rural scenery that he imagines himself to be “freely walking about” Lambinet’s painting. James’s choice of Lambinet is also worthy of attention (450). Lambinet belongs to the Barbizon school⁸ of painters, an artistic movement in its prime in the early and mid-19th century. The French artistic movement was mainly concerned with the realistic depiction of rustic elements, e.g., landscapes, nature, sheep, and shepherds — which were some of the dominant motifs of the Romantic movement. Therefore, again, James tries to emphasize Strether’s state of mind, which is the romantic aesthetic presence in the real world. In this episode, one can also find other allusions to Romanticism; in the middle of his excursion, James’s hero takes a break from walking and “conversed with rustics who struck him perhaps a little more as men of the world than he had expected” (454). Rustics and rustic life were often glorified in the Romantic period; specifically, rustic man and imagination were the two key components of William Wordsworth’s poetry. Strether eventually becomes tired and stops at an inn near a riverbank and orders a meal. James pauses the narrative to stress the inward drama that is happening in Strether’s mind:

He had walked many miles and didn’t know he was tired; but he still knew he was amused, and even that, though he had been alone all day, he had never yet so struck himself as engaged with others and in midstream of his drama (...) For this had been

⁸ An artistic movement in painting (1830-1870) that portrays the romantic elements such as nature, rural life, landscape in a realist fashion.

all day at bottom the spell of the picture—that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. (455)

By referring to the “scene” and “stage,” the author also draws attention to the *mise-en-scène* of the recognition scene that is about to occur: Strether is sitting on a bench that overlooks the river. The selection of the river for the recognition scene also has its significance because it touches upon the notion of “the water of consciousness” or the “liquidity of consciousness.” Strether suddenly notices a boat coming slowly toward the direction of the inn from the other side of the river. A young man and a woman are sitting in the boat. He cannot recognize their faces straight away; however, through a “vague” impression, he feels that the nature of the relationship between the couple must be “intimate.” It is the sort of “vague,” chilling impression that Isabel Archer feels when she encounters Osmond and Merle in conversation in the drawing room:

For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them—a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent—that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt. (458)

Mme de Vionnet and Chad also come to the inn to eat. The couple is flustered when they see Strether. The three dine together and get back to Paris afterward. Interestingly, James quickly ends the scene and does not offer many details about the food, the exchanges, and what happens among the characters during those hours; rather, the author decides to

discontinue the scene to focus on the recognition process. The next scene shows Strether sitting in the darkness of his room, reminiscing about his encounter with the couple in the countryside. Strether's mind cannot catch up with the large volume of impressions he received in the afternoon, and he needs time to process the occurrence of that day to find out the truth. However, finally, in the silence of his room, he is "at that point of vantage, in full possession, to make of it all what he could." Connecting the dots, he finally sees "that there had been simply a lie in the charming affair—a lie on which one could now, detached and deliberate, perfectly put one's finger":

It was with the lie that they had eaten and drunk and talked and laughed, that they had waited for their carriage rather impatiently, and had then got into the vehicle and, sensibly subsiding, driven their three or four miles through the darkening summer night. The eating and drinking, which had been a resource, had had the effect of having served its turn; the talk and laughter had done as much; and it was during their somewhat tedious progress to the station, during the waits there, the further delays, their submission to fatigue, their silences in the dim compartment of the much-stopping train, that he prepared himself for reflexions to come. It had been a performance, Madame de Vionnet's manner, and though it had to that degree faltered toward the end, as through her ceasing to believe in it, as if she had asked herself, or Chad had found a moment surreptitiously to ask her, what after all was the use, a performance it had none the less quite handsomely remained, with the final fact about it that it was on the whole easier to keep up than to abandon. (464)

Strether finally realizes that all this time, he was misled by the couple as he inadvertently became an actor in a show whose *chefregisseurin* was Mme de Vionnet, a social stage play that its other performers stayed in their characters until the last minutes. However,

discovering a lie is not the only outcome of Strether's late-night ruminations. A new notion infiltrates his mind and sits firmly and fixed at the center of his consciousness: "Back to the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed" (467). The acknowledgment of the physical aspect of the relationship makes him "blush, in the dark." Strether realizes that all this time, "he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll" (467). Again, here James refers to the aesthetic veneer that Strether imposed upon the relationship between the couple because young girls usually adorn their dolls in highly-embellished and aesthetically-pleasing manners.

As stated earlier, the aftermath of the recognition scene in *The Ambassadors* does not focus on learning the truth only; self-understanding is also of prime importance. Unlike his classic fictional counterparts, Strether undertakes a self-autopsy to understand that he himself was the one that consecrated the couple and *embellished* their relationship. As a result, the acknowledgment of the blindness does not lead to physical action or prompt decisions that reverse the circumstances of the narrative; rather, such recognition ends with the protagonist's introspection and self-analysis. The more Strether reflects upon the afternoon's incident, the less he concerns himself with his ambassadorial role or Mme de Vionnet's impiety. It is as if he looks inside himself and detects an unfilling void within; he starts to question his own condition: "There was the element of the awkward all round, but Chad and Madame de Vionnet had at least the comfort that they could talk it over together. With whom could he talk of such things?" (467)

The novel's closure does not evoke a sense of resolution in the reader. Strether disengages himself from both Woollett and Paris. At the bottom of Strether's experience lies a feeling of disappointment or disenchantment. Even though he is not an existential hero — and the novel is by no means an existential story — what he learns about his condition as

a human being is no less than an existential crisis. An existential truth that the hero can no longer function in this modern unfathomable universe. Therefore, he symbolically “shrinks” from his part and abandons the stage. Therefore, Strether’s extreme renunciation functions as a symbolic statement. The Jamesian hero ditches his social relations and worldly obligations in favor of an ideal inward living.

Chapter Four

The Theater of Deceit: Blindness and Recognition in *The Age of Innocence*

‘It *did* go off beautifully, didn’t it?’

May questioned from the threshold of the library.

(*The Age of Innocence*, Book Two, Chapter

XXXIII)

In the last chapter of *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Edith Wharton opens a window of possibility for Newland Archer, the now fifty-seven-year-old protagonist of the novel, to be reunited with Ellen Olenska, Archer’s lifelong inamorata, who was separated from him by fate’s hands twenty-six earlier. The complications that once seemed insoluble have gradually been resolved by themselves. Presently, both Archer’s and Ellen’s spouses are no longer alive, and it appears that time slowly bent the firm societal conventionalism that once seemed unshakable. The air of *fin de siècle* is much lighter than its preceding decades as the “new generation” appears to have become more liberal regarding tradition and social etiquette; it suffices to say that Dallas Archer, Newland’s eldest son, is soon about to marry Fanny Beaufort, the daughter of Julius Beaufort, the notorious banker who happened to be Newland’s love-rival in the 70s. However, these were all things of the past, and Wharton assures the reader that nothing at the moment can stop Ellen and Archer’s reunification in Paris:

A few streets away, a few hours away, Ellen Olenska waited. She had never gone back to her husband, and when he had died, some years before, she had made no change in her way of living. There was nothing now to keep her and Archer apart — and that afternoon he was to see her. (304-305)

Nevertheless, refusing to see Ellen, Newland ultimately, and rather unexpectedly, abnegates his life's "only one prize" (296); instead, he sits on "an empty bench under the trees" (307) in front of Ellen's apartment, instructing Dallas to apologize on his behalf by saying that his father is "old-fashioned" (308). Wharton also stresses Archer's feeling of antiquatedness a few pages earlier. On the first day that Newland arrives in Paris, he looks out of "his hotel window at the stately gaiety" of the city's streets and feels the throbbing of his heart that reminds him of "the confusion and eagerness" of his youth (301). However, he perceives himself as an unmatching figure for the grandeur of the view that he beholds:

Archer had pictured often enough, in the first impatient years, the scene of his return to Paris; then the personal vision had faded, and he had simply tried to see the city as the setting of Madame Olenska's life. Sitting alone at night in his library, after the household had gone to bed, he had evoked the radiant outbreak of spring down the avenues of horse-chestnuts, the flowers and statues in the public gardens, the whiff of lilacs from the flower-carts, the majestic roll of the river under the great bridges, and the life of art and study and pleasure that filled each mighty artery to bursting. Now the spectacle was before him in its glory, and as he looked out on it he felt shy, old-fashioned, inadequate: a mere grey speck of a man compared with the ruthless magnificent fellow he had dreamed of being. (302)

Here, Newland's "shyness" roots in the form of double consciousness or a double conception that the character has of himself. The first consciousness considers Newland to

be a “philanthropic,” “good citizen” (295) of Old New York, which is referred to by Dallas Archer to be a “prehistoric” (303) mindset *vis-à-vis* the avant-garde air of *fin de siècle*. The second consciousness corresponds to the image of a romantic hero, who is always ready to “ruthlessly” break the social conventions for the call of love.

While the first conception of the self corresponds to the social façade that the character has adopted, the second self-conception relates to the interior of the character, an interior that only Archer and the narrator have access to. And Archer’s ego gradually becomes a battleground between these two conflicting personas. In this light, in the last chapter of *The Age*, Newland ditches one persona in favor of the other. Under the heavy burden of reality, the protagonist sticks with an inside persona and takes refuge in the protective shelter of his imagination. It is evident that the persona of a cultivated socialite or a man-about-town figure is dictated by society; the persona of a boulevardier is adopted in a hereditary manner as a societal demand of Old New York. However, what is the origin of the internal romantic hero? From where does this persona emanate and exist in Newland’s consciousness?

To answer such questions, one should consider the fact Wharton’s *The Age* is a highly *mise-en-scène* narrative that deftly mimics — in terms of composition, theme, and style — its earlier Jamesian progenitors, namely *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Ambassadors* (1903). The thematic similarities to middle and late James can be seen in every warp and weft of Wharton’s magnum opus, a work that made its author the first woman who won the Pulitzer. On a broader scale, the longtime expatriatism and the penfriendship with James can be viewed as the undeniable factors that narrow the gap between the intellectual substructure of Wharton’s fiction and James’s. As one of the recent commentators contends, even Wharton’s selection of “New York of the 1870s” as the setting of the novel was

“motivated” by “a wish to pay homage to the recently deceased James” (Evron 40). On a smaller scale also, *The Age* seems to borrow its fictional elements — rather in a direct manner — from James, particularly from the latter’s middle and later novels. At its core, *The Age* is a novel of manners comprising recognition and error of judgment themes as the centerpieces of the love triangle that Wharton portrays.

Alan Price, one of Wharton’s biographers, mentions that “the names of her fictional characters were always a matter of importance to Wharton” (147) in a way that she frequently changed the names of the characters like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* or Ellen Olenska of *The Age*. Name-wise, we see an interesting similarity between the protagonist of *The Age*, Newland Archer, and Isabel Archer, the indrawn heroine of James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*. Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, an amateur art enthusiast who throws Sunday parties for New York’s artists and intellectuals, is named after her dilettante Jamesian counterpart, Lambert Strether, the protagonist of James’s *The Ambassadors*.

Furthermore, *The Portrait* and *The Age* follow the same three-act structure: The individual’s entrapment in a toxic relationship, their attempt to break away from the non-idealistic marriage, and the eventual capitulation to the monotonous conjugal fate. However, one can find stronger allusions to James, especially in his later period. In particular, one can put one’s finger on James’s *The Beast in the Jungle*, a novella which is published in 1903 — in the same year that James’s *The Ambassadors* got published — and both works deal with the idea of the “the living death” (James *The Notebooks*, 83), a thematic idea that occupied James’s thoughts in the latter years of the nineteenth century, dealing with carnal desires, recognition, and the self-sterilization of passion. In the final episode of *The Beast*, when John Marcher, the protagonist of the novella, discovers that May Bartram was passionately in love with him — the now-deceased companion of Marcher — he mourns for

the loss of youth, passion, and the chance of the intense love that he could have experienced with May. Marcher ponders over his lost youth and realizes that he became “*the* man, to whom nothing was to have happened”: “This horror of waking — *this* was knowledge, knowledge under the breath of which the very tears in his eyes seemed to freeze. Through them, none the less, he tried to fix it and hold it; he kept it there before him so that he might feel the pain. That at least, belated and bitter, had something of *the taste of life*”¹ (James *The Beast*, 596-97). This belated discovery hits Marcher like a thunderbolt because he realizes that he threw away a chance of a lifetime — to love someone and to be loved — and now he has no choice but to take his longing for a “taste of life” to the grave. However, in contrast with Marcher’s belated recognition, it does not take long for Newland Archer to discover that life is floating away from him right before his eyes, as long as he stays in a marriage with the jejune May Welland. There is an interesting episode in chapter twenty-two of *The Age* when Archer stops at the Blenkers’ house to quench his curiosity about Ellen Olenska’s temporary residential place. There, Archer is informed about Ellen’s departure to Boston. Upon the discovery that his forbidden *dulcinée* has moved away from Newport, Archer envisions himself as a doomed figure, trapped in love’s wild-goose chase:

Archer was dealing hurriedly with crowding thoughts. His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen. He glanced about him at the unpruned garden, the tumble-down house, and the oak-grove under which the dusk was gathering. It had seemed so exactly the place in which he ought to have found Madame Olenska; and she was far away. (194)

¹ Italics added.

The dwindling figure that Archer envisions in the Blenkers' garden is both his future self and his distant fictional ancestor, John Marcher. In addition, the imagery of the "unpruned garden" and "the tumble-down house" evokes inattention and abandonment — perhaps the negligence about the existence of emotional desire. Therefore, it makes sense why Archer envisions Marcher (or his future self) in that forsaken garden. However, unlike *The Beast's* protagonist, Newland identifies the problem and foresees his future, sooner rather than later, and attempts to break the status quo regarding his love-life — this struggle to escape from the marital bondage molds the kernel of Wharton's novel.

The Age recounts Newland Archer's story, a lawyer who lives in New York during the Gilded Age. The novel's largetto start allows the reader to get familiarized with the numerous characters the writer introduces. Not much into the story, it becomes evident that Archer's engagement news to the debutante May Welland serves a somewhat larger purpose for the author; the segment provides enough space for Wharton to comment on a closely-knit social structure filled with gossipy plaster saints. Newland and May are both the products of the society of the so-called perfect order, whose bound in heaven matrimony is automatically fused into the chain of the existing social stratagem. And out of all the bachelorettes that the upper-class New York could offer, Newland picks out May Welland, who is, in the words of Sarah Kozloff, "the epitome of that society's virginal wholesomeness" (272). This virginally-pure façade soon becomes the subject of Archer's repulsion and the reason for his inner revolt. Now, no longer a bachelor, Newland discerns that the society he lives in is "self-deluded and deeply hypocritical" as it offers a double standard of etiquette for the people of wealth and influence: "For instance, Julian Beaufort's and Larry Lefferts's extra-marital affairs are accepted with gossipy relish," (Kozloff 273), and this pretense is in conflict with Newland's utopian frame of mind. In the words of

Richard Grenier, the “Old New York” depicted by Wharton has its own “way of taking life without bloodshed” as the society knows how to behead its victims with cotton, so to speak.

In such a state of things, the *experienced* and bohemianesque Countess Ellen Olenska, May’s cousin, flees from the clutches of her dissolute powerful Polish husband in Europe and returns to New York to stay with her wealthy matriarch grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott. Ellen’s reverse exodus from a cosmopolitan world to a restrictive society has a somewhat larger significance as it touches upon the actual events of Wharton’s life. Living in France during World War I, Wharton experienced the horrors of a world she felt no longer accustomed to. Therefore, Ellen’s descent into the bygone world of customary values should be viewed as Wharton’s figurative attempt to “recapture a time of lost stability and to achieve a reconciliation with the past” (Fryer 156).

Madame Olenska’s arrival injects an air of *individuality* into the monolith atmosphere of New York that Archer knew. To Archer, Ellen characterizes a piquant foreignness because she was brought up in Europe by her aunt, the aberrant Medora Manson. To Old New York, however, she becomes just another black sheep. And as Archer puts it himself — in one of the conversations between him and Ellen — in such cases, “the individual ... is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest” of the society (95). Seeing Ellen’s futile wriggles for independence, Newland initially sympathizes with Madame Olenska. However, soon, sympathy turns to empathy once Newland realizes that he himself is involuntarily assenting to the strong conformity tide of his society. It is the same quest for a *taste of life* that whets Archer’s desire to consider the possibility of leaving his simple wife for her complex cousin. In chapter twenty-four, when Newland and Ellen are having lunch together on a ferryboat, Archer confesses to Ellen about the depth of his miserable situation: “You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the

same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. It's beyond human enduring" (207). The way Wharton stages this episode is quite remarkable and telling; in chapter twenty-three, the reader is already informed that Count Olenski dispatched one of his secretaries from Europe, offering a "considerable" (198) sum of money to Ellen to persuade her to go back to Europe. Now, looking at the "bare beach," Newland asks Ellen: "Why you don't go back?" And she answers: "I believe it's because of you" (205). The episode is quite scenic because while the steamboat drifts on the Atlantic ocean, the reader confronts the suspenseful question of what side of the Atlantic would be Ellen's terminal home. The same question can be applied to Newland; will he choose to remain on the "bare" side of the Atlantic, or would he leave his marriage for the "colorful" side? (205)

Despite Archer's decision to break away from his marriage, fate divides the two lovers: Ellen goes back to Europe, and Newland succumbs to the "dull" marital bond. Here, what plays a crucial role in understanding the poetics or the plot mechanism of *The Age* is that Wharton fabricates the novel's dynamic in a manner to that of James's *The Ambassadors*. The story's plot weighs heavily upon one central recognition scene and the theme of Newland's error of judgment in underestimating the guilefulness of his wife, May Welland. Therefore, while Archer has the illusion of deceiving his wife, May has the situation under control as she outwits her husband and cunningly separates Newland and Ellen in the end. But why is Archer — similar to Strether — blind to the fact that his wife is operating behind the scene to knock her love rival out of the competition in a New Yorkian "oppressively hospitable" manner? The answer lies in the study of the character.

Like Strether, Archer is a "worldly" man in the public sphere who, as a young and well-established lawyer, offers legal advice to the toffs of New York's *les grand monde*. However, in his hours of solitude, Archer converts to a quixotic "dilettante" who has

developed a special taste for the Pre-Raphaelites. Stevens the Butler, the protagonist of Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, follows a similar routine. A highly disciplined and rigid man in the social sphere, Stevens drifts away from the world of politics and wars by immersing himself in the world of sentimental novels of the bygone days within the confinement of his room. Therefore, like Strether, Stevens, and Briony Tallis, Newland Archer gradually metamorphoses into a daydreaming fantasist while retreating into the "sanctuary" of his library. Wharton offers an interesting description of Archer's metamorphosis in chapter twenty-six of *The Age*:

Since then there had been no further communication between them, and he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent — that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there. (224)

But when did this *absentness* begin? And why does Newland's library play an important role in the development of the protagonist's psychic metamorphosis?

The Library of Life

In chapter fifteen, after Newland and Ellen's flirtatious encounter at Skuytercliff — where Newland visits Ellen at van der Luyden's like a knight in shining armor — Wharton steadily introduces a new dimension to her male protagonist. The author takes us to Newland's library and exposes the bibliophile's most treasured activity in his private hours:

That evening he unpacked his books from London. The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of the prolific Alphonse Daudet's brilliant tales, and a novel called 'Middlemarch,' as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews. He had declined three dinner invitations in favour of this feast; but though he turned the pages with the sensuous joy of the book-lover, he did not know what he was reading, and one book after another dropped from his hand. Suddenly, among them, he lit on a small volume of verse which he had ordered because the name had attracted him: 'The House of Life.' He took it up, and found himself plunged in an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich, and yet so ineffably tender, that it gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions. All through the night he pursued through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska; but when he woke the next morning, and looked out at the brownstone houses across the street, and thought of his desk in Mr Letterblair's office, and the family pew in Grace Church, his hour in the park of Skuytercliff became as far outside the pale of probability as the visions of the night. (118)

The first thing that catches our attention is that, same as Ellen, these books also arrived from across the Atlantic. Wharton subtly reiterates the dichotomy between traditionalism vs.

progressivism as Europe, once again, is portrayed in such a light to provide the protagonist with new ideas and avant-garde modes of thinking. Another dichotomy — that is more noteworthy — is the sharp contrast that exists between the works that are mentioned in the above paragraph. Newland receives the latest book by Herbert Spencer, who was perhaps the strongest advocate of Social Darwinism during that period; he also takes a quick look at Eliot's magnum opus, *Middlemarch* — the work and the writer that have been associated with Realism. However, Newland abandons the realistically-themed works for an *incomplete* collection of romantic sonnets by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Rossetti's *The House of Life* is an "obscure" nonchronological sonnet sequence that mirrors Newland Archer's truncated and unquenched romantic quest in many ways. The sonnets vaguely recount the narrator's (poet's) emotional involvement with two women: a wife and a mistress. Interestingly, the idea of Madame Olenska becoming Newland's mistress is brought up by Ellen herself in chapter twenty-nine when Newland picks her up from Jersey City's train station. On their way to Mrs. Manson Mingott's house, Archer tells her about his *vision* of him and her being together, to which Ellen responds with a sudden burst of laughter that she will "look, not at visions, but at realities":

'I don't know what you mean by realities. The only reality to me is this.'

(...)

'Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress — since I can't be your wife?' she asked.

(...)

'I want — I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that — categories like that — won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.'

She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. ‘Oh, my dear — where is that country? Have you ever been there?’ (246-247)

Like the narrator of *The House of Life*, Wharton’s protagonist is in pursuit of love as an aesthetic ideal in his imaginary neverland. It is interesting how Archer’s mind freezes when he is confronted with the notion of Ellen being his mistress; it can be inferred that Newland has no *real*, clear-cut plan for his future relationship with Ellen as he appears indecisive about ending his marriage with May. He is not even sure whether he wants to divorce May at this point. Nevertheless, what he is so certain about is that he only wants to get away — more than anything — from his marriage to concretize the sensuous existence that he experiences in his mind. According to Ellen, the sensuous existence that Newland idealizes in his visions does not correspond with the realities of his life. There are also other elements that link Rossetti’s narrator to Wharton’s protagonist: Both of them lose their wives, and they have to deal with profound emotional experiences. It is interesting how all the themes of *The House of Life* can be applied to *The Age* also; the subject matters of Rossetti’s sonnet sequence, such as “the birth of human love, its growth, its satisfaction, the conflicting power of a new love springing up by the side of the old, the sorrow of parted love, the anguish of loss, regret over unused opportunities and unrealized ambitions, doubt, remorse, despair” can be applied to Wharton’s novel as well (Tisdell 258-9).

The library becomes the “sanctuary” that shields the protagonist’s wrought psyche from outside social pressure. In addition, the books that Archer reads reinforce his conceptualization of himself as a romantic hero on a love-hunt pursuit *vis-à-vis* the image of a maritally-faithful socialite. Emily Orlando also notes the importance of Archer’s library and the influence of romantic tales on Newland’s psyche. She writes:

For Archer, his library has always been his refuge. (...) Archer, like Ellen Olenska, reads the work of French authors, even writers who are linked with the naturalist school. But he does not read their so-called “naturalistic” works, opting instead for their more romantic stories. For instance, he stocks his library with Alphonse Daudet, who was for a time a leading naturalist; but Archer reads “Daudet’s brilliant tales” starring Tartarin, a *quixotic*² character known for deluding himself with his own fictions. (...) Archer also reads Balzac (...); but Archer chooses the author’s fanciful tales (“a volume of the ‘Contes Drolatiques’”) crafted in the tradition of Rabelais. Additionally, Archer is taken with the works of French Romantic writer Mérimée: a particular text of Mérimée is to Archer “one of his inseparables.” In a similar fashion, Archer cannot “separate” himself from his romantic inclinations, his pursuit of the ideal. (...) A considerable fan of Walter Pater, Archer reads his “wonderful new volume called ‘The Renaissance’” which voices the idea that life is modeled on the experience of art, “each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.” So much like Archer, Pater and the members of the aesthetic movement were obsessed with the idealized, the not-real. (58)

Here, again, the dichotomy between Realism — or Naturalism — and Romanticism is clearly noticeable. Furthermore, an interesting and rather subtle point that can be noted in Orlando’s sharp observation is that Newland’s reading list contains works from the so-called forerunner of Naturalism (Daudet) and the emblem of literary Realism (Balzac); it is understandable why Newland would order books from such authors because both of these writers were associated with the literary movements which were in fashion in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, what provides us with a better understanding of

² My emphasis.

the character is that Newland Archer *ditches* Daudet's and Balzac's chef-d'œuvre(s) in favor of the authors' minor escapist romantic tales. It is worth reiterating that it is from one of these Balzac's lesser-known tales that Henry James modeled the character of Lambert Strether. Balzac's *Louis Lambert* (1832) narrates the story of a young intellectual who gets swept away by reading too much about metaphysical ideals and mysticism that the day before his wedding, he tries to *castrate* himself. Louis gets mad eventually and dies at the age of twenty-eight.

In light of the things discussed, it is clear that the idea of the “ruthless magnificent” lover — that appears in the protagonist's reverie in the last chapter of *The Age* — is formed in Newland's library. Interestingly, even after Ellen's permanent departure to Europe, we observe that the function of the library grows over the years and surpasses the ad interim sanctuary that it once offered to Archer; it merely becomes the staple part of Newland's life — a wheel that the protagonist's life affairs revolve around it. In the last chapter, the reader is informed that for “over thirty years,” Newland's library “had been the scene of his solitary musings and of all the family confabulations” (293). Wharton's choice of words is also noteworthy because the verb “confabulate” means “to have a conversation” or “to talk informally” (“Confabulate”). However, since it is derived from the Latin root *fābula*, which is also the etymological root of “fable” in English, it also denotes “to fill in gaps in memory by fabrication,” which is considered a mental process. It is a cerebral function, and the term was coined by the German psychiatrist Karl Bonhoeffer in 1900, in which the mind confuses the imaginary or the fabricated with the real. Therefore, like his fictional progenitors, Newland Archer slowly sinks into quixotism, where he substitutes the unpleasant real with the sensuous ideal. Furthermore, the centralization of the library — as a place that provides

a haven for Newland — touches upon the idea of “inwardness,” where many of the events in Newland’s life occur within this room:

It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened. There his wife, nearly twenty-six years ago, had broken to him, with a blushing circumlocution that would have caused the young women of the new generation to smile, the news that she was to have a child; and there their eldest boy, Dallas, too delicate to be taken to church in mid-winter, had been christened by their old friend the Bishop of New York, the ample magnificent irreplaceable Bishop, so long the pride and ornament of his diocese. There Dallas had first staggered across the floor shouting ‘Dad,’ while May and the nurse laughed behind the door; there their second child, Mary (who was so like her mother), had announced her engagement to the dullest and most reliable of Reggie Chivers’s many sons; and there Archer had kissed her through her wedding veil (...). It was in the library that he and May had always discussed the future of the children: the studies of Dallas and his young brother Bill, Mary’s incurable indifference to ‘accomplishments,’ and passion for sport and philanthropy, and the vague leanings toward ‘art’ which had finally landed the restless and curious Dallas in the office of a rising New York architect. (293-294)

It can be seen that Wharton places emphasis on the importance of the library room in Newland’s house as a place that surpasses its normal function; for instance, it serves as a holy place for the baptism of Newland’s first child. Something else can also be inferred from the above excerpt, and that is the small amount of Newland’s engagement with the outside world in these thirty years, in a way that in all of these cardinal moments in his life, Newland is alone in his library and his wife and the children are to come to the library for a conversation or a farewell kiss. Therefore, Newland’s library figuratively obtains an

autonomous existence of its own as it becomes a resting place for the protagonist by providing a haven for an imaginary getaway amidst life's turbulent sea of troubles.

Blindness: Newland's Error

As stated earlier, *The Age* is comprised of a recognition plot proper which exploits the theme of human blindness at its core. Here, Newland's male vanity, together with his sense of intellectual superiority over May, obstructs him from acknowledging that May is aware of his affair with Madame Olenska. Thus, when in the penultimate chapter, Archer recognizes that his wife is aware of his longtime obsession with Ellen, this sudden realization happens to him like an electric shock. However, in the course of the narrative, there are a few instances in which Wharton hints at May's alertness and acumen. For example, early in the novel, when the infamous Ellen Olenska appears with Newland's betrothed at the New York Opera, Archer goes to the Welland's box to show support for his fiancée's family: "As he entered the box his eyes met Miss Welland's, and he saw that she had instantly understood his motive, though the family dignity which both considered so high a virtue would not permit her to tell him so. (...) Her eyes said: 'You see why Mamma brought me'" (14).

May quickly grasps the idea that, with his appearance, Newland tries to protect May and her family from the gossip of people like Larry Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson, and in return, Newland also detects this sharpness in May. However, such moments do not seem to substantially affect Newland's dogmatism against May's perspicacity. To Newland, May still remains "that terrifying product of the social system ... who knew nothing and expected everything" from her husband (36). Since Newland, Ellen, and the story of their failed romance occupy a sizeable portion of the plot, May Welland seems to appear as a flat character; however, Evelyn Fracasso believes that Wharton puts emphasis on May

Welland's eyes in the crucial parts of the plot in order to offer insight to the inaccessible interior of the character, and in doing so, compensates for the character's lack of appearance and background information: "The toughness and tenacity, the depth of feeling and strength of character were always present in May, and Wharton provides clear evidence of these characteristics in her symbolic treatment of May's expressive eyes" (48). Indeed, May does not say much, but her eyes often appear probing inquisitively. Another example of May's high intuitive power appears in chapter sixteen. Disappointed about his encounter with Ellen and Beaufort at Skuytercliff, Newland rushes to St. Augustine to persuade May to hasten the date of their marriage:

'Why should we dream away another year? Look at me, dear! Don't you understand how I want you for my wife?'

For a moment she remained motionless; then she raised on him eyes of such despairing clearness that he half-released her waist from his hold. But suddenly her look changed and deepened inscrutably. 'I'm not sure if I *do* understand,' she said. 'Is it — is it because you're not certain of continuing to care for me?'

Archer sprang up from his seat. 'My God — perhaps — I don't know,' he broke out angrily.

May Welland rose also; as they faced each other she seemed to grow in womanly stature and dignity. Both were silent for a moment, as if dismayed by the unforeseen trend of their words: then she said in a low voice: 'If that is it — is there some one else?'

'Some one else — between you and me?' He echoed her words slowly, as though they were only half-intelligible and he wanted time to repeat the question to himself. She seemed to catch the uncertainty of his voice, for she went on in a deepening tone: 'Let us talk frankly, Newland. Sometimes I've felt a difference in you; especially since our engagement has been announced.'

'Dear — what madness!' he recovered himself to exclaim.

She met his protest with a faint smile. 'If it is, it won't hurt us to talk about it.' She paused, and added, lifting her head with one of her noble movements: 'Or even if it's true: why shouldn't we speak of it? You might so easily have made a mistake.' He lowered his head, staring at the black leaf-pattern on the sunny path at their feet. 'Mistakes are always easy to make; but if I had made one of the kind you suggest, is it likely that I should be imploring you to hasten our marriage?'

She looked downward too, disturbing the pattern with the point of her sunshade while she struggled for expression. 'Yes,' she said at length. 'You might want — once for all — to settle the question: it's one way.' (125-126)

May's speculative arrow hits the target. Newland wants to hasten the marriage because he is unsure of his feelings for May. Therefore, an early marriage would lead Newland to the point of no return where he could get rid of his thoughts and feelings for Ellen. Here, again, Newland is momentarily startled by May's candid behavior; however, he persists in thinking that May is a "dull" creation of the New York society who can never gain the intellectual capacity to read her husband's motives. Margaret Jay Jessee offers a thought-provoking explanation of why Newland always seems to find a way to gloss over the fact that May can also be as discerning as Ellen. Jessee postulates that since Newland gets used to living in the "hieroglyphic" world of binaries dictated to him over the years by the Old New York, he persists in the existence of such dichotomies between the oddball Ellen and the conventionalist May. Jessee writes:

With May and Ellen as representatives of opposing female stereotypes, the novel creates a series of binaries between old and new, virgin and whore, and fair and dark. However, the result is not a novel that maintains these dichotomies. Instead, on the thematic level, *The Age of Innocence* interrogates binaries by repeatedly throwing into question distinctions between what is actual and what is Newland's misperception. Fearing he is merely a product of his judgmental and frightened

society, Newland creates a fantasy of opposition between the “real thing” and Old New York’s “hieroglyphic world” with its system of “arbitrary signs.” As a result, Newland places onto May and Ellen what he believes are their appropriate masks.”

(38)

A few other instances in the novel also imply that May is aware of Newland’s longing for Ellen. For example, in chapter twenty-six, the way May subtly hints at the fact that Archer’s sole purpose for going to Washington is to see Ellen, or the way she questions Newland when she finds out that her husband’s business trip to Washington got canceled after Ellen left Washington for New York. But, strangely, Newland does not see that May has guessed the true motive behind his actions because his (male) vanity bars him from acknowledging that a woman’s *naïveté* does not necessarily contradict her sense of feminine shrewdness, that May Welland, like Ellen Olenska, is naturally equipped with womanly instinct and intuition. Therefore, similar to Lambert Strether’s case, the truth was highly accessible to the protagonist of *The Age*. Nevertheless, Newland is blindsided, not by May’s wits but by his own ego. As McDowell also notes, it is the “egocentric temperament” that “limits” Archer’s imagination, preventing him from “seeing May as a woman instead of a stereotype. He never sees that what he calls ‘her abysmal purity’ is a myth largely of his own formulation — one that underestimates her intelligence and the extent of her worldly knowledge” (98).

There is an interesting passage in chapter thirty-two in which Wharton subtly unveils May’s cold-blooded cruelty towards Ellen. Once again, New Yorkers gather at the theater to see *Faust*. Archer “had half-expected [Ellen] to appear again in old Mrs. Mingott’s box, but it remained empty” (273). Archer’s eye is fixed on Manson Mingott’s box until the soprano’s high note averts Newland’s eyes to the stage where the “blond victim” was finally

“succumbing” to her “seducer” (273). The scene of the performance alludes to Ellen’s final submission to Newland’s venereal demands, and here Wharton clearly implies the sexual tryst between Archer and Ellen, which was planned for the day after the opera. Newland’s eyes wander from the stage “to the point of the horseshoe” where May sits between “two older ladies,” Mrs. Lovell Mingott and her newly-arrived foreign cousin. The way Wharton positions May between the older women represents the existence of a form of tribal solidarity within the family in which the old is trying to safeguard the young from the hardship of marriage. May is dressed “all in white.” At first, Newland does not notice what dress she wears, but suddenly he recognizes “the blue-white satin and old lace of her wedding dress”:

It struck Archer that May, since their return from Europe, had seldom worn her bridal satin, and the surprise of seeing her in it made him compare her appearance with that of the young girl he had watched with such blissful anticipations two years earlier. Though May’s outline was slightly heavier, as her goddess-like build had foretold, her athletic erectness of carriage, and the girlish transparency of her expression, remained unchanged: but for the slight languor that Archer had lately noticed in her she would have been the exact image of the girl playing with the bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her betrothal evening. The fact seemed an additional appeal to his pity: such innocence was as moving as the trustful clasp of a child. (273)

Archer notices May’s unusual “pale” complexion; however, he is so busy in his thoughts, daydreaming about the next day’s bedding with Ellen, that he “misses this mark.” In fact, the origin of Archer’s blindness corresponds very well with the concept of *hamartia*, which is set forth by Aristotle in *Poetics* and is manifested in the aforementioned tragedies from

the Age of Antiquity and the Renaissance (*Oedipus*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*). As Brody contends:

Hamartia is a morally neutral non-normative term, derived from the verb *hamartano*, meaning “to miss the mark,” “to fall short of an objective.” And by extension: to reach one destination rather than the intended one; to make a mistake, not in the sense of a moral failure, but in the nonjudgmental sense of taking one thing for another, taking something for its opposite. *Hamartia* may betoken an error of discernment due to ignorance, to the lack of an essential piece of information. (23)

Interestingly, seeing that May wore her bridal gown, Newland concludes that May looks like an innocent, childlike figure who has no idea that her husband is cheating on her. This thought arouses a feeling of guilt and urges Newland “to tell her the truth” (274); however, Archer is unaware that the situation is quite the opposite because May has already gotten rid of her love rival, Ellen, by lying about herself being pregnant. And in fact, May’s choice of dress accentuates her feeling of victory over Ellen. Wharton’s choice of setting for this episode is also quite noteworthy. The novel’s actions start at the New York theater in the first chapter, where the reader is offered a holistic but superficial view of New York’s fashionable society. Near the closure of the novel, Wharton again takes the reader back to the same place. This time, the calm and orderly appearances of the elite at the opera leave a smothering effect on the reader, insinuating that perhaps all these people — who look so harmless on the surface — are or can be potential deceivers who have perfected themselves in the game of double-crossing. In this light, Newland Archer, more or less, ends up becoming like Julius Beaufort and Larry Lefferts, the scoundrels of the *beau monde* whom he profoundly loathes at the beginning of the novel.

Recognition: The Scenic Ending and the Dramatic Effect

In the first three initial plot outlines that Wharton developed for *The Age*, we observe many changes in what Wharton regards as the “subsidiary actions” of the plot. As Alan Price noted, in the “1st plan (...), the countess is the major character in the story, while (...) Archer recedes into the background” (“The Composition of Edith Wharton” 23). There are also some notable differences between the first draft of *The Age* and the novel’s final draft. For example, Newland Archer was called Langdon Archer or Lawrence Archer at first; or Ellen Olenska was named Clementine or Clementina on multiple occasions. Also, in the first outline, Archer is a businessman instead of a lawyer who actually does marry Ellen instead of May. There are other plot differences in the second outline as well. For instance, a considerable part of the plot is dedicated to a semi-elopement episode where Archer and Ellen secretly travel to the south and stay in Florida for a while. Wharton omits this segment altogether in the final version of her novel.

Interestingly, a scene that appears consistently in all of these different plot outlines is May’s farewell banquet — the farewell dinner party that May throws on the occasion of Ellen’s departure to Europe. It is apparent that the narrative arc Wharton envisioned for *The Age* was entwined with some sort of a farewell party, as May’s banquet remains an unwavering part of the plot in all these three outlines. May combines two occasions in this banquet: The Newland Archers’ “first big dinner” party as a married couple and “her farewell dinner for the Countess Olenska” (279). While the silent separation of the lovers (Newland and Ellen) gives the novel a tragic dimension, I want to argue that the farewell dinner party adds up to the overall dramatic quality of *The Age*, and it is due to this reason that Wharton allocated considerable space in sketching the dinner scene and the subsequent events.

After the opera, Newland and May go home. Newland decides to tell the truth and set himself free. When he mentions Ellen's name, May shows him a recent letter from Ellen indicating that she is going back to Europe for good. Frustrated and perplexed, Archer cannot get hold of Ellen for about two weeks until her name is again mentioned by his wife; May informs Newland she is going to throw a farewell dinner for her cousin. Against Archer's will, the matter is put forward as a *fait accompli*: "Here are the invitations all written. Mother helped me — she agrees that we ought to" (283).

The night arrives. The dining room is "nearly full." Ellen appears "excessively pale" to Newland. The hosts and the guests sit at the dinner table, and Wharton offers an excellent *mise en scène*, preparing the reader for the grand recognition scene. Newland is seated at the head of the table; Ellen is sitting to his right as a "foreign" guest of honor, and to Ellen's right sits Mr. Henry van der Luyden, who embodies the "superterrestrial" authority in New York's upper crust, sealing the irreversible decision on Madame Olenska's departure to Europe. Archer, who cannot quite fathom what is going on around him, glances at the guests and the lavish dinner table, and suddenly he sees the truth of his life's situation:

Archer, who seemed to be assisting at the scene in *a state of odd imponderability*,³ as if he floated somewhere between chandelier and ceiling, wondered at nothing so much as his own share in the proceedings. As his glance travelled from one placid well-fed face to another he saw all the harmless-looking people engaged upon May's canvas-backs as a band of dumb conspirators, and himself and the pale woman on his right as the centre of their conspiracy. And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to "foreign" vocabularies. He guessed

³ My emphasis.

himself to have been, for months, the centre of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin.

It was the old New York way of taking life 'without effusion of blood': the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes,' except the behaviour of those who gave rise to them.

As these thoughts succeeded each other in his mind Archer felt like a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp. He looked about the table, and guessed at the inexorableness of his captors from the tone in which, over the asparagus from Florida, they were dealing with Beaufort and his wife. 'It's to show me,' he thought, 'what would happen to *me* —' and a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words, closed in on him like the doors of the family vault. (285-86)

Through "means unknown to him," Newland finally understands the contrived collective act that is committed around him; and in fact, the one who is sitting at the head of the table is the star of this play unwittingly. Here, Wharton follows in James's footsteps in the treatment she gives to *The Age's* recognition moment in a way that Archer's realization is not emanating from character interactions (such as conversation or confrontation), a slip of the tongue, a physical token, or a discovery of a lost document or a letter; rather, the

realization is triggered by a glance at a particular scene, sensing an inexplicable quality in the individual's surrounding; and this ungraspable quality is accompanied by the *accessoires* of the scene that leads the individual to his ultimate impression. In this regard, the unfathomable "means" that help Newland Archer reach his intuitive conclusion are of the same nature as the "thickened air" in *The Ambassadors* that assists Strether in coming to his grand recognition. And the stream of consciousness is utilized by both authors as *the* apparatus to capture these internal processes. On another level, Newland's belated recognition also affects the reader. It adds to the overall dramatic quality of *The Age*, mainly due to the fact that Newland Archer is chosen to be the narrative's focalizer or *centre of consciousness*. The power of *The Age's* plot lies in the fact that until the penultimate chapter, the reader shares Newland's same side of the story because they cannot access May's side. As Hadley contends, "we see May only through [Archer's] eyes; Newland projects his ideal of innocence onto May (just as he projects an aura of secrecy onto Ellen). May appears to be the innocent of the novel's title, but she is not, and Newland must misinterpret his interactions with May in order to continue viewing her as innocent" (267). Also, since Newland appears to us as a *convincing* societal critic of New York's upper class, we easily fall into Wharton's trap of judgment and take for granted that Newland is not an omniscient judge of this world. As Stephen Orgel suggests: "The innocent May, 'terrifying,' 'like a stranger,' is the crucial hieroglyph [Newland] has not deciphered, an index to everything he fails to understand about his world" (xvi). This belated realization not only batters Newland's egoistic selfhood but also surprises the reader, who has hitherto invested a considerable sum into the protagonist's power of judgment.

At the closure of the penultimate chapter, Wharton yet again tries to put together a dramatic episode. After all the guests have left, Newland retreats to his library — a place

where he can lose himself in his thoughts and find peace against the heavy lashes of reality. However, May soon enters and brings Newland back from the realm of imagination: “‘It *did* go off beautifully, didn’t it?’ May questioned from the threshold of the library” (291). Wharton deliberately wants May’s remark to sound ironic because it seems as if May were inquiring about the quality of the collective deceitful act that happened in the form of a lovely farewell dinner. Also, May’s sudden appearance in Newland’s library represents a metaphoric foray into Newland’s fortress of imagination. Despite his present separation from Ellen, Newland does not give up the idea of breaking away from his marriage, and he decides to apprise May of the truth right after the dinner party:

She sat down and he resumed his seat; but neither spoke for a long time. At length Archer began abruptly: ‘Since you’re not tired, and want to talk, there’s something I must tell you. I tried to the other night —.’

She looked at him quickly. ‘Yes, dear. Something about yourself?’

‘About myself. You say you’re not tired: well, I am. Horribly tired . . .’

In an instant she was all tender anxiety. ‘Oh, I’ve seen it coming on, Newland! You’ve been so wickedly overworked —’

‘Perhaps it’s that. Anyhow, I want to make a break —’

‘A break? To give up the law?’

‘To go away, at any rate — at once. On a long trip, ever so far off — away from everything —’

He paused, conscious that he had failed in his attempt to speak with the indifference of a man who longs for a change, and is yet too weary to welcome it. Do what he would, the chord of eagerness vibrated. ‘Away from everything —’ he repeated.

‘Ever so far? Where, for instance?’ she asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know. India — or Japan.’

She stood up, and as he sat with bent head, his chin propped on his hands, he felt her warmly and fragrantly hovering over him.

‘As far as that? But I’m afraid you can’t, dear . . .’ she said in an unsteady voice. ‘Not unless you’ll take me with you.’ And then, as he was silent, she went on, in tones so clear and evenly-pitched that each separate syllable tapped like a

little hammer on his brain: 'That is, if the doctors will let me go . . . but I'm afraid they won't. For you see, Newland, I've been sure since this morning of something I've been so longing and hoping for —'

He looked up at her with a sick stare, and she sank down, all dew and roses, and hid her face against his knee.

'Oh, my dear,' he said, holding her to him while his cold hand stroked her hair.

There was a long pause, which the inner devils filled with strident laughter; then May freed herself from his arms and stood up.

'You didn't guess —?'

'Yes—I; no. That is, of course I hoped —'

They looked at each other for an instant and again fell silent; then turning his eyes from hers, he asked abruptly: 'Have you told anyone else?'

'Only Mamma and your mother.' She paused, and then added hurriedly, the blood flushing up to her forehead: 'That is — and Ellen. You know I told you we'd had a long talk one afternoon — and how dear she was to me.'

'Ah —' said Archer, his heart stopping.

He felt that his wife was watching him intently. 'Did you *mind* my telling her first, Newland?'

'Mind? Why should I?' He made a last effort to collect himself. 'But that was a fortnight ago, wasn't it? I thought you said you weren't sure till today.' Her colour burned deeper, but she held his gaze. 'No; I wasn't sure then — but I told her I was. And you see I was right!' she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory. (291-293)

At this moment, Wharton removes the mask of sheer innocence from May's face; it is rather surprising to see how May lies about herself being pregnant to convince her cousin to break ties with Newland. What is crucial to our understanding of *The Age*'s dramaturgy is that the protagonist's gained knowledge does not lead to decisive action. He discovers that his wife was the one who got in between him and Ellen, and he realizes how May will be the domineering figure in their marriage, but still, Newland does not make anything out of this discovery. In other words, the recognition scene is implemented by the author as the prime element of the denouement; however, this much-valued revelatory moment does not lead to a radical resolution. Instead, Newland turns into a semi-stoic figure who forsakes the call of

love and the pursuit of passion for the rest of his life. He disengages from involving himself in the realm of worldly passions and retreats back to his library because there, he can cultivate his imaginary living. He fosters this inside world to such an extent that he substitutes the real, unattainable Ellen with the imaginary one. He lives in the recluse of his library for thirty years, just like Ellen, who lives a similar solitary life. And even when both of their spouses die, Newland and Ellen remain reluctant to resume their amorous entanglement. In the last scene of *The Age*, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, Newland refuses to see the real Ellen; instead, he imagines his son to be in a room with a “pale,” “dark lady.” Interestingly, Ellen also refuses to meet Newland in the flesh as she does not come after him. Newland Archer looks at Madame Olenska’s apartment window for a while and gets lost in his thoughts. He finally stands up and walks back “alone” to his hotel:

[Newland] tried to see the persons already in the room — for probably at that sociable hour there would be more than one — and among them a dark lady, pale and dark, who would look up quickly, half rise, and hold out a long thin hand with three rings on it ... He thought she would be sitting in a sofa-corner near the fire, with azaleas banked behind her on a table.

‘It’s more real to me here than if I went up,’ he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other.

He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters.

At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel. (308)

Archer's too much engagement with the ideal aesthetic image bars him from acknowledging the real Madame Olenska, as the protagonist substitutes the imaginary Ellen with the non-imaginary: "It's more real to me here than if I went up." He imagines himself to be upstairs among Madame Olenska's guests, and he is in such an ecstatic mental flight that the only thing that keeps him connected with reality is the physical touch that his body has with the bench's surface. On the basis of Levinas's argument on the detracting effect of the aesthetic attitude toward life, it can be observed that the pleasurable sensuous inward living that Archer cultivated over the years grew to such a proportion that the protagonist renounces the companionship of his once forbidden fruit in favor of an imaginary beloved. As a result, an imaginary Ellen gradually took the place of the real Ellen — an imaginary figure who could be possessed by Archer and was ever-present in the protagonist's psyche.

Chapter Five

The Warmest Congratulations: An Elegy for a Non-existent Myth in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

In an interview at the Toronto International Film Festival, Eleanor Wachtel asked Kazuo Ishiguro why he stated earlier that “a study of the failure of emotion” could be one of the main themes of *The Remains of the Day*. To clarify what he meant by “the failure of emotion,” the author associated the novel’s theme with the attributes related to the profession of his central character, Stevens. Ishiguro asserted that the “internationally-known stereotype” of an English butler assisted him in penning down a “stoic figure” who “fears from engaging in the world of emotions.” He maintained:

This figure could very well stand for that part of all of us that is actually afraid to open ourselves to love and to the possibilities of being loved, the dangers of being emotionally engaged and hiding instead behind some sort of professional role; that was one of the things that the figure of the butler offered me (...) so I was attracted to this figure who wanted to be this kind of so good at being a butler, and everything was about serving his employer. (TIFF Originals, 2017)

In a “conscious” attempt “to write for an international audience,” the author then adopts “a myth of England that was known internationally – in this case, the English butler” (Hunnewell, and Ishiguro). Alongside the emotional reservedness, etiquette, and Englishness that a persona like an English butler could provide for Ishiguro, there is also one particular quality that such a figure inherently possesses; that is, a butler is a liminal figure concerning his profession which means that the professional space he occupies or inhabits is among the lords and nobles, and yet he cannot be considered as one of them. Equally, the rules of such a profession dictate not to get mixed with the ones who are more relatable concerning the social scale but have lower professional statuses since the realm of servants also has a hierarchy of its own (footman, manservant, under-butler, and butler). Therefore, Stevens, the butler of *The Remains*, is a socially heterogeneous figure who

oscillates between the realms of “betters” and inferiors and stays remote and isolated from both.

Similar to James’s *The Ambassadors* and Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, *The Remains* can be considered as a novel of manners that, on the whole, follows the events that occur between the World Wars in a fictional stately home of Darlington Hall in Oxfordshire, England; however, the narrative structure is more complex than those of its predecessors. Like Ishiguro’s other novels, such as *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Unconsoled* (1995), *The Remains* employs a first-person narrator who discloses the events of the past through a series of recollections and flashbacks. Here, the author’s favored method of narration — narrating through memory — is utilized to capture and survey “the fabrics” of human consciousness. This technique can be regarded as similar to James’s “centre of consciousness.”

During his six-day journey to Cornwall, Stevens tries to evoke memories from the 1920s and 1930s, when Darlington Hall was amongst England’s most prestigious and visited estates, and he — as he reckons — was at the height of his career. Throughout the journey, Stevens’s thoughts circle those pleasant bygone gentlemanly eras where the stately manors were the center of the public’s attention as they represented some sort of social haven for the finest artists and most influential politicians of the day. Stevens even has his own set of jargon regarding England’s stately manors; he calls Darlington Hall “the hub of this world’s wheel,” and he elaborates this idea by claiming that the world to a butler like him “was a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub, their mighty decisions emanating out to all else, rich and poor, who revolved around them” (112). It was the aspiration of all those of us with professional ambition to work our way as close to this hub as we were each of us capable” (103). Not only does the butler define the self regarding this pleasant and

influential “hub,” but he also considers himself as one of the centerpieces of that genteel picture.

As a result, the concept of service in *The Remains* is more or less in agreement with the “contemporary world of consuming professionalization, a world in which subjectivity seems to stem from occupation, a career providing not only manner and method but also social station” (Trimm 135). Stevens belongs to the elite community of butlers — that is, at least, the way he sees himself — who meticulously governs a place of perfect order as he fervently orchestrates the affairs which take place behind the scene for the sake of his master, Lord Darlington; and in order to aggrandize himself in his (social) position, he clings to such ideas as a man’s “greatness” and “dignity.”

Even though the explanations that the butler offers are by no means cut and dried, the reader gradually fathoms out that in Stevens’s view, the unconditional loyalty to a morally worthy employer and the emotional reservedness in times of crisis are the highest possible virtues that dignify a butler in his profession. However, Stevens’s insistence on inhabiting or preserving this aura of the so-called “professionalism” is the cause that distances the character from responding to the day-to-day human demands and the worldly realities which exist outside his vocation; as Kathleen Wall asserts, the novel puts forth “new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator whose split subjectivity, rather than moral blindness or intellectual bias, gives rise to unreliable narration” (23). In *The Remains*, we are not dealing with a stereotypical unreliable narration, the kind in which the narrator intentionally manipulates the truth as guile to obstruct the reader from accessing it; instead, as Walls suggests, the subject is so engrossed with the concept of professionalism that he mistakenly mixes up the professional and personal spheres and often prioritizes the former over the latter. As a result, Stevens gradually renounces the world outside the self (with its

material and immaterial connotations) while his ego is fed with the delicious, abstract, and non-existent gentlemanly concept of the past. As the world outside Darlington Hall is prone to change, the character mentally retreats into the walls of the English manor because there, he has control and power to some extent. Therefore, Darlington Hall provides a holistic mental image of the bygone non-existent gentlemanly era that the protagonist craves, and as a result, the world of the English manor substitutes the outside world and the realities which surround it. In an interview with Allan Vorda, Ishiguro emphasizes that the “Englishness” that Stevens so wholeheartedly tries to preserve is, in fact, a hollow that never existed:

What I’m trying to do there, and I think this is perhaps much easier for British people to understand than perhaps people abroad, is to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England. I think there is this very strong idea that exists in England at the moment, about an England where people lived in the not-so-distant past, that conformed to various stereotypical images. That is to say, an England with sleepy, beautiful villages with very polite people and butlers and people taking tea on the lawn (...) The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia for a time that didn’t exist. (139)

However, interacting with such a mythical hollow does turn out to be “harmless” for Stevens and those around him. As Shaffer argues, *The Remains* tends to exhibit “only a mock nostalgia” rather than an innocuous, placid one; a nostalgia “that throws into question the ‘good old world’ as much as it does the grandeur of Stevens’s ‘professional dignity’” (88).

The novel’s prologue takes place on an unspecified day in July 1956. Stevens, who is presently in his 60s, introduces us to John Farraday, the easy-going and affluent American who is the new owner of Darlington Hall. Even though the novel is relatively in its early

stages, the reader understands that a sense of disinclination exists in Stevens towards the idea of leaving the manor. For instance, when Mr. Farraday urges him to take a break and go on a motoring tour of England for a week, the butler comes up with a rejoinder that can be regarded as both interesting and crucial to our understanding of the character:

Farraday: I'm serious, Stevens. I really think you should take a break. I'll foot the bill for the gas. You fellows, you're always locked up in these big Houses helping out, how do you ever get to see around this beautiful country of yours? (5)

Stevens: It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls. (6)

The idea of leaving the manor is put forth as a friendly suggestion from the employer; however, it seems that Stevens takes the matter to heart when he responds with such a thin-skinned attitude. At this early stage of the novel, Steven's remark will be received somewhat metaphorically by the reader; however, a complete reading of the novel reveals that Stevens had rarely left Darlington Hall and its vicinities; at least, we are not told of any trips. Trimm also notices this and asserts that "the novel's depiction of service has a spatial divide (...) Stevens's career has greatly restricted his field of vision: his 'position' having tied him to Lord Darlington and Darlington Hall, he does not seem to have left the house ever before" (135).

When he finally convinces himself to go on the motoring tour, Stevens states that he is "very conscious" of the fact that upon his departure, "Darlington Hall would stand empty for probably the first time this century — perhaps for the first time since the day it was built" (23). Since the butler had tried for so many years to preserve the lively atmosphere of the place, the idea of its vacancy saddens him; therefore, he convinces himself that this temporary desertion of the manor serves the mission of staff recruitment: The narrator informs us that he recently received a letter from Miss Kenton, one of the former

housekeepers, and he claims that “Miss Kenton’s letter set off a certain chain of ideas to do with professional matters (...) at Darlington Hall, and [he] would underline that it was a preoccupation with these very same professional matters that led [him] to consider anew [his] employer’s kindly meant suggestion” (6). However, when the novel reaches its midpoint, the reader gradually infers that professionalism is not the only reason that has led the protagonist to such a conclusion to select Miss Kenton from all the previous housekeepers he had seen at the manor. Reading between the lines reveals that a sort of emotional attachment also existed between the two, and Stevens’s association with Miss Kenton cannot be viewed as a strictly professional relationship because they shared a few “intimate moments,” so to speak, in the past.

Miss Kenton joined Darlington Hall’s staff team in the spring of 1922 and resided in the house during the years that led to World War II. Having waited in vain for Stevens to approach her, she accepted Mr. Benn’s marriage proposal and left Darlington Hall for the southwestern parts of England. Presently, Stevens informs the reader that the relationship between the now-called Mrs. Benn and her husband has been on the skids and that their “marriage is *finally*¹ to come to an end” (46). Stevens claims that he sees “the unmistakable message conveyed by the general nuance of many of the passages” of Miss Kenton’s letter that she has “a deep nostalgia for her days at Darlington Hall” and “no doubt, she is pondering with regret decisions made in the far-off past that have now left her, deep in middle age, so alone and desolate. And it is easy to see how in such a frame of mind, the thought of returning to Darlington Hall would be a great comfort to her” (46).

The favorable departure of Stevens’s romantic rival, Mr. Benn, opens a new window of possibilities for the butler to reduce the distance between himself and Mrs. Benn once

¹ Italics added.

again. Here, Stevens projects his own feeling of “regret” about the bygone missed chances onto Miss Kenton, lamenting her current loneliness and desolate condition. However, the “age” and “loneliness” that Stevens relates to Miss Kenton apply to his own condition as well, and they can be even more relevant to Stevens than to Miss Kenton. We later find out that Miss Kenton’s “marriage [is] not in quite as parlous a state as” Stevens imagines it to be; “that although she had indeed left her home for a period of four or five days (...), she had returned home and Mr. Benn had been very pleased to have her back” (203). Furthermore, Miss Kenton has a daughter from this marriage and will become a grandparent soon, so she is not as lonely as Stevens imagines. In this light, the notion of an emotional reunion provides the butler with an incentive to break away from Darlington Hall. At the same time, not only does this mark the initiating event of the story, but it also acts as an engine starter that sets the whole narrative into motion. Stevens maintains:

In fact, this very shortage that had been at the *heart*² of all my recent troubles. And the more I considered it, the more obvious it became that Miss Kenton, with her great affection for this house, with her exemplary professionalism — the sort almost impossible to find nowadays — was just the factor needed to enable me to complete a fully satisfactory staff plan for Darlington Hall. (10)

The only reason Stevens can convince himself to leave the house and go on a motoring tour of the country is, again, to do something for the sake of the house. He arranges his trip to “drive to the West Country and call on Miss Kenton in passing, thus exploring at first hand the substance of her wish to return to employment (...) at Darlington Hall” (11). Stevens mentions that he has “reread Miss Kenton’s recent letter several times, and there is no possibility [that he] merely imagine[s] the presence of these hints on her part” (11).

² Italics added.

However, he later admits that he may have arrived at a faulty presumption and, thereby, he misinterpreted Miss Kenton's intentions. In addition, it becomes evident at the end of the narrative that Stevens totally imagined these hints when he comes away empty-handed from the trip.

Being unable to break away from the air of professionalism that he inhabits, Stevens, again, "entrusts" himself with a "professional task" on the trip that was supposed to be taken as a vacation. The self-imposed duty is concerned with "Miss Kenton and [the house's] present staffing problems" (26). Therefore, an emotional matter is brought under the veil of professionalism by the character in order to fit into Stevens's mythical image or to comply with his notion of dignity. Here, two points are worth mentioning; the first one is that Stevens has a glimmer of hope regarding his former associate's return to Darlington Hall, and this hope is underscored by the fact that he disregards his usual refined mannerism and addresses Mrs. Benn by her maiden name, Miss Kenton. Second, and more importantly, a supposition is formed in the reader's mind that Stevens's intention for the trip is to make up the past by asking Miss Kenton's hand in marriage or at least confess his mistake of letting her go. However, Stevens does not undertake the journey to resolve the unspoken issues of the past; rather, his intention for the trip is to bring Miss Kenton back to Darlington Hall and restore her as the manor's housekeeper. In other words, Stevens tries to pull back his former associate into Darlington Hall to fit or place her into that sensuous mental image that Darlington Hall represents for him.

However, this is not the only time that the reader sees this sort of pullback or inwardness from the protagonist; It can be viewed as an act of inwardness that enables the individual to regain possession of his loved ones as if the character recovered his dear ones — or at least the people that he cares about the most — from the world outside the manor,

brings them back to Darlington Hall and try desperately to fit them into that mental image of his. A similar attitude can be observed in how Stevens handles his father's situation, namely the latter's illness, and homelessness. Stevens provides the reader with information on how he concluded to employ his father at Darlington Hall back in 1922:

My father had around this time come to the end of his distinguished service at Loughborough House with the death of his employer, Mr John Silvers, and had been at something of a loss for work and accommodation. Although he was still, of course, a professional of the highest class, he was now in his seventies and much ravaged by arthritis and other ailments. It was not at all certain, then, how he would fare against the younger breed of highly professionalized butlers looking for posts. In view of this, it seemed a reasonable solution to ask my father to bring his great experience and distinction to Darlington Hall. (48, 49)

In the above lines, it can be observed that the reasons behind Stevens' employment of his father at Darlington Hall are due to his father's "ailments" and his inability to find a job in a competitive market. However, Stevens recruits the seventy-year-old William on the grounds that, in his view, his father is the very "embodiment of [the word] dignity" (32). Even though the reader notices on different occasions that the father performs rather poorly in delivering the simple appointed tasks, Stevens still feels certain satisfaction in viewing his father's regular appearance in the house. He reckons that it is unimaginable to disregard his father's "imposing physical force," so he employs this "physical presence" to add greatness and depth to the House (61). However, a series of conspicuous gaffes from the father proves otherwise; these errors include leaving the dustpan in the hall, forgetting to polish "several pieces of silver (...) for the dining room," or dropping large drops of snot

carelessly into the soup bowls (53). Perhaps, the most telling example of William's errors is the incident with the Chinaman.

In one of the interesting episodes of the novel, Stevens recalls a "climactic" incident in "one grey and drizzly afternoon" when he "was in the billiard room attending to Lord Darlington's sporting trophies" (53). Miss Kenton — who hitherto had been criticized by Stevens for not having adequate knowledge of placing the household goods in their correct positions — enters the room abruptly and informs Stevens about the incorrect positioning of a Chinaman statue, the proper place of which is the upstairs landing and which has now been placed wrongly outside the entrance door of the billiard room. The way Stevens reacts to this news is quite significant and telling; despite Miss Kenton's forceful attempts to coerce Stevens to "step outside" the billiard room and "observe" for himself that the statue is "replaced incorrectly," Stevens shows utmost resistance. He first tells Miss Kenton that she has been "a little confused," and then when he sees the insistence on the part of the housekeeper, Stevens shifts his strategy by saying that he is "busy just now and will attend to the matter shortly. It is hardly one of urgency"; he says this to discourage his colleague from pursuing the matter (53). However, it does not seem that Stevens's answer knocks the opponent out of the competition, so to speak, as Miss Kenton responds: "I can see you will be finished very shortly, Mr. Stevens. I will await you outside so that this matter may be finalized when you come out" (54). In the lines below, Ishiguro sketches the butler's intense uneasiness about a matter of little importance; it can be seen that Stevens's anxiety level is very high for these sorts of "trivial" issues, and the butler calculates every possible move to find a way out from this suffocating situation:

Miss Kenton had departed, and sure enough, as I continued with my work, an occasional footstep or some other sound would serve to remind me she was still there

outside the door. I decided therefore to occupy myself with some further tasks in the billiard room, assuming she would after a while see the ludicrousness of her position and leave. However, after some time had passed, and I had exhausted the tasks which could usefully be achieved with the implements I happened to have at hand, Miss Kenton was evidently still outside. Resolved not to waste further time on account of this childish affair, I contemplated departure via the french windows. A drawback to this plan was the weather — that is to say, several large puddles and patches of mud were in evidence — and the fact that one would need to return to the billiard room again at some point to bolt the French windows from the inside. Eventually, then, I decided the best strategy would be simply to stride out of the room very suddenly at a furious pace. I thus made my way as quietly as possible to a position from which I could execute such a march. (54)

In spite of Stevens's speedy "march" out of the billiard room, Miss Kenton overtakes him swiftly and bars his way; she asks him again "to turn around and look at that Chinaman" (55). The butler still does not yield as he persists in showing the same resistance that he showed in the billiard room. After a few exchanges of the same nature between the two, Stevens finally pours cold water on the housekeeper's non-stop advances by saying: "If it is so important to you, Miss Kenton, I will allow that the Chinaman behind me may well be incorrectly situated. But I must say I am at some loss as to why you should be so concerned with these most trivial of errors" (55). The way Stevens reacts to the incorrect positioning of the Chinaman makes this episode one of the most telling parts of the novel; the butler is very well aware of the misplacement of the statue, and that is why he does not turn around to face it. At the same time, the avoidance of seeing the Chinaman means that acknowledging the truth would have a ruinous effect on the butler, and he has no choice

other than to accept the fact that his father, the so-called embodiment of dignity, is no longer capable of doing the assigned tasks. Therefore, looking at the Chinaman could have damaged the “mythical” image that Stevens’s ego is being fed on, and his resistance in doing so is for the sheer protection of the sensuous mental image.

There are other moments when the reader observes the same attitude from the butler. For instance, later, Lord Darlington encourages Stevens to “lighten” William’s duties and remove certain burdens from the old man’s shoulders. Still, Stevens does not show signs of flexibility toward accepting his father’s weaknesses; he reckons that the errors were “trivial slips” and reiterates that William is “still a person of considerable dependability” (57). Stevens only succumbs to Lord Darlington’s appeal when the butler is assured that his father can stay in the manor despite his ineptitude: “Look here, Stevens, there’s no question of your father leaving us. You’re simply being asked to reconsider his duties” (58). Furthermore, at the end of the conversation, the employer is compelled to shift to an authoritative tone and put forth his suggestion in the form of an order: “Your father’s days of dependability are now passing. He must not be asked to perform tasks in any area where an error might jeopardize the success of our forthcoming conference” (58). Therefore, the butler has no choice other than to obey his employer’s command because the disobedience would also make him less dignified *vis-à-vis* the image; as a result, Stevens discharges his father from the circle of regular staff members, and this produces bitterness and emotional separation between the two which persists until the death of his father.

It was the father himself, in the first place, that aggrandized the concept of dignity in his son’s eyes. When Stevens was younger, William used to recount a semi-true story about “a certain” English butler who traveled with his employer to the colonized India. There, one afternoon, the butler of the story enters “the dining room” of his employer’s

place of residence “to make sure all [is] well for dinner” when he notices a tiger languishing beneath the dining table. The butler then retreats self-composedly to his lordship’s chamber, “where his employer [is] taking tea with a number of visitors” (34). He notifies the lord sotto voce and asks the latter’s permission to use the twelve-bore shotgun to sort out the problem. Stevens maintains that according to the “legend,” a few minutes later, the lord and the guests hear three gunshots:

When the butler reappeared in the drawing room some time afterwards to refresh the teapots, the employer had inquired if all was well. “Perfectly fine, thank you, sir,” had come the reply. “Dinner will be served at the usual time and I am pleased to say there will be no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time.” This last phrase – ‘no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time’ - my father would repeat with a laugh and shake his head admiringly. [William] neither claimed to know the butler’s name, nor anyone who had known him, but he would always insist the event occurred just as he told it. In any case, it is of little importance whether or not this story is true; the significant thing is, of course, what it reveals concerning my father’s ideals. For when I look back over his career, I can see with hindsight that he must have striven throughout his years somehow to *become*³ that butler of his story. (34-35)

This was the image of a dignified professional that the father had presented to his son for many years. If one takes the story metaphorically, the above anecdote has a revealing impact on the whole narrative. The image of the “languishing” tiger under the dining room table evokes Henry James’s enigmatic beast, which also lies down in the jungle’s midst in “The Beast in the Jungle.” In both stories, the beasts are associated with the realm of emotions

³ Italics are in the source text.

that the individuals avoid engaging with. In James's tale, stoicism originates from the fear of indulging oneself in the realm of sentiments, whereas, here, emotions are considered expendables that should be suppressed for the greater good. And while a lot has going on "beneath" the surface, no "discernible" trace of the emotional vehemence should be observable on the exterior. It is as if the individual sweeps the dust under the rug; nevertheless, despite being hidden from view, the dust will always remain there. Ishiguro also suggests that a butler's role is to serve "inconspicuously"; therefore, a butler creates an "illusion of absence" while "being physically on hand to do things." Ishiguro maintains: "It seemed (...) appropriate to have somebody who wants to be this perfect butler because that seems to be a powerful metaphor for someone who is trying to actually erase the emotional part of him that may be dangerous, and that could really hurt him in his professional area. Yet he doesn't succeed because these kind of human needs, the longings for warmth and love and friendship, are things that just don't go away" (Vorda et al. 153). Stevens reckons that his father had "become" the butler of the story; however, he himself is the one that surpasses his father in inhabiting the professional persona. As a human being, Stevens's agency is alloyed with his professional persona; his identity is so integrated into the identity of Darlington Hall that he ends up being a man with no clear-cut identity. As Jack Slay notes: "Stevens's lack of identity is (...) emphasized by the fact that he is known only as 'Stevens'; with no apparent first name, he becomes 'unselfed,' possessing no self outside of his manservant role" (180). Therefore, for the reader, Stevens is the unnamed butler of the story, not William.

Furthermore, the significance of the anecdote of the butler and the tiger is revealed when the reader reaches the midway point of the narrative: Stevens reminisces about a conference at Darlington Hall in March 1923 when he reckons that he "truly [comes] of age

as a butler” (64, 65). The goal of the conference “was to gather under the (...) roof of Darlington Hall the most influential of the gentlemen whose support had been won with a view to conducting an ‘unofficial’ international conference” — a conference that would discuss “the means by which the harshest terms of the Versailles treaty could be revised” (69). Lord Darlington’s sympathy for the Germans seems to arise from the fact that his longtime friendship with a German military officer, Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann, comes to an end in 1922 due to the terminal illness of the latter. Since then, Lord Darlington felt a “strong moral” obligation as a gentleman to “relax” various aspects of the Versailles treaty to alleviate “the great suffering he (...) himself witnessed in Germany” (83). Therefore he organizes an “off the record” conference to align the opinions of the representatives of certain powerful countries with his own — especially the obdurate representatives of the U.S. and France. Stevens recalls the stress and anxiety he felt in those days: “As this date grew ever nearer, the pressures on myself (...) were nevertheless not inconsequential. I was only too aware of the possibility that if any guest were to find his stay at Darlington Hall less than comfortable, this might have repercussions of unimaginable largeness” (70).

The carping French deputy, Monsieur Dupont, arrives at the Hall with sore feet. Since M. Dupont is the pre-eminent guest whose political standpoints may significantly impact the conference’s outcome, Stevens feels a certain commitment to pay special attention to the Frenchman’s comfort. In addition, Stevens believes that he and his staff are contributing significantly to the conference, and any negligence on their part may have great “repercussions.” As Ishiguro outlines, Stevens is “somebody who desperately wants to contribute to something larger, but he thinks he is just a butler and the only way he can do this is to work for a great man. (...) He is driven by this urge to do things perfectly, and not only do things perfectly, but that perfect contribution should be, no matter however small a

contribution it is, to improving humanity. That is Stevens' position" (Vorda et al. 152). The butler even gives "the staff a military-style 'pep-talk,'" emphasizing that "History⁴ could well be made under this roof" (71). However, despite all of his preparations, Stevens faces a double whammy, so to speak, at the conference. Not only does M. Dupont find his stay at Darlington Hall "less than comfortable," but also William's health deteriorates, and the father needs special care. Stevens is attending to the Frenchman when he is informed by the "first footman" that his "father [has] been taken ill upstairs" (84). Once the father has been "laid in his bed," Stevens is "a little uncertain as to how to proceed" because it seems "undesirable" for him to leave his father in such state and at the same time he does not "really have a moment more to spare" (84). As Stevens stands hesitantly in the doorway, Miss Kenton comes to his rescue, ensuring him that she will attend the father and "shall show Dr Meredith up and notify" Stevens if the doctor has anything "noteworthy" to say (84). Here, Ishiguro delineates a sharp dichotomy between the emotional and professional realms; there is an episode in the novel when Stevens goes back upstairs to check on his father. Gazing "tiredly at the backs of his hands," it is evident that William is foreseeing his imminent death. The father then breaks his professional posture and tries to open up to his son: "I'm proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I haven't." William even repeats himself a couple of times; however, it seems that Stevens, still, has trouble finding the proper words for such moments. The only words Stevens manages to utter are: "I'm afraid we're extremely busy now" or "I'm glad father is feeling so much better, (...) Now really, I'd best be getting back. As I say, the situation is rather volatile" (87). The last moments that Stevens could have spent with his father are sacrificed

⁴ Capitalized in the original.

for the sake of the “volatile” hours of the kitchen so that everything would be well prepared for the conference’s supper.

Later, when Stevens is informed that his father has fallen into a state of unconsciousness, he quickly goes upstairs again, and his only reaction to the news is that “this is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs” (93). He hurries down the stairs “in time” to see the gentlemen proceeding into the smoking room. Having a bottle of port on his tray, Stevens contributes to the “celebratory atmosphere” of the room. Ishiguro provides an interesting narrative turn in the smoking-room episode. Although the writer maintains the first-person point of view, we get to see Stevens from the perspectives of those in the smoking room. For instance, when Stevens joins Reginald Cardinal “in his laughter,” the young man keeps asking Stevens “are you all right?” A similar narrative strategy is used when through Lord Darlington, the reader SEES the focalizer: “Stevens, are you all right? (...) You look as though you’re crying” (94). Taking out a handkerchief without delay, the butler laughs again and quickly “wipes” his face: “I’m very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day” (94). In another instance, M. Dupont follows Stevens and tells the butler that his feet are unbearable and that he is in pain. Despite the emotional suffering that Stevens is going through, his professional façade does not collapse. The act of wiping tears from his face indicates how the butler strives not to allow the emotions to erupt on the surface. Wending his way past the guests with a bottle of port, Stevens notices Miss Kenton standing in the hall. She informs the butler that his father passed away “four minutes ago” and wants to know whether Stevens wishes to go up and close his father’s eyes. Stevens tells the housekeeper he is “busy,” and Miss Kenton asks for the butler’s permission to close the dead man’s eyes. Furthermore, Dr. Meredith, the doctor who was telephoned to visit

William, arrives late at the Hall, and Stevens ushers him to attend M. Dupont instead of William.

As the subject's ego is absorbed more and more into the world of Darlington Hall — which the smoking room can be seen as a representation of — the butler's sense of professionalism *decolorizes* the outside reality; therefore, metaphorically speaking, as the butler feels he closes on touching “greatness,” the father, who represents the emotional side of the character, fades and perishes. As one commentator suggests: “As his father dies, Stevens continues his duties, serving drinks, maintaining proper order, retrieving bandages for the deplorable M. Dupont, all the while unaware that he is crying, his inner walls crumbling under the weight of humanity, his outer walls standing firm” (Slay 180). Stevens regards his experience of the conference of 1932 as a “triumph” and claims that despite “all its sad associations” whenever he recalls the evening of his father's death, he finds he does so “with a large sense of triumph” (98). In this light, the anecdote of the tiger and the butler is a parallel side story to the episode of William's death. The father, the person who familiarizes his son with the anecdote, becomes the tiger himself in the end — A tiger that perishes unnoticeably amid a ceremony while the impervious butler is entertaining his employer's guests.

The Sense of Judgement and the Moral Status of the Employer

In spite of everything that has been said, Stevens's state of intense subserviency is not totally devoid of rationale. At the novel's midpoint, Stevens elaborates on the reason behind his unconditional commitment to his master and why the butlers of his age should be differentiated from the butlers of the past. He introduces his generation of butlers as

“idealists” who, unlike their elders, are not occupied with the idea of “whether or not an employer [is] titled” (104). In contrast, the “moral status of an employer” in the public sphere and his sense of judgment were foregrounded. In this regard, a moral employer is viewed as an “appropriate outlet” that could provide an employee with a vessel, a tool through which a butler could project himself into the world in order to channel his contribution to “furthering the progress of humanity” and hence to gain “professional prestige” (102). As Stevens states later: “A ‘great’ butler can only be, surely, one who can point to his years of service and say that he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman — and through the latter, to serving humanity” (104). However, it is revealed that the outlet Stevens chose had a flawed sense of judgment, as the employer’s decisions did not go well hand in hand with ethical values. This does not mean that Lord Darlington was essentially a morally corrupted person. Rather, it signifies that Lord Darlington was a naïve aristocrat who allowed others on numerous occasions to dupe him, and morality, to him, should not be viewed as the most important criterion that he adjusted his affairs based on that credo. For instance, through Stevens, we get to know that Lord Darlington received “hospitality from the Nazis on the several trips he made to Germany” during the 1930s; he also welcomed the British Union of Fascists, the so-called “Blackshirts” at Darlington Hall during the same decade (121).

Stevens rejects his employer’s anti-semitic sentiments, shifting the blame on Joachim von Ribbentrop, a close affiliate and confidant of Adolf Hitler, who, in Stevens’s view, was entrusted with a mission to conceal Hitler’s true intentions and “to deceive England for as long as possible” (120). However, there are a few “incidents” in that Lord Darlington shows antagonism towards the Jewish race. One is perhaps the employer’s instruction to stop money donations to a local charity on the grounds that they are

“homogeneously Jewish”; another one is when Stevens recalls “overhearing at dinner one evening, when [the name of] a particular newspaper [has] been mentioned,” and Lord Darlington remarks with disdain: “Oh, you mean that Jewish propaganda sheet” (130). Still, Stevens regards such incidents as “extremely minor,” just like when he turned his head away from seeing his father’s “trivial slips.” However, an episode in the novel casts serious doubt on the genuineness of the employer’s moral judgment.

Stevens recounts an afternoon when Lord Darlington calls the butler into his study, suggesting the dismissal of the Jewish staff members. Assuring Stevens that he has “looked into this matter and thought it through thoroughly,” the employer concludes that “the safety and well-being” of his guests at Darling Hall would be at risk due to the presence of two Jewish housemaids on the staff. It is evident that the butler is shocked by the odd request of the employer; nevertheless, he does not demur or at least offer his opinion on the matter. Furthermore, Sarah and Ruth, the Jewish housemaids who worked under the direct supervision of Miss Kenton, had served Darlington Hall “excellently” for over six years. Therefore, Stevens has no doubt about the professionalism of the Jewish housemaids and their sense of duty. When Miss Kenton is informed about the ousting, she becomes outraged, labeling the decision as “wrong” and “sinful,” to which Stevens retorts, “we must not allow sentiment to creep into our judgement” (132). The latter remark is, of course, ironic because the reason behind the dismissals is based on antagonistic sentiments and has no professional explanation. Nevertheless, Stevens’s remark does not seem to abate the tension with Miss Kenton, as she warns him that she will quit if “her girls” are dismissed. The resignation threat seems to fluster the butler, making him “impatient,” as he later confesses to the reader (133). Stevens tries desperately to vindicate his employer’s decision to keep hold of the housekeeper:

Miss Kenton, let me suggest to you that you are hardly well placed to be passing judgements of such a high and mighty nature. The fact is, the world of today is a very complicated and treacherous place. There are many things you and I are simply not in a position to understand concerning, say, the nature of Jewry. Whereas his lordship, I might venture, is somewhat better placed to judge what is for the best.

(132)

As seen in the above lines, Stevens gulps down his sense of moral judgment to save a greater picture. As Michel Terestchenko argues, Stevens is “aware of the evil nature of [his] employer’s decision”; however, he “dissembles and represses his disapproval, clearly in the name of the pompously referred to professional duty. (...) When Stevens complies with the iniquitous order without any discussion, thinking that it is unbecoming for him to contest its justness, his conduct is in conformity with his professional ethics, which consist in putting aside his feelings” (86). Furthermore, in spite of her ultimatum, Miss Kenton does not resign during that period; later, she unbosoms herself to the butler, telling him that she has no place to go and that if she had one, she would not be a “coward” to stay at Darlington Hall and observe the harm that had been done to the young girls.

Interestingly, Stevens also admits that an injustice has been done to the Jewish housemaids; however, he does so only after his employer confesses his error. A year later, when Lord Darlington’s relationship with Carolyn Barnet — an influential member of the Blackshirts — deteriorates, he confides to Stevens that “what [had] occurred” with the Jewish housemaids “was wrong” (134). Stevens then rushes to Miss Kenton, who is presently in the summerhouse, telling her: “What’s done can hardly be undone. But it is at least a great comfort to hear his lordship declare so unequivocally that it was all a terrible misunderstanding. I just thought you’d like to know, Miss Kenton, since I recall you were

as distressed by the episode as I was” (136). Miss Kenton replies in a confounding tone that she does not understand Stevens, and as she recalls, the butler was “positively cheerful” about the incident. Stevens finds the housekeeper’s verdict “quite incorrect and unfair” and mentions that “the whole matter caused [him] great concern” and “it is hardly the sort of thing [he] like[s] to see happen” at Darlington Hall. Then, when Miss Kenton asks why he did not come clean about the matter a year ago, Stevens “laughs” and rather finds himself “at a loss for an answer” (136). The Butler does not question Lord Darlington’s sense of judgment at first because doing so would mean direct sabotage on the mental picture — a picture that regards his employer as a moral “outlet” and any action other than obeying his master would abrade the image. However, once the employer himself admits to his error, the butler is glad that he finds the chance to express his thoughts; in this way, he relieves his conscience of the harm that has been done and, at the same time, protects his mental image. Also, Lilian Furst posits that “Stevens indulges in memories of the greatest butlers of recent years on whom he models himself and against whom he measures his own performance.” She maintains:

He thereby engages in stereotyping and (...) in his sustained endeavor to conform to the paradigm of the great butler. So his actions, his conduct, his bearing are all geared to his preconceived notion of how a great butler should behave. His clinging to his chosen role prompts Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, to ask in exasperation, “Why, Mr. Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?” It is a question that he laughs off nervously, but to readers the answer is quite clear: he always has to pretend.” (541)

After Lord Darlington’s death, Stevens still tries to preserve his former employer’s legacy, presenting Lord Darlington’s public persona as a dignified moralist in the name of “loyalty.”

However, the reader discovers that after World War II, Lord Darlington was labeled by the newspapers as a Nazi sympathizer. There was a consensus in public opinion that he was a traitor to England; this left the man in misery, depression, and isolation until he died. Nevertheless, Stevens reckons his former master as “a gentleman of great moral stature,” and to preserve his legacy, he *dissociates* himself with Lord Darlington after the employer’s death (112). For instance, after reaching Dorset, Stevens meets a hillbilly sort of guy and engages in a conversation with him while the fellow helps the butler with the car’s radiator. When the man learns about Stevens’s employment at Darlington Hall, he gets excited: “You really must be top-notch working in a place like that. Can’t be many like you left, eh? (...) You mean you actually used to work for that Lord Darlington?” The response that Stevens gives to the man is interesting: “It was Lord Darlington’s residence until his death three years ago. (...) The house is now the residence of Mr John Farraday, an American gentleman. (...) Oh no, I am employed by Mr John Farraday, the American gentleman who bought the house from the Darlington family” (106). Since Stevens ends the discussion before its commencement, the local Englishman has no choice but to conclude: “Oh, so you wouldn’t have known that Lord Darlington. Just that I wondered what he was like. What sort of bloke he was” (107). Stevens lies about working under Lord Darlington partly because he finds peasants inferior “dwarfs” who talk “nonsense,” and he does not want to engage in a conversation about his former master with them because he knows that the conversation will end in a political debate, and politics is not a realm suitable to be discussed with the local hillbillies. One can then imagine how uneasy Stevens becomes when he is urged to discuss politics with villagers in a cottage near Tavistock when he is offered lodgings by Mr. and Mrs. Taylor. The second reason, and perhaps the more important one, is that Stevens finds any kind of argument not in favor of Lord Darlington as an assault on the sensuous element. Therefore, in order not to hear any criticism regarding his deceased

master's political and moral judgment, Stevens redirects, lies, or misleads others because the image of his employer as a moral stature gives him enormous satisfaction: "I gave thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington; one would surely not be unjustified in claiming that during those years, one was, in the truest terms, 'attached to a distinguished household.' In looking back over my career thus far, my chief satisfaction derives from what I achieved during those years, and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege" (112).

There are other instances in which Stevens dissociates himself from his former employer. In one of her visits to Darlington Hall, Mrs. Wakefield, an American friend of Mr. Farraday, asks the butler about his association with Lord Darlington: "But tell me, Stevens, what was this Lord Darlington like? Presumably you must have worked for him." Stevens answers: "I didn't, madam, no" (109). Later, when Mr. Farraday inquires about Stevens's authenticity as a "genuine old-fashioned English butler," the butler does not accept that he lied to his employer's guest:

I mean to say, Stevens, this *is*⁵ a genuine grand old English house, isn't it? That's what I paid for. And you're a genuine old-fashioned English butler, not just some waiter pretending to be one. You're the real thing, aren't you? That's what I wanted, isn't that what I have?

I venture to say you do, sir.

Then can you explain to me what Mrs Wakefield is saying? It's a big mystery to me.

It is possible I may well have given the lady a slightly misleading picture concerning my career, sir. I do apologize if this caused embarrassment. (110)

It is evident that Stevens clearly dissociates himself from his former master, but he later only says that he gave a "slightly misleading picture" of the past circumstances. Again we

⁵ Italics is in the original source.

observe the same approach from the butler when he indirectly stops the woman from assaulting the reputation of his former employer. Here, the allusion to Henry James's seminal short story, "The Real Thing," is worthy of attention. In that story, James also creates a dichotomy between the genuine reality vs. the representation of reality; and James poses the question of which of these two is more real in the eyes of the viewer? In Mr. Farraday's eyes, it seems that Stevens's association with Lord Darlington makes him a "genuine" English butler. However, Stevens thinks that his inherent qualities make him genuine and dignified in the eyes of his employer.

Anagnorisis: A World about to Collapse

As the narrative reaches its ending and Stevens is also close to reaching Weymouth, his destination, he reminisces about the episode that had led to Miss Kenton's resignation from Darlington Hall. Miss Kenton, who wants to draw affection from the butler, attempts a few times to narrow the emotional gap between the two. The climactic episode of the novel occurs when Miss Kenton tells Stevens that she is soon to marry:

"Are you not in the least interested in what took place tonight between my acquaintance and I, Mr Stevens?"

"I do not mean to be rude, Miss Kenton, but I really must return upstairs without further delay. The fact is, events of a global significance are taking place in this house at this very moment."

"When are they not, Mr Stevens? Very well, if you must be rushing off, I shall just tell you that I accepted my acquaintance's proposal."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Kenton?"

"His proposal of marriage."

"Ah, is that so, Miss Kenton? Then may I offer you my congratulations."

(...)

I started to walk away again, but then when I had all but reached the doors out to the corridor, I heard Miss Kenton say: “Mr Stevens, (...) Am I to take it,” she said, “that after the many years of service I have given in this house, you have no more words to greet the news of my possible departure than those you have just uttered?”

“Miss Kenton, you have my warmest congratulations. But I repeat, there are matters of global significance taking place upstairs and I must return to my post.” (190-191)

Here, there is a significant parallel to the episode of Williams’s death. Again, an important meeting is taking place in Darlington Hall. Lord Darlington secretly invited the British prime minister and the German Ambassador in order to persuade the former “to accept an invitation to visit Herr Hitler” (195). Regie Cardinal, now a journalist, shows up at Darlington’s residence and asks Stevens if “everything is all right?” (192) And again, Stevens has to conceal his emotions in favor of “good professionalism.” However, this time, the butler discovers the truth about his employer’s foolishness. Regie asks Stevens to sit with him, and the young man tells Stevens that his employer is a “fool” and that the butler has been serving a wrong cause all these years:

“I’ll tell you this, Stevens. His lordship is being made a fool of. (...) His lordship is a dear, dear man. But the fact is, he is out of his depth. He is being manoeuvred. The Nazis are manoeuvring him like a pawn. Have you noticed this, Stevens? Have you noticed this is what has been happening for the last three or four years at least?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I have failed to notice any such development.”

“Haven’t you even had a suspicion? The smallest suspicion that Herr Hitler, through our dear friend Herr Ribbentrop, has been manoeuvring his lordship like a pawn, just as easily as he manoeuvres any of his other pawns back in Berlin?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I’m afraid I have not noticed any such development.”

“But I suppose you wouldn’t, Stevens, because you’re not curious. You just let all this go on before you and you never think to look at it for what it is. (...) His lordship is a gentleman. That’s what’s at the root of it. He’s a gentleman, and he fought a war with the Germans, and it’s his instinct to offer generosity and friendship to a defeated foe. It’s his instinct. Because he’s a gentleman, a true old English gentleman. *And you must have seen it, Stevens. How could you not have seen it?*⁶ (...) Over the last few years, his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler

⁶ Italics added.

has had in this country for his propaganda tricks. (...) His lordship has been trying to persuade the Prime Minister himself to accept an invitation to visit Herr Hitler. He really believes there's a terrible misunderstanding on the Prime Minister's part concerning the present German regime. And that's not all, Stevens. At this very moment, unless I am very much mistaken, at this very moment, his lordship is discussing the idea of His Majesty himself visiting Herr Hitler. It's hardly a secret our new king has always been an enthusiast for the Nazis. Well, apparently he's now keen to accept Herr Hitler's invitation. At this very moment, Stevens, his lordship is doing what he can to remove Foreign Office objections to this appalling idea."

(...)

"Tell me, Stevens, aren't you struck by even the remote possibility that I am correct? Are you not, at least, *curious* about what I am saying?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have to say that I have every trust in his lordship's good judgement." (193-196)

Regie's words prove that, in fact, Stevens has seen the flaw in his employer's actions; however, he does not want to accept it, and when Regie asks Stevens that he does not think that there is a slight "possibility" that the employer might be wrong, Stevens's answers look like as if they were coming from an automaton rather than a human being. He does not try to find common ground with Regie. Therefore he immediately negates every assault the young man has upon Lord Darlington's character. As Amit Marcus contends: "Compromise is impossible for Stevens, since dignity is perceived not only as a value to be judged and rated in relation to other values, but as a professional being, which is equivalent, in Stevens's view, to his own existence. Thus, he considers any assault on dignity as a threat on his existence, his professional being" (143). Nevertheless, the fact that Stevens claims he remembers that event so vividly allows the reader to infer that something happened that evening, which could not be regarded as an ordinary incident for the protagonist. Even though Stevens ends up as a regretful person at the end of the novel, he resists breaking the persona that he inhabits in the face of his moment of discovery — the discovery that his self-

made image of “greatness” is falling apart and his master is nothing but a puppet in the public scene.

Even though Stevens pretends that he is calm about Miss Kenton’s marriage, he finds himself going downstairs and “pausing” in front of Miss Kenton’s room, sensing a feeling of despair. He feels an “ever-growing conviction” that Miss Kenton is crying on the other side of the door: “As I recall, there was no real evidence to account for this conviction — I had certainly not heard any sounds of crying — and yet I remember being quite certain that were I to knock and enter, I would discover her in tears. I do not know how long I remained standing there; at the time it seemed a significant period, but in reality, I suspect, it was only a matter of a few seconds” (197). Later, Stevens takes his “usual position beneath the arch,” waiting for his employer to call upon him. He admits that his mood was “downcast” at first, but thinking about his “achievement” that night eventually helps him to overcome the spirit. Nevertheless, he confesses to the reader that the hour he spent “standing there has stayed very vividly in his mind throughout the years” (197). Monika Gehlawat comments on this climactic moment drawing attention to how the butler “neutralizes” his subjectivity regarding expressing his desire for Miss Kenton. She posits:

“We all have a part to play,” he repeats throughout the narrative, and that part is to neutralize oneself through systematic objectification. This belief helps to explain why Stevens’s greatest moment is when he stands perfectly still for hours in the front hall, waiting on his master after rejecting Miss Kenton. Neither speaking nor acting, Stevens momentarily perfects his objectification, for like a statue, he stands unmoved by his subjective feelings of loss and desire. (517)

Even though the narrative structure pushes the reader to this great moment of realization, it can be observed that Stevens still takes sides with the sensuous mental image, and as

Gehlawat mentions, Stevens remains so passive that he metaphorically turns into a statue in front of the door of his employer's guest room resembling the statue of the chinaman standing motionless in front of the billiard room — an image that distances the protagonist from reality and dictates the self not to engage with other people and the realm of emotion. In the end, when the protagonist has to go back empty-handed from his mission, what remains for him “is a lifetime's worth of memories to recount and ponder regarding the many crucial life decisions that were made and opportunities for a better life missed” (Teo 112). In the final scene of the novel, Stevens finds his heart “breaking,” and he cannot stop the stream of tears coming down from his eyes (208). The now aged Stevens finally breaks his persona, and the way he cries gives one the sense that all the emotions he had suppressed over the years are erupting on the surface, and he has no control to stop them.

Chapter Six

Fictive Imagination and Vascular Dementia in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

In an interview about *Atonement*, Ian McEwan's most celebrated novel, the writer states that *Atonement* is his "Jane Austen novel" (Giles). Here, McEwan reiterates a point he made at the novel's beginning. In the novel's epigraph, the writer uses a quote from Austen's *Northanger Abbey* when Catherine Morland, Austen's naïve and coming-of-age heroine, is rebuked for over-indulgence with gothic romances, especially her fondness of Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Brian Finney is one of the first critics who commented on the significance of McEwan's allusion:

Austen's protagonist, Catherine Morland, who is reprimanded by Henry Tilney in the quoted extract for her naïve response to events around her, is the victim of reading fiction — the Gothic romances of her day — and failing to make a distinction between the fictive and the real. McEwan ironically has the Tallis country house renamed Tilney's Hotel as a sly tribute to this fictional precedent. McEwan sees *Northanger Abbey* as a novel 'about someone's wild imagination causing havoc to people around them.' (Finney 70)

Swayed by the ideas of the gothic murder stories, Catherine's self-deception led her to believe that each secluded abbey is a haunted place. As a result, she considers General Tilney, the owner of the abbey, a high-rank Bluebeard who practices uxoricide. Still, *Northanger Abbey* is not the only inspirational source for McEwan's *magnum opus*. In another interview with Dan Cryer for *Newsday*, McEwan reveals that the point of view and the epistemological issues of *Atonement* are taken directly from Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*: "I didn't want to write about a child's mind with the limitations of a child's vocabulary or a child's point of view. I wanted to be more like [Henry] James in *What Maisie Knew*: to use the full resources of an adult mentality remembering herself" (25).

Briony Tallis, the pubescent protagonist of McEwan's novel, replicates Maisie in many ways. For example, the way James treats subjects like knowledge and consciousness in *What Maisie Knew* is echoed in *Atonement*. In both stories, a child-like consciousness is present at the center of the events. However, it is not fully developed or capacitated to avoid making unerring judgments. Still, McEwan's *innocent eye* POV technique in *Atonement* is not James's invention; rather, it is the literary descendant of dramatic irony, which has been one of the most commonly-practiced literary devices in drama since the tragedies of the ancient Greek theater. Therefore, in a sense, all three narratives — *Atonement*, *Northanger*, and *Maisie* — tackle the epistemological issues of human understanding; however, while *Atonement* and *Northanger* employ a recognition plot proper, *Maisie* focuses on the process of human understanding *per se*.

Pilar Hidalgo is another critic who emphasizes “the presence of the history of the English novel in *Atonement*.” Hidalgo sees strong character ties between Briony, Catherine, and Maisie and postulates that “part 1 [of *Atonement*] appears as a rich depository of motifs and narrative techniques. As a young girl who cannot understand the world of adults, Briony descends both from Jane Austen's Catherine and Henry James's Maisie, although the country house motif points to Austen as the central influence at work” (Hidalgo 84). Still, I believe Hidalgo misses out on an essential point in her analogy; that point is that *Atonement*'s plot “complication” borrows its form and style from *Maisie* rather than from *Northanger*.

Similar to Maisie, Briony, the dominant central consciousness of McEwan's novel, is an innocent observer of a scene of adult sexual pursuits taking place between her older sister Cecilia and her lover Robbie which she (Briony) cannot digest properly due to the lack of age. And the *hamartia* (blindness) of the character or the act of misreading the

situation creates a havoc with an everlasting and unchangeable consequence. Briony's *hamartia* emanates from her powerful yet quixotic imagination — an “intact inner world” that often mixes up the real with fiction (McEwan 72).

Still, categorically, the commonality of these three works revolves around concepts such as knowledge and recognition. In all three narratives, the reader is some steps ahead of the central consciousnesses knowing facts the character has trouble discerning. In other words, while the central consciousnesses are in ignorance due to their immaturity and naivete, the (adult) reader has a superior understanding of the situation and the narrative circumstances. With the employment of such a narration technique, the writer draws a dividing line between the reader and the character (the central consciousness) in terms of knowledge and understanding while maintaining the POV of the central consciousness (focalizer). Therefore, although the readers observe the narrative incidents through the *visueur* of the main character, they possess a more profound understanding of reality than the focalizer. Such a narration technique directly touches upon the classic recognition plot and the idea of “cosmic irony,” when the hero's unawareness about his fate induces him to persist in pernicious actions rather than non-destructive ones, which eventually propels him towards his pre-destined, unavoidable doom. In cosmic irony, although *anagnorisis* is the crucial part of the plot structure, the moment of recognition arrives too late, when the damage has already been done; hence a reversion of circumstances is impossible. This can also be applied to Briony Tallis's story, the quixotic protagonist of *Atonement*, whose over-indulgence in fiction and the unreal forces her to have a judgemental error. She possesses a powerful fictive imagination that leads her to believe that Robbie Turner, the son of the charwoman of the Tallis's residence, rapes Lola Quincey, Briony's older cousin. Briony eventually discovers that the culprit was Paul Marshall, a friend of Leon, Briony's older

brother; however, this recognition occurs too late and at a point when Cecilia and Robbie's reunion has become impossible. In the following, I will discuss the reason for Briony's blindness and her persistence in accusing Robbie of raping Lola.

The Mayhem of Minds and Fictive Imagination

In *Atonement*, McEwan tackles such ideas as recognition and self-understanding through a phenomenological medium. The author's approach becomes evident not much into the narrative. After Lola cleverly snatches away the role of Arabella¹ from Briony, the downhearted protagonist goes back to her room, reflecting on the thought that no one is as "unique" to the world outside as they are in themselves:

Briony sat on the floor with her back to one of the tall built-in toy cupboards and fanned her face with the pages of her play. The silence in the house was complete—no voices or footfalls downstairs, no murmurs from the plumbing; in the space between one of the open sash windows a trapped fly had abandoned its struggle, and outside, the liquid birdsong had evaporated in the heat. She pushed her knees out straight before her and let the folds of her white muslin dress and the familiar, endearing, pucker of skin about her knees fill her view. (...) The silence hissed in her ears and her vision was faintly distorted—her hands in her lap appeared unusually large and at the same time remote, as though viewed across an immense distance. She raised one hand and flexed its fingers and wondered, as she had sometimes before, how this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her

¹ Arabella is the heroine of a play that Briony wrote to welcome the arrival of his brother, Leon, and his guest, Paul Marshall to the Tallis' mansion. The importance of Arabella lies in the fact that Briony assigns the role of Arabella to herself while she was writing the play; however, Lola Quincey wittingly takes away the part from Briony and casts herself as the beautiful heroine of the play.

arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command. Or did it have some little life of its own? She bent her finger and straightened it. The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her *intention*² took effect. It was like a wave breaking. If she could only find herself at the crest, she thought, she might find the secret of herself, that part of her that was really in charge. She brought her forefinger closer to her face and stared at it, urging it to move. It remained still because she was pretending, she was not entirely serious, and because willing it to move, or being about to move it, was not the same as actually moving it. And when she did crook it finally, the action seemed to start in the finger itself, not in some part of her mind. When did it know to move, when did she know to move it? There was no catching herself out. It was either-or. There was no stitching, no seam, and yet she knew that behind the smooth continuous fabric was the real self—was it her *soul*?³—which took the decision to cease pretending, and gave the final command. (...) A second thought always followed the first, one mystery bred another: Was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal

² Italics Added.

³ Italics Added.

importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. (39-40)

In the passage above, what Briony considers as "soul" can be replaced by the concept of ego. The subject meditates on the fact that her soul (ego) is a separate entity from her body. Briony's field of vision then constantly focuses and re-focuses on different objects around her, like a fly or her hand. Intending toward her hand, she tries to find out what "part" of her being is in command of her bodily movements and is "really in charge." She is well aware that what constitutes the essence of a human being is not the outside shell that exists in the world of matter but rather the inexplicable and mysterious dimension which is hidden from view and is trapped inside the corpus. Still, she wonders whether everyone else has the same (concealed) ego behind this physical façade. Therefore, if everybody had a unique voice within themselves, there must have been millions of unique individuals existing in the world of the matter. Briony finds such a notion highly unsettling and irksome due to the fact that she, in her world of imagination, always considers herself the heroine and a master of an inner universe. And the affairs of this inner world (must) revolve around the heroine's center. However, contrasting with this inner world of order, "the social world" is viewed as a world of disorderliness — a world of conflicting egos where each ego tries to project its uniqueness, self-image, and self-understanding onto the outside world, thereby silencing the significance and uniqueness of the other voices in the process. In the opening of the novel, McEwan emphasizes Briony's tendency to centralize herself as the master and the heroine of her inner imaginary world — an inner world of perfect order where every doll or miniature figure is on guard, waiting for their owner's command:

She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so.

Whereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes,

unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—toward their owner—as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact, Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table—cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice—suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders. A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. (8-9)

The dichotomy between Briony's orderly world inside and the disorderly world outside evokes Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* when Stevens, the butler of the story, constructs his selfhood and professional identity around a world of perfect order inside the little world of Darlington Hall. In *The Remains*, the world outside Darlington Hall is a place of mayhem and social unrest; similarly, Briony's room is "the only tidy upstairs room in the house," where the protagonist can be in total control, protecting this isolated space from the chaotic influence of the outside world. David O'Hara also discovers certain affinities between *Atonement*'s first part and *The Remains* regarding mainly the settings of the two novels. He points out that the overall ambiance of both works presages the sense of a cultural end or collapse of tradition: "The whole setting—the tiredness of the house's day-to-day ritual, the gradual slippage of old hierarchies—adds to a sense of a culture in its final days. As Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, this is a pre-Second World War England still largely ambivalent about the extremity of what lay ahead" (O'Hara 76).

Still, another aspect that ties *Atonement* to *The Remains* — and is imperative in understanding both novels' protagonists — is the fact that Briony and Stevens are

disinclined to modify their self-images in compliance with the social world outside their consciousnesses; rather, the adaptation process is the other way around. Therefore, similar to Stevens, Briony tends to be a self-engulfed “prima-donna” who tries to adapt other people’s self-images to her own. Perhaps it would not be a far-fetched claim to say that both Briony and Stevens suffer from an inner dictator, an absolutist ego that gets unsettled by the notion that there are billions of self-images co-existing in the world with the same degree of uniqueness and intensity. Thus, from one angle, *Atonement*’s central theme is Briony’s thirst and struggle to superimpose her inner mental image onto others. In a world filled with disparate, unique, and divergent self-images, Briony almost always tries to ignore other *selves* (self-images) and adapt the other existing conflictory viewpoints to her self-image. This is the reason why Briony seems like an uncompromising, either/or individual in Part One of the novel. In fact, McEwan’s narrative technique is highly significant in this regard as the author employs the Jamesian “centre of consciousness” method with a focalizer change in each chapter. In this way, McEwan is able to narrate the story, not through a single viewpoint but from the mayhem of conflicting minds where each mind tries to project its self-image unto the idyllic world of the Tallis’s residence. As can be observed, McEwan repeatedly shifts the focalizer between Briony, Cecilia, Robbie, Emily, Paul Marshall, etc., to inculcate a sense of the mayhem of minds in the reader. The employment of a multi-dimensional point of view in *Atonement* has attracted the attention of notable critics such as Frank Kermode. Referring to Kermode’s review of *Atonement*, Richard Robinson sees McEwan’s POV technique as a successor of a Jamesian “proto-modernism.” Robinson writes:

In his review “Point of View,” Frank Kermode commented that “one is tempted to imagine that the best readers of [*Atonement*] might be Henry James and Ford Madox

Ford,” signaling a kinship not only with Woolfian modernism, but also with the proto-modernism of James and his influence on the “impressionist” technique of Ford and Conrad. Generally, the triangulated perspectives of Briony, Robbie, and Cecilia may recall what Ian Watt called the “multidimensional” quality of James’s method. (Robinson 484)

Praising McEwan’s “complicated perspectivist structure,” Peter Mathews indicates that the author’s “tactic” of the constant shift in POV “requires the reader continually to revise their view of particular events and characters” (Mathews 151). Again, this technique is evocative of James’s late phase of works like *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

There is a vital purpose behind the constant focalizer oscillation in *Atonement*. With the employment of such a “tactic,” McEwan emphasizes the incongruity between Briony’s mental self-image and the image that she projects in the world outside her consciousness. In other words, the reader has access to Briony’s ego-centric self-image — a self-image with the illusion that Briony is the centralized heroine in all of life’s circumstances — and at the same time, they are able to see Briony through the other characters’ *visueur* or consciousness. Contemplating McEwan’s POV method — particularly in Part One of *Atonement* — the reader gradually learns that there is a substantial disparity between how Briony wants to project, assert or impose her significance or particularity on others and the way the real world resists complying with Briony’s mental image. Therefore, the protagonist’s error of judgment, first and foremost, emanates from the fact that Briony wants to dictate and superimpose an illusory mental image on real-life circumstances.

McEwan portrays the nature of Briony's struggle very early on in the novel. For example, in chapter one, when Briony is rehearsing *The Trials of Arabella*⁴ with her three cousins, Lola cunningly succeeds in casting herself as the heroine of the play, Arabella — the play's central role Briony assigned to herself: "She [Briony] *was*⁵ Arabella" (17). Seeing her self-image demolished by Lola, Briony fails to find a middle ground and thus terminates the play's performance altogether. Another instance occurs in chapter eleven. At the dinner table, when Briony complains that Pierrot and Jackson are wearing her "strawberry socks," she is immediately castigated by Cecilia: "Shut up, for goodness' sake! You really are a tiresome little prima donna" (144). Briony, who views herself as the protector of her older sister against Robbie, is shocked by Cecilia's remark: "Briony stared at her, amazed. Attacked, betrayed, by the one she only longed to protect" (144). Other examples can be found throughout the novel; most importantly, one can refer to the episode in the opening segments of Part Three when the eighteen-year-old Briony starts her job as a trainee nurse at St Thomas' Hospital.

As a rookie nurse, Briony feels like getting "stripped away" from her "identity" because no one is supposed to call her by her first name. Briony points out to Sister Drummond, the head nurse, "that a mistake had been made with her name badge. She was B. Tallis, not, as it said on the little rectangular brooch, N. Tallis. The reply was calm. 'You are, and will remain, as you have been designated. Your Christian name is of no interest to me. Now kindly sit down, Nurse Tallis'" (279). The narrator finds such moments of "humiliation" to be "instructive" incidents for the character's maturation process. Suppose any form of understanding arises from such embarrassing moments of social interactions,

⁴ A play that the protagonist wrote to welcome her older brother Leon.

⁵ Italics in the source.

in that case, the underlying lesson is that Briony is not as significant of a person in the social space as she believes she is inside her mind; that perhaps she is equally insignificant as everybody else. But does the obstinate Briony learn this lesson? Therefore, most of the novel portrays Briony's inner conflict — her persistence in projecting or imposing her imaginary self-image unto the world and her refusal to accept that she is insignificant, ordinary, and voiceless amid the existing multitude of other self-images and voices in the social world.

Also, the way Briony handles these social let-downs is quite telling. Instead of trying to resolve her social conflicts through mutual concession, Briony settles the score in her imaginary inner world. For example, when Briony sees that she cannot stand up to Lola and the twins to salvage her play, she deserts the scene and rips off the play's poster in frustration. However, we later see that she takes revenge on Lola and the twins, not in the real world, but in the world of her imagination:

She had found a slender hazel branch and stripped it clean. There was work to do, and she set about it. A tall nettle with a preening look, its head coyly drooping and its middle leaves turned outward like hands protesting innocence—this was Lola, and though she whimpered for mercy, the singing arc of a three-foot switch cut her down at the knees and sent her worthless torso flying. This was too satisfying to let go, and the next several nettles were Lola too; this one, leaning across to whisper in the ear of its neighbor, was cut down with an outrageous lie on her lips; here she was again, standing apart from the others, head cocked in poisonous scheming; over there she lorded it among a clump of young admirers and was spreading rumors about Briony. It was regrettable, but the admirers had to die with her. Then she rose again, brazen with her various sins—pride, gluttony, avarice, uncooperativeness—and for each she paid with a life. Her final act of spite was to fall at Briony's feet and sting

her toes. When Lola had died enough, three pairs of young nettles were sacrificed for the incompetence of the twins—retribution was indifferent and granted no special favors to children. (77-78)

Instead of solving the complication through compromise and friendly interaction, Briony involves herself in an imaginary inward process where Lola and her brothers are metamorphosed into nature's weeds and successively receive lashing as retribution for ruining her play. Therefore, Briony does not do anything pragmatic to solve the issue or even take revenge; instead, she takes the objects (people) from the outside world and punishes them inside her imaginary world. This is Briony's state of mind before she receives the letter from Robbie. Briony is determined to assert her inner self-significance in the face of the opposing, indifferent world:

In a spirit of mutinous resistance, she climbed the steep grassy slope to the bridge, and when she stood on the driveway, she decided she would stay there and wait until something significant happened to her. This was the challenge she was putting to existence—she would not stir, not for dinner, not even for her mother calling her in. She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance. (80-81)

Briony's error of judgment is rooted in the fact that the protagonist, first and foremost, is blindsided by her own ego — an ego that sacrifices Robbie and Cecilia's romance to assert her self-significance in unrelated worldly affairs. Therefore, Robbie's salacious letter provides the perfect opportunity for Briony to "dispel her insignificance" by becoming a heroine who saves her older sister from the clutches of a "maniac." Furthermore, Briony's hyperactive imagination often has the habit of producing stories from the impressions she

makes. For instance, in chapter three, when Briony sees the incident near the fountain from afar, she overcomes the “temptation” to demand an explanation from Cecilia; nevertheless, “she felt obliged to produce a story line” out of her vague impression (45). The same form of fictive imagination can be observed in chapter thirteen when Briony sees her mother’s figure from a distance: “She was positioned too far behind her mother to see her eyes. She could make out only the dip in her cheekbone of her eye socket. Briony was certain her eyes would be closed. Her head was tilted back, and her hands lay lightly clasped in her lap” (165). Emily’s closed eyes, her tilted back, and the clasped hands in her lap evoke an image of a corpse in a coffin. Again, this impression starts a chain of mental narratives centralizing Briony instead of her mother. Briony becomes the heroine of a life’s tragedy, who is obviously more significant than the other attendees at her mother’s funeral:

Her mother was forty-six, dispiritingly old. One day she would die. There would be a funeral in the village at which Briony’s dignified reticence would hint at the vastness of her sorrow. As her friends came up to murmur their condolences they would feel awed by the scale of her tragedy. She saw herself standing alone in a great arena, within a towering colosseum, watched not only by all the people she knew but by all those she would ever know, the whole cast of her life, assembled to love her in her loss. (165)

The above excerpt shows how perception quickly leads to a bigger narrative through the protagonist’s fictive imagination. Therefore, Briony’s impression from seeing the lovers in the fountain episode is sufficient for her to make herself believe that Robbie has some sort of mysterious evil power over her sister. And the subsequent events, like the letter episode or the incident at the library, provide further proof, although falsely, that Briony’s inceptive impression about Robbie being evil was accurate: “Surely it was not too childish to say there

had to be a story; and this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil” (119).

Like Strether, who concludes that Madame de Vionnet must be a saint based on vague impressions, Briony’s fictive imagination needs a villain for her *significant* heroine. And who could be a more fitting candidate than Robbie Turner for the assignment of that role; the fatherless son of the Tallis family’s cleaning lady who receives financial support for his education from Briony’s father. In chapter thirteen, prior to encountering the rape scene, all of Briony’s thoughts are occupied with Robbie being a “maniac,” and her ego seems to be gratified that “real life (...) sent her a villain in the form of an old family friend” (162). As a result, Briony’s blindness or fatal error predominantly emanates from her ego’s engagement with the illusory non-real image, which has no concrete basis outside her ego.

Recognition and Vascular Dementia

The recognition scene in *Atonement* follows the Jamesian tradition; it is rather long, and the discovery is made through a series of deductive impressions rather than solidly stated remarks or facts. Similar to its predecessors — *The Ambassadors*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Remains of the Day* — *Atonement* places the grand recognition scene near the denouement, if it has any. In Book Three, the story is fast-forwarded for five years. Briony is now an eighteen-year-old nurse in one of London’s hospitals. Like Archer and Stevens, she spends most of her time in the solitary confinement of her room, occupying her thoughts with fiction and romance. In one of her correspondences with her father, Briony is informed that “Paul Marshall and Lola Quincey [are] to be married a week [from] Saturday in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Clapham Common” (289). This new information is passed on

to Briony rather desultorily and gratuitously because her father gives “no reason why he supposed she would want to know, and made no comment on the matter himself” (289). However, this seemingly unimportant information creates a faint mental image; a weak notion is formed in the character’s hyperactive and imaginative mind; the idea gets strengthened, and the image becomes clearer through a series of subsequent impressions. Briony ponders that she is “more than implicated in this union.” In fact, she sees herself as the one who “made it possible” (289).

Although she has not received an invitation, Briony decides to attend the wedding ceremony to prove to herself that her initial intuition is correct. The first impression the reader gets — through Briony’s *visueur* — is that Holy Trinity in Clapham Common is not a notable church in London. It cannot be listed among those outstanding churches like St Mary-le-Bow or Temple because Briony has trouble locating it. Furthermore, Holy Trinity is surrounded by a cluster of churches — such as St Mary’s Roman Catholic Church, St Peters Church, St Barnabas’ Church — and this can even be regarded as an obstacle that does not make the process of searching easier for a person who is new to the church’s vicinity: “Forty minutes later she reached Clapham Common tube station. A squat church of ruffled stone turned out to be locked. She took out her father’s letter and read it over again” (327). Briony faces many difficulties finding the wedding place, as though the hosts had deliberately decided to thwart the guests’ access to the site. Briony’s initial conjecture is reinforced once she encounters and locates the small and “half-concealed” building: “A woman in a shoe shop pointed her toward the Common. Even when Briony had crossed the road and walked onto the grass she did not see the church at first. It was half concealed among trees in leaf, and was not what she expected” (327). The covert outlook of the church, which is half hidden by a bunch of trees, implies that the building is small in size,

underscoring the fact that the host considers the matrimony insignificant. Taking into account that Paul Marshall is the wealthy heir of the chocolate factory Amo bars, the reader can surmise that the Marshall family might not be too excited about Paul's current marriage scheme.

Furthermore, the fact that the wedding's location is in a church surrounded by other churches implies that a sin or a strong feeling of shame lies at the heart of the matter that needs to be redeemed. Briony senses this heavy olfactory ecclesiastical presence in the Clapham Common: "The sweet waxy smell of wood, the watery smell of stone, were of churches everywhere," and then she suddenly ruminates on the whole foundation of marriage, that is, in her view, must be "ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication, that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body" (328).

The mastery of McEwan — in delivering the mechanism of the recognition process — lies within the fact that the author tries to engage as many sense impressions as possible in order to propel the character toward the ultimate grasp of the truth. In addition to the senses like vision and smell, auditory perception is also engaged in the recognition process. Briony silently enters the church, and "as she turn(s) her back to close the door discreetly, she (is) aware that the church (is) almost empty. The vicar's words were in counterpoint with their echoes" (328). Even the strong echo of the vicar's voice in the church hall is another indication that Briony was right regarding her initial assumption. She turns around and waits "for her eyes and ears to *adjust*" to the light and the sound of the building's interior. She then observes that the number of attendees was so small that only the front pew was occupied. She notices her Aunt Hermione with her "elaborate hat" in the front row. "Next to her were Pierrot and Jackson, lankier by five or six inches, wedged between the

outlines of their estranged parents. On the other side of the aisle were three members of the Marshall family. This was the entire congregation. A private ceremony. No society journalists” (328). This (almost) uninhabited frame is the terminal proof that turns the character’s doubt into certainty. Therefore, it is the wedding’s ambience and a series of sense impressions that lead the character to her assured *anagnorisis*. This definite realization enters Briony’s consciousness like a bursting flash, and all of a sudden, she *feels* the related memories like a chain of pictures displayed in front of her eyes. However, this time she sees the true and clear picture:

She felt the memories, the needling details, like a rash, like dirt on her skin: Lola coming to her room in tears, her chafed and bruised wrists, and the scratches on Lola’s shoulder and down Marshall’s face; Lola’s silence in the darkness at the lakeside as she let her earnest, ridiculous, oh so prim younger cousin, who couldn’t tell real life from the stories in her head, deliver the attacker into safety. Poor vain and vulnerable Lola with the pearl-studded choker and the rosewater scent, who longed to throw off the last restraints of childhood, who saved herself from humiliation by falling in love, or persuading herself she had, and who could not believe her luck when Briony insisted on doing the talking and blaming. And what luck that was for Lola—barely more than a child, prized open and taken—to marry her rapist.” (329)

Not only does Briony unearth the truth about Lola and her rapist, but she also discovers the source of her earlier ignorance and error of judgment — A quixotic syndrome, the inability to distinguish the “real life from the stories in her head.” Still, the main question regarding the poetics of the recognition is how Briony will use this gained knowledge. McEwan plays with this idea and creates suspense when the vicar asks: “...Therefore if any man can show

any just cause, why they may not be lawfully joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace” (329). Briony imagines herself interrupting the vicar to let out the truth to the attendance:

She had not planned it, but the question, which she had quite forgotten, from the Book of Common Prayer, was a provocation. And what were the impediments exactly? Now was her chance to proclaim in public all the private anguish and purge herself of all that she had done wrong. Before the altar of this most rational of churches. But the scratches and bruises were long healed, and all her own statements at the time were to the contrary. Nor did the bride appear to be a victim, and she had her parents’ consent. More than that, surely; a chocolate magnate, the creator of Amo. Aunt Hermione would be rubbing her hands. That Paul Marshall, Lola Quincey and she, Briony Tallis, had conspired with silence and falsehoods to send an innocent man to jail? But the words that had convicted him had been her very own, read out loud on her behalf in the Assize Court. The sentence had already been served. The debt was paid. The verdict stood. ... She remained in her seat with her accelerating heart and sweating palms, and humbly inclined her head. (329-330)

Like that of her predecessors, Strether and Archer, Briony Tallis’s recognition does not lead to action. Here, one can observe that McEwan is also employing the Jamesian theme of “too late.” The only palpable action that Briony engages in, if it can be considered as such, is that she stares at Lola once their eyes meet: “All she wanted was for Lola to know she was there and to wonder why” (331). Therefore, the way McEwan handles the dynamics of the recognition scene conforms to the modern Jamesian tradition, in the sense that the prolonged discovery scene does not lead to any form of action on the protagonist’s part; it does not reverse the narrative’s course of action or the circumstances.

After the recognition scene is concluded, *Atonement* suddenly becomes a novel-within-the-novel. Even though no clear-cut line has been drawn in *Atonement* to separate fiction from the real, there is a subtle hint after the closure of the recognition scene when Briony feels that there are two of hers walking in separate directions; while the “no less real” Briony walks back towards the hospital, the *imaginary* one goes to see Cecilia and Robbie to beg for their forgiveness: “She left the café, and as she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back toward the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona” (334). Here, again, we observe that the protagonist cannot or will not prioritize the real over the imaginary, and she powerfully holds on to her inward existence. The finale of *Atonement* can be regarded as a radical take on the Jamesian inward drama where Briony pulls the characters from the real world into her imaginary world and tries to reconcile her relationship with Cecilia and Robbie.

The novel finishes at a point in which Briony goes to her sister’s apartment in Balham. There, she sees Robbie visiting Cecilia. Briony asks for the couple’s forgiveness and promises to go to court and disclose the truth for the charges against Robbie to be dropped. The events of the novel end here in the year 1940; however, against the reader’s expectation, McEwan adds a postscript of a few pages, which provides a flashforward to nineteen ninety-nine, sixty-four years after Briony committed her disastrous mistake. Briony is now a seventy-seven-year-old established novelist and informs the reader about her recently-discovered illness, which her doctor has diagnosed as “vascular dementia.” It is fascinating how McEwan interweaves the source of the protagonist’s *hamartia* with her terminal illness. “Vascular dementia is a general term describing problems with reasoning, planning, judgment, memory and other thought processes caused by brain damage from

impaired blood flow to your brain” (Mayo). It is a form of “cognitive impairment.” The word “dementia identifies patients too late to do much about their problems” (Hachinski 130). The Latin root of *dementia* literally means “madness, insanity (...) a being out of one’s mind,” which is derived from the stem “*demens* ‘mad, raving’” (etymonline). We observe that the aged Briony is not “distressed” about her illness; she actually embraces the brain malfunction that will eventually disengage her consciousness from the outside world: “On the contrary, I was elated and urgently wanted to tell my closest friends” (361).

In the postscript, Briony reveals to the reader that she actually never did anything with the gained knowledge of Lola and Marshall’s secret. Therefore, the recognition did not lead to any form of action that would alleviate the emotional suffering of Cecilia and Robbie; Briony never went to court or did anything to rectify her misdeed. She confesses to the reader that she manipulated reality with fiction so the lovers could reunite at the end of her last novel, which she named *Atonement*. She also informs the reader that “Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940” at the battle of Dunkirk and that “Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station,” and adds “that I (Briony) never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her recently bereaved sister” (377).

Briony’s cognitive impairment and her association with vascular dementia evoke Strether’s phantasmagoric mental state in which the illusory aesthetic experience is favored over the unbearable *realism* of life — like opium that sedates the intolerable weight of life and soothes the pain of existence. Near the novel’s closure, McEwan’s protagonist justifies her decision on why she manipulated the reality (the actual events) for the sake of a world of phantasm: “What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account?”

Who would want to believe that they⁶ never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?" (377)

Therefore, similar to her predecessors — Strether, Archer, and Stevens — Briony Tallis embraces an illusionary inner world. She tries to compensate for her mistake in an imaginary world, thereby renouncing getting involved with the world outside. Briony regards an illusory treatment as a healing possibility for the real world's malady. Thus, to protect her inner world, she writes a novel to eternalize the unreal vis-à-vis the real: "I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (377).

⁶ Cecilia and Robbie.

Afterword

With the current study, I have examined a specific mode of the recognition plot proper, favored and realized by modern and contemporary literary novelists. The poetics of Henry James's fiction — especially his later works — conformed to the poetics of the finest form of drama propounded by Aristotle in *Poetics*. I have demonstrated that James's chief artistic and fictional concern centers on recognition in the Aristotelian sense of the word (*anagnorisis*). However, unlike Aristotle, James does not consider *peripeteia* — the reversal of circumstances — as the crucial element of his self-claimed best fiction, *The Ambassadors*. In other words, although the Jamesian recognition plot almost strictly follows the rules of high tragedy propounded by Aristotle, the grand moment of discovery does not lead to any dramatic action; instead, it leads to a form of passivity which is best manifested in Lambert Strether's renunciation. Even though in *The Ambassadors* — which benefits from the epitomic Jamesian recognition plot proper — the narrative structure revolves around the moment of discovery and related epistemological issues, strangely enough, the significant knowledge gained by the protagonist is left unused. As I have shown, such Jamesian passivity recurs in the works of other modern and contemporary literary writers such as Edith Wharton, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Ian McEwan.

I interpreted the passivity of the protagonists through the phenomenological lens of Emmanuel Levinas's theory of aesthetics. Since ethics is all-important for Levinas, aesthetics is considered a deleterious element that disengages the subject's intentionality from "the real" worldly issues. I have tried to employ a dialectical approach between Levinas and James. Aesthetics — which Levinas considers a detrimental element¹ — gains a fresh value once it falls into the hands of modernist and contemporary writers like James

¹ Such a view is stronger in his early works.

and McEwan. In this study, aestheticism and the power of imagination are regarded as the last barricades against the merciless modern world — a world filled with tattered ideals that no longer function. In other words, what Levinas considers expendable and worthless gains value in James. In Levinas, aestheticism disengages the human being's attentiveness from worldly affairs. Therefore, the ego is propelled toward an inward pleasurable existence, and the individual's amount of worldly engagement is lessened. Unlike Levinas, James gives value to this disengaged internal sensuous experience, leveling the differences between the inward and outward existences to the point that even the former can be prioritized over the latter.

All of the protagonists in the novels discussed here experience a dual form of existence; an inner life in the realm of pleasurable sensations — a sensuous element that the ego once felt and still feeds on — and a worldly life that is dominated by the growing pragmatic ethos of the modern age. Furthermore, the modern world depicted in these novels is gradually depleted of the old age's values and is filled with double standards and arbitrary moralities. Facing the rapid changes of this new world of arbitrary ideals, Strether and Archer are so confounded that they experience a form of social abjection as if their state of consciousness were suspended in time and space.

James does not seem to see a middle-ground solution for the conflict between these internal and external worlds. Therefore, his protagonist has no choice but to distance himself from his social entanglements and retreat to the aesthetic inner world — an inward melodrama in which he can be both the director and actor. Not only do these characters reject the old age and its values, but they also fail to take part in the new one. Failing to adjust themselves to the requisites of the dawning era, these heroes experience a loss of functionality in the modern age. Renunciation must be viewed as a form of revolt by the

modern man who self-consciously abstains from further engagement with social and worldly affairs. In this light, James can be considered a critic of modernity who forewarns that the jumble of the old world and the new would result in nothing but a human *cul-de-sac* where the absolutism of the old age falters at the threshold of the relativism of the modern era.

James has a pivotal role in introducing and developing a new fictional form by foregrounding the presence of an inner world *vis-à-vis* the chaotic world outside one's consciousness. As a result, *The Ambassadors* is not only the author's best artistic achievement but also sets out a new literary prototype about man and his social dilemma in the modern age; a dilemma that, as shown in many other exemplary novels of the modern era, places the theme of human alienation, the dominant subject of modernism, as the core literary and artistic concern. This is a form of human estrangement that not only encompasses social isolation but also comprises the alienation from one's self and feelings. Similar to many canonical modernist writers, James views the social dimension of alienation as an inexorable impasse, as he does not seem to see a way out of the grim human social condition in the modern era. However, he still holds on to an alternative soothing world of within with the hope that the world of imagination acts as a poultice that could alleviate the soreness caused by the heavy weight of reality, with the hope that this aesthetic imaginary living provides an escape route from the inescapable heavy weight of existence.

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