

## A Comparative Study of Henry James's Selected Novels

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**Abstract:** Henry James's styles in most of his works are similar to each other and compliment the novels. James makes his readers better understand his novels by using the settings to relate to the themes, using characters to represent the conflicts in the plot, using different techniques of styles to make understand the full meaning of the novels, and by using recurrent themes and various qualities of writing. His proper mix of his style to the theme of each novel makes his works unique. The focus of this study is on structural parallelism in Henry James's principal fictions including *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Colden Bowl*.

**Keywords:** Henry James, Comparison, *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Colden Bowl*.

### 1. Introduction

Henry James's major fictions including *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Colden Bowl* reveal remarkable structural parallelism. Though the five novels represent various phases of James's creative life, they do reveal a pattern of structure that recurs, in spite of the fact that these huge fictional structures were created by James during a span of thirty years between 1875 and 1905. Parallelism among these novels is closely related to the Jamesian view of plots. The plot of a novel should burgeon out of the "exciting inward life" of the characters, the depiction of which alone, asserts James (1962a:57), "throws the action further forward than twenty 'incidents' might have done." Jamesian plot, hence, is a graphic picture of the growing consciousness of the major characters, depicting all their emotional contours. This complex process evolves out of interactions between life-situations and individual emotional responses and is never an aggregation of various "incidents" from the lives of individuals. Movement in a Jamesian plot is thus a concomitant of the transformation of psychic personalities. The development of each of his plots is invariably interlinked with the attainment of emotional maturity by the characters involved. Every advance towards such maturity, in turn, forms a turning point of the plot. Perhaps due to this common aesthetic strategy, the five major novels display startling parallels in their plot structures.

### 2. Comparative Study of Henry James's Selected Novels

A comparative study of these five novels reveals certain conspicuous parallels and establishes a pattern. They are: the dislocation of the major characters from their moorings; certain chances offered which are apparently alluring; the psychological state of the characters; the double set of characters - one young and the other elderly; and, finally, marriage as a crucial factor. Symbolizing the sea change that occurs in the emotional lives of the major characters, the plots provide drastic changes in their outer social lives, too. Since the emotions of people are stirred up only "in some larger life-situation, of great usually critical - importance" (Beck 1950:95), each major character is dislocated from his/her comfortable native location and

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is taken into a new environment. But for these displacements from their native locations, the course of their lives would have been entirely different.

The protagonists of all these novels are Americans who go to Europe, though for slightly different purposes. Christopher Newman (*The American*), Isabel Archer (*The Portrait of a Lady*), Lambert Strether (*The Ambassadors*), Milly Theale (*The Wings of the Dove*), Maggie Verver (*The Golden Bowl*) - all go to various places in the old world. None of these people suspects the unpleasant consequences of their dislocations. On the other hand, all of them consider those displacements as rare opportunities offered for their betterment.

Christopher Newman, who has been engaged in business from the age of fifteen to forty-two, takes a holiday for the first time in his life and goes to Paris. This "grand good worker" wants to amuse himself there, though he does not know exactly how to do it. He wants to get the biggest kind of entertainment a man can get: "People, places, art, nature, everything!" (James *T907:33*). He is totally ignorant of the heavy cost his enthusiasm would demand. Isabel Archer, too, is greatly excited to see the world because she "had a great desire for knowledge" (James 1961:40). Her aunt, Mrs. Touchett's unexpected visit and equally unexpected offer to take Isabel along with her to Europe play an important role in Isabel's life. While the offer raises her hopes, her actual experience pushes her down into the trap carefully woven for her. Lambert Strether goes abroad on an ambassadorial duty, assigned by Mrs. Newsome. This official tour stirs his dormant consciousness and disturbs his emotional tranquility by making him realize his loss. The tour which he begins with utmost confidence ends in his sad recognition of what a colossal waste his life has been. Milly Theale is a female version of Newman, who starts her "pilgrimage" to Europe, fascinated by the cultural richness of the world. She does not want to miss the "opportunities for real improvement" (James 1965:187). This innocent dove is totally unaware of the trap to be woven for her in Europe. Maggie Verver, too, is enchanted by the "generations" of history in Europe, its "annals," "archives" and "libraries." This infatuation of the enthusiastic American heiress throws her into a complicated situation. All these Americans are enticed by the chances offered to them and they cling to these offers without hesitation. Surprisingly, all these characters encounter similar consequences for their actions. There is one more character, Kate Croy, in *The Wings of the Dove* who is offered a chance, though not an attractive one. Kate, the European counterpart of Milly, is offered some assistance by her aunt Mrs. Lowder. It is to "keep" Kate with her, provided she cuts off all connections with her people. She should "break off all relations" not only with her father but also with her lover, Merton Densher, for Mrs. Lowder does not entertain a very high opinion of him. All these dislocations and the chances offered through them appear to be normal and quite natural in each case. But their recurrence is of critical importance to James's fiction since through such techniques he exposes his characters to complex situations.

To understand the reason why Jamesian characters readily accept the offers given to them, an analysis of their respective psychological states is necessary. James is conceptually clear when he speaks about the role of the psychological condition of the characters in creating his fictional structures. More than a "moving incident," he says, "the human emotion and the human attestation, the clustering human conditions" (James 1962b:257) make a plot. Hence, not only the reactions of the major characters to the respective chances offered to them, but also the psychological reasons behind these reactions, should be analyzed. Such analysis leads to the second aspect of the structural parallelism: the major characters are either orphans or emotionally alienated, or both.

Newman and Isabel each have two sisters; but they are married and have their own lives to look after. Newman is almost alone when he starts on his solitary pilgrimage. Despite their deep affection for Isabel, her sisters do not provide her any intellectual companionship because they regard Isabel as an "intellectual superior." Goodwood, her American suitor, is unable to become her companion despite his immense but unreciprocated love. He bears no resemblance to her ideal man:

He showed his appetites and designs too Simply and artlessly; when one was alone with him he talked much about the same subject, and when other people were present he talked too little about anything (James 1961 :114).

Isabel's ideal man should "know everything." She wants to leave this uninteresting "past behind her ... to begin afresh" (*ibidem*:38). This idea encourages her to accept readily Mrs. Touchett's offer. Strether is a perfect symbol of an orphan with a "young wife he had early lost and the young son he had stupidly sacrificed" (James 1973:56). There is nobody in "the great desert" of his life. He realizes it only after entering Europe. His ambassadorial mission to Europe is crucial because it reveals what an enormous waste his past had been. His sterile life, with no particular experience to be proud of, is no better than the life of an orphan left lonely on the street. Similarly, Milly Theale has "no body." The five other members of her family, including her parents, died, leaving her an orphan. "Isolated, unmothered," she enters Europe to fall a prey, in spite of her "other strong marks, her big house, her big fortune, her big freedom" (James 1965:92). She craves the company of people to overcome her loneliness, and is too innocent to see any evil in them. Kate Croy, too, in the same novel, has no mother but has a father who considers her as "an 'asset'" (*ibidem*:15) to prosper through her. Kate is expected "to burn her ships ... so that Marian [her sister] should profit" (*ibidem*:26). With "her haunting harassing father, her menacing uncompromising aunt, her portionless little nephews and nieces" (*ibidem*:25), Kate has only a crowd around her, but not a companion. Likewise, Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl*, being "great in nature, in character, in spirit" (James 1932:127), suffers from a feeling that "no one would have" (*ibidem*:40) her. Her consequent marriage with Mr. Verver complicates the situation and adds a new dimension to the plot.

All these alienated orphans in their excessive excitement to be in the midst of great crowds of people, in their attempts to identify themselves with the people whom they admire, encounter utter failure. James exploits the unfailing impact of the emotional complex upon human behavior, and utilizes it as one of the influencing factors in the development of the plots of all of these five novels. James thus incorporates in the craft of his novels a close parallelism in their structure.

The third: case of structural parallelism found in these novels is that each novel consists of two sets of people who influence the central actions both directly and indirectly. The first set consists of elderly people, bearing a close relationship to the major characters. The roles they play are astoundingly similar to one another and add new curvature to the structure. Madame de Bellegarde, Mrs. Touchett, Mrs. Newsome, Mrs. Lowder, Mr. Verver -- all are related to the major characters and Exercise direct influence over them, indirectly creating new and unexpected turns in the plots. Madame de Bellegarde, mother of Madame de Cintre, "rules the family with an iron hand and allows her to have no friends but of her own choosing and to visit only in a certain sacred circle" (James 1907:55). She is a true representative of the decadent aristocratic French family and is the main cause of the tragic experience of Newman and Madame de Cintre. She breaks their engagement, thus bringing a crucial, though melancholic, change in their lives. Unlike Madame de Bellegarde, Mrs. Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady* intends to help Isabel. In her enthusiasm to help her niece, "to introduce her to the world," Mrs. Touchett brings Isabel to Europe from America. Later Isabel herself feels:

If her aunt Lydia [Mrs. Touchett] had not come that day in just the way and found her alone, everything might have been different. She might have had another life and she might have been a woman more blest (James 1961:522).

Mrs. Touchett's generous little act, thus, becomes a decisive factor for Isabel's tragedy and changes the whole course of her life. While Mrs. Touchett takes Isabel along with her, Mrs. Newsome in *The Ambassadors* sends Strether to Europe, herself staying in America. But for this act of Mrs. Newsome, Strether would have never come in contact with Europe. He would have lived the rest of his life in blessed ignorance, without becoming conscious of his wasted past.

Without being seen even in a single scene in the novel, Mrs. Newsome plays a crucial role as the director of the drama enacted by Lambert Strether. Similarly, Mrs. Lowder in *The Wings of the Dove* tries to take the strings of Kate's life into her own hands through her offer. But the condition laid down by Mrs. Lowder complicates the situation. Further, it is Mrs. Lowder who joins Kate in Milly's company, indirectly laying ground for the final scene of the drama. If Mrs. Lowder had not attached the unpleasant condition to her offer, Kate would have not bothered about ten American princesses like Milly. While all these characters are ladies, their counterpart in *The Golden Bowl* is an American gentleman, Mr. Verver. He is just in contrast with

Madame de Bellegarde. While she had created tragedy in her daughter's life by her unlimited and tyrannical authority, he created confusion in his daughter's life through his excessive love.

Their problem has no solution till they are separated. Of all these five persons, only Mrs. Newsome plays a constructive role. Whatever the pain of recognition from which Strether initially suffers, his realization contributes to the growth of his consciousness and enriches his personality: "He may die poor, but he won't die barren, inexperienced, undeveloped, unexpressed and unappreciated. He had finally lived" (Evans 1963:vii). In the other four cases, however, the consequences are undesirable for the characters involved. Whatever be the differences in the consequences of the actions of these characters, all of them add complexity to the plots and lead the major characters to the peak of their emotional experiences. What Isabel feels about Mrs. Touchett's role in her life is applicable to the other characters, too. But for these particular actions of this set of people, the plots would have turned into different alleys. Their actions which are amazingly identical are integral to the basic plot-structure.

The second set in all these novels consists of people who, according to James (1962a:54), are like "wheels to the coach." "Each of these persons . . . neither belongs to the body of that vehicle nor is for a moment accommodated with a seat inside" (*ibidem*). This conceptual statement by James only adds to the validity of the thesis of structural parallelism in his novels.

Though James mentions Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*, parallel characters are not far to seek in the other novels. Mrs. Tristram in *The American*, Mrs. Stringham in *The Wings of the Dove*, and Mrs. Assingham in *The Golden Bowl* play similar roles. The very choice of these names focuses attention on an identical pattern. They have not only similar sounding names but also identical roles. Mrs. Tristram acquaints Newman with Madame de Cintre, and encourages him to marry her, without realizing the underlying difficulty. Towards the end of the novel, she admits her contribution to Newman's sorrow: "I'm at the bottom of your troubles. I've not forgotten that I suggested the marriage to you" (James 1907:378). Mrs. Assingham makes a similar confession when she sees the strained relationships among the four major characters in *The Golden Bowl*: "But I've worked for them all" (James 1932:268). She repeats it: "I did it all. I realize that -- I accept it" (*ibidem*: 271). In addition to promoting acquaintance among the major characters, Mrs. Assingham plays a more important role than Mrs. Tristram. She is the reader's growing awareness of the situation getting complicated: "I see the boat they're in, but I'm not, thank god, in it myself" (*ibidem*:263). She is the "wheels" on which the coach runs and is outside "the body of the vehicle." Henrietta and Maria, as James himself says, "run beside the coach" on "the dusty road" and "cling to it till they are out of breath" (James 1962a:55). Henrietta keeps Isabel's consciousness awake, entering her life at crucial moments and reminding her of her grave mistake. Similarly, Maria Gostray stands against Mrs. Newsome in Strether's imagination to speed up the realization through contrast. She watches Strether's growing consciousness and is its custodian in Europe. Mrs. Stringham is pale in comparison with the other four characters and is like "the privileged high official ... who rides) with the king and queen" (*ibidem*:54). She is a constant companion to Milly till the latter's death and informs Denner that Milly knew his duplicity.

But for her role, the plot would not have ended the way it did. . . Another noteworthy feature common to the plots of these novels is the key role assigned to marriage. The parties involved are invariably Americans and Europeans who differ totally in their approach to life due to the difference in their crucial backgrounds. Emotional maturity is attained by James's characters only by their exposure to "larger life-situations . . . of . . . critical importance," and James uses marriage as a strategy in all these novels to promote an understanding of human nature in general and of self in particular.

Christopher Newman would have remained as happy as ever only if his enthusiasm had not led him to the extent of taking a decision to marry only a European lady, who is like "a pure pearl," "the best article in the market" (James 1907:). His consequent attempt leaves him "cruelly wronged" by the Europeans. Isabel's tragedy is also interwoven with her marriage like Newman, only with a difference. While Newman is humiliated through a rejection, Isabel is exploited through an acceptance into a marriage, to be "made use of" (James 1961:503). Newman fails totally and is left with no alternative but to return to America. Isabel rejects the alternative offered by her former suitor, Goodwood, and remains with her husband in order to conceal the

"crack" in her marriage and keep up appearances. Though the theme of *The Ambassadors* seems to be apparently different, it is basically connected with the proposed marriage between Chad Newsome and his niece Mamie Pocock. The success of Strether in his duty also implies his unannounced marriage with Mrs. Newsome. The problem of Kate in *The Wings of the Dove* and that of the Prince in *The Golden Bowl* are again connected with marriage. Their poverty comes in the way of marrying their respective lovers and leads them into unpleasant situations.

The problem of marriage is more subtly exploited in *The Golden Bowl*. If the Prince's marriage with Maggie fulfils her desire to have a European alliance, the marriage of Mr. Verver to Charlotte Stant adds complexity to the situation. The distribution of the two lovers - the Prince and Charlotte - between the daughter and the father results in unhappy relations among the four characters and the only solution is to separate the two couples. Maggie is the only person who achieves a solution for the problem to keep up her alliance. In all the five novels, marriage is used as a strategy to explore intricate human relationships. Marriage, it can be concluded, becomes a complex factor in James's aesthetic experimentation with his favorite themes. Two common features may be attributed to casual or accidental coincidences. But when the parallels are so marked in the five major novels, written at different times, one might justifiably attribute a deliberate design on the part of the novelist. Moreover, the critical prefaces provided by him do unfold James's awareness of the parallels. An exhaustive study of how far Henry James was conscious of such aesthetic links among his novels would be an interesting and valuable addition to Jamesian criticism.

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