# Henry James as Critic: From the Pictorial to the Formal

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**هنري جيمز ناقداً: من التصويري إلى الشكلي**

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**ملخص**

كثيراً ما كان هنري جيمز يشبه القصة بالفنون البصرية والدرامية وهو بذلك يؤكد مثله ومفهومه لوحدة الشكل وارتباطها بصورة الحياة. وحينما نقارنه بأمثاله من الكتاب الواقعيين نذكر منهم على سبيل المثال هاويلز وتورغنيف وفلوبير وزولا وغالسوَرثي فإننا نجده متفرداً متميزاً ، غير أنه ينزع إلى أهمية البناء الشكلي التي وجدها لدى فلوبير. وتبحث هذه المقالة في آراء جيمز التي عبر عنها هو نفسه بخصوص هؤلاء الروائيين، كما تبحث في المفارقات الجمالية الواردة في مقالاته النقدية التي ترى في إدراك عملية الكتابة المصدر الرئيسي لمتعة القراءة وتعتبر وصف عملية بناء القصة "أكثر موضوعية" من حبكة بطل الرواية. وتستعرض هذه المقالة الأعمال النقدية التي نشرها هنري جيمز بين عامي 1860 و 1912.

**Abstract**

James often compared fiction to visual art and to drama, revealing his ideal of formal unity combined with the illusion of life. Compared to his fellow realists, such as Howells, Turgenev, Flaubert, Zola and Galsworthy, he is found to be unique among them but tending towards the values of formal composition he found in Flaubert. This study examines James's own evaluations of these other novelists and the paradoxes of the esthetics in his critical essays, in which awareness of process the is seen to be the main source of reading pleasure, and the story of the story's composition is viewed as "more objective" than the story of the protagonist. The essay surveys James's criticism originally published from the 1860s to 1912.

## Introduction

> " The artist, of course, in wanton moods, dreams of some Paradise (for art) where the direct appeal to the intelligence might be legalized" - Henry James, *The Notebooks*.

Henry James's critical writings are important to literary history and have received some significant consideration from critics. Viola Hopkins (1961) considers how James's dedication to "pictorialism" in his essays works out in his fiction, especially in relation to

the techniques of Mannerist and Impressionist visual art. J. A. Ward (1965) focuses on the contrast between James's formalism and his ideal of freedom of expression, showing how the analogue of architecture to writing works in the criticism and in the fiction. Timothy Martin (1980) touches on my topic (as indicated by his subtitle "From Mimesis to Formalism"), but his purpose is to show the relationship between James and Percy Lubbock, author of The Craft of Fiction (1952). Vivien Jones's book-length study of the criticism (1985) shows how James's ideas develop from "a neo-classical concept of mimesis" (p. ix) to a "revolutionary and critically prophetic achievement" (p. 200) that anticipates modernist and post-modernist views (p. 185). More recently, Kimberly Vanderlaan (2008) considers James's ideas about painting by means of a close analysis of an early short story, "A Landscape Painter," while Mark Desiderio (2002) finds James's ideal of pictorial representation a source of personal and artistic conflict in his consideration of "Henry James's Evasion of the Pictorial."

With these studies as a foundation, my essay begins with the comparison of fiction with painting and drama to show how James sees the illusion of life being incorporated into the greater purpose of artistic form, how he requires fiction to express the essence, not the surface, of life and how he expects the reader to appreciate the process of artistic creation. I do this by bringing together critical remarks from James's essays written between the late 1860s and 1912 and by focusing on his analysis and evaluation of his contemporaries among realist writers of fiction. I find that the formalist impulse proves dominant and that the picture he is finally interested in is the ideal design of a story's form.

Throughout his critical writings Henry James makes frequent analogies between the art of the novelist and that of the painter and of the dramatist. In his book on illustration, Picture and Text, he writes: "What the verbal artist would like to do would be to find the secret of the pictorial, to drink at the same fountain" (1893, p. 23). The painting can achieve truth to reality while maintaining a perfectly unified form. The theater is even more an object of envy to the novelist: "An acted play is a novel intensified; it realizes what the novel suggests, and, by paying a liberal tribute to the senses, anticipates your possible complaint that your entertainment is of the meager sort styled 'intellectual'" (James, 1948, p.3). The play also achieves unity of form but, more than that, it provides the illusion of life.

Truth to reality, formal unity and the maintenance of the illusion of life—these aims are the starting point for James, and as such they seem little different from those of his contemporary, the American realist William Dean Howells. Like Howells, James believes the novel should be true to life and that this ideal is basic for judging a novel's value. He agrees also that a novel should picture and not merely map reality by piling up details; selection is the artist's primary task. They agree further that the novel should present man's moral rather than animal nature. James is not even above preferring the brighter side of life as does Howells; he chides the Russian writer Turgenev for being so completely pessimistic.

Once these similarities are recognized, however, the immense differences between the two men become apparent. James does not find all reality equally significant, as Howells does; rather he believes there are degrees of worth among subjects and that the artist should choose only the richest. In addition, his central characters should be intelligent and sensitive, in order to portray the maximum of felt life. James is not overly concerned with the virginal minds of young ladies either; he argues for the novelist's complete freedom in choosing his theme. Their greatest difference lies in Howells' general neglect and James's overwhelming concern for the aesthetic question, for the art of fiction considered in its formal dimension. While Howells sings the praises of "poor real life," James, in his notebooks, waxes lyrical over art: "Oh art, art, what difficulties are like thine; but at the same time, what consolations and encouragements are like thine? Without thee, for me, the world would be, indeed, a howling desert" (1981, p. 68).

James's criticism continually tends to move the center of emphasis, in considering the novel, away from life. The novel should be based on the experience of the writer, but to James impressions are experience, and so the novel consists of the artist's personal impressions. The writer must understand human sensibility; that is, the moral and intellectual man. He must use his understanding to explore in his novel what James calls a "situation." James's situations are often quite bizarre as we know from his novels (for instance, Strether's assignment to save Chad from Europe in The Ambassadors); he means by them a combination of circumstances which offer great potential for "working out" by the novelist. The mere suggestion of such a situation will start the writer thinking through its implications.

Not all experience is open to the Jamesian novelist from which to gather his situations. Significant experience for James consists of "our apprehension and our

measure of what happens to us as social creatures" (1956a, pp. 64-65). James would have the reader see this social experience not in a wide panorama but through the limiting consciousness of the central character. The concern of the artist is not with the immediate surface of life but with "the reflected field of life." Thus James criticizes the French novelist Zola for his method of plunging into a subject, taking notes and making graphs. This he calls an "imitation of observation" (James, 1956b, p.189). Genuine observation is a deep penetration into the "essence" of human experience. This essence may not be comparable to anything in real life. The novelist deals with types, with situations and with ideas, rather than with facts.

In his Preface to "The Lesson of the Master," James deals with the charge that his characters could have no counterpart in reality. He argues that there are basic principles of human behavior which we must take for granted even if they are nowhere realized. If these types of people are not found in real life, they should be. The writer may use "operative irony" to show how a fine human sensibility would act even if there are, in the present age, no finely sensible humans (James, 1956a, pp. 221-225).

When James speaks like this he sounds more like an idealist, or even a symbolist, than a realist. His refusal to deal with the details of life and his assumption that intelligence and sensibility are primary human characteristics set James aside from the general attitude of the realistic school. Unlike much realism, James's novels never become socially concerned; he never writes thesis novels, as Howells did in his later years. More than anything else, however, it is his ideal of artistic form which divorces James from the direct contemplation of real life associated with realism, especially American realism.

The idea of the novel as an artistic construct which brings pleasure by means of its formal unity is the central point of James's criticism. The artist's material is plucked from "the garden of life" (James, 1956b, p.53); but, as soon as the subject is chosen, the artistic process begins. The metaphors James applies to the relationship between art and life imply a great disparity. The artist views the garden of life, "perhaps with a field glass," from the house of fiction. The apertures opening onto the "spreading field, the human scene" are not "hinged doors opening straight upon life" but rather "mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft." "The watcher" is "the consciousness of the artist"; and "the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slitlike and low-browed, is the 'literary form'" (1956a, pp. 46-47). Elsewhere, in the "Preface to The American",

James speaks of the novel in terms of a balloon floating in space, attached by a long cable to earth. A romantic novel, as opposed to the Jamesian novel, would go one step further and cut the cable, thereby completely disconnecting the work of art from the world; but James can also "part company with terra-firma" by effects that are "more showy, dramatically speaking, than sound" (1956a, pp. 33-35).

In his great personal statement of his art as a novelist, the Prefaces to the New York Edition of his works, James concerns himself almost entirely with composition. He speaks of the dramatic technique, of the use of the central consciousness and of "the story of the story itself, which, if one's a dramatist" is, compared to "the story of one's hero," paradoxically "really the more objective of the two" (James, 1956a, p. 313). He contrasts "clumsy life . . . at her stupid work" with the beauty of artistic form. As James explains in his essay "The Art of Fiction," the artist should make the endless relationships of life appear to be confined and to inhere in a unified organic structure:

> A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of the other parts. (1966, p. 86).

By creating a separate, artistic world the novelist can deal directly with values, feelings and morals—the essentials of life. Life is confusion and ugliness; the small grain of value which alone concerns the novelist is lost in the disorder of life but can be rescued by the "sublime economy of art" and thereby made to "count." James's major concern is with how this transformation is accomplished; to him "composition alone is positive beauty" (1956a, p. 319). He mourns the fact that readers do not recognize this; they cannot see beyond the novel to the artistic process. The scenic method is best because it allows the reader to feel "how the theme is being treated," if only he cares to (James, 1956a, p.158).

Despite his emphasis on the novel as a made work of art bearing the imprint of process, James does not want to give up completely the illusion of life. He finds British novelist Anthony Trollope's habit of free authorial comment appalling because, by using "this pernicious trick," he gives up the right to have his story taken seriously (James, 1956b, pp. 247-248). Intrusion into the world of the novel destroys verisimilitude; awareness of the artistic process should not. Perhaps the best way to see James's point about combining the illusion of life with the awareness of artifice is through his own analogy of prose fiction and drama. A play gives the illusion of life by its very assurance;

the players are real enough, and they believe in the world of the play. Thus they exist for us within that world. Yet the action is confined by the limits of the stage and ordered by the divisions of act and scene and by its faithfulness to a theme. We know there is a playwright, a director, make-up men and technicians behind all this and yet we accept the illusion. We "believe" in the fiction not as a reflection of real life but as a working out of real problems within an artificial structure.

James nowhere speaks of his own fiction as "realistic." He uses the term in a passage in his notebooks in a context which indicates he equates it with naturalism, or at least with novels about unpleasant subjects (1981, p.198). He speaks, rather, as if what he is striving for is the fulfillment of the potential of the novel as an artistic medium. This raises the question of whether we should see him as the culmination of the realistic tradition or as the beginning of a modern tradition often more concerned with art than life or, again, as a completely idiosyncratic figure in literature. His roots, however, are in the writers we call the European realists, and an examination of his attitudes toward them is enlightening.

James thinks Zola fatally limited. He has no real insight into life and thus can portray only its surface. Worst of all, Zola has no taste; and, since taste is the most admired human characteristic, Zola is without "the finer vision of human experience" (James, 1956b, p.180). In his review of Nana, James emphasizes that Zola is unfaithful to his own ideal of naturalism; for nature is not, as Zola represents it, "a combination of the cesspool and the house of prostitution" (1956b, p. 92). Zola fails to see that the primary human qualities are imagination, sensitivity and intelligence; he deals with man as an animal. Therefore, although possessed of a great mind, he adopted a "futile art."

In a later essay, "The New Novel," James deals again with this tendency to portray the surface of life. Here he is concerned with the failure of writers to impose artistic form on their material as "it quite massively piles itself up" (1956b, p. 271). The British novelists Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells, as a group, merely record their impressions of reality. This is only half of the novelist's task; the creation of pleasing form is the other half. Truth and poetry should merge, and poetry should never be sacrificed for truth. The reader's pleasure is all-important, and in reading a novel the deepest pleasure results from an appreciation of the artistic process (see James, 1956b, pp. 260-275).

If James finds fault with the new novelists for making their work all material and no process, he also criticizes French author Gustave Flaubert, whose greatest ambition

was to write a novel about nothing. Flaubert represents the deification of style; he is concerned too little with his themes and characters and thus chooses them poorly. He therefore is not the ideal novelist, but James admires him for his peculiar gift, "the perfection and arrangement of form" (1956b, p.151). In contrast to the writers who see the novel as a direct reflection of life, Flaubert saw it as existing only by its own power of expression.

Thus James defines the two extremes he sees in the novels of his day. At one end is the novel of life and at the other end is the novel of style. He describes these two approaches more closely in his essay on Flaubert. For the novelist of life, "the more he can feel his subject the more he can render it"; while for the novelist of style, "the more he can render it the more he can feel it" (James, 1956b, p.156). The implied ideal position lies in the middle, in the union of form and content. For the James novelist who achieves this union more than any other, is Turgenev. Turgenev goes to the heart of the matter in the true Jamesian sense. He deals with man's "religious impulses" and with his "ascetic passion," subjects Flaubert never touch on. He deals with character and feeling and places them in a subtle, pleasing construct. He achieves the unity of material and expression and thus "offers a capital example of moral meaning giving a sense to form, and form giving relief to moral meaning" (James, 1878, p. 22; reprinted in Representative Selections, 1966, p. 17).

And yet, with all his praise of Turgenev, James still finds this "novelists' novelist" somewhat lacking "as regards form" (1978, p.18; 1966, p.13). This seems to confirm the feeling that one has when reading James's later novels, namely, that he tends toward the deification of pure art which he found in Flaubert. In his examination of the European realists, he seems to favor an ideal fusion of art and life, of method and material. But the concern of the Prefaces and of his later criticism in general is predominantly formal. This, along with the evolution of his novels, shows that James came more and more to base his ideal of the novel in the "luminous paradise of art" which he writes of in his notebooks rather than in the garden of life.

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