

Artistic Elements in the Short- Stories of Henry James

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ABSTRACT

“Henry James has been one of the leading literary personalities of American Renaissance, who developed his own style of prosaic writing. In his short-stories James reinterprets the various women characters and put them synonymously with art. This characteristic of James has been vividly analyzed by the literary critics and it leads him to the position which once William Shakespeare occupied”.

Like Shakespeare, Henry James is also famous for sketching a rich varieties of female characters, especially in his Short- Stories. His artistic contemplation and Philosophical thought about the female characters put him next to William Shakespeare. Many of his short stories enjoy a privileged status in this respect. They are not merely James's representation of women characters. They are the successful outcome of his critical confrontation with the question of women's representation, a question that is cultural and ideological as well as artistic.

One of James's favorite ways of confronting such a question is the exploration of the implications inherent in the notion of beauty. As a fundamental category of all artistic experience and simultaneously as a crucial value in the image of women as it has been constructed in modern Western culture, beauty draws woman into the aesthetic sphere, thus making problematic both her hold on the existential dimension and her relation with temporality. Woman, beauty, time, and art objects: these are the basic elements which James' stories tirelessly analyze and combine into ever new and more complex patterns over a forty-year period.

The comparatively unripe yet nonetheless amazingly rich fruits of James's early confrontation with this conceptual cluster are two stories from 1873, *“The Madonna of the Future”* and *“The Sweetheart of M. Brioux.”* Focusing on a thematic and dramatic antithesis between a real woman and her artistic reproduction, these two stories set the basic features of a woman's representation/ dialectics in James' work that proceeds from opposition, through equivalence (the symbolic and dramatic exchange of woman versus statue in *“The Last of the Valeri,” woman versus carved gem in “Adina”*), to reach substitution in such stories as *“Rose-Agatha”* or *“Glasses.”* In these latter stories, the substitution of woman by her representation becomes the only way of assuring the unalterable survival of beauty value of which woman, in her material existence, is finally seen to be nothing more than a contingent symbol. Such a substitution, therefore, becomes James's *“mise-en-scène of that absence of the 'real' woman that is the necessary support of the attribution of beauty”*¹ an extreme version of the man - woman relations in the cultural universe, he is exploring. **Theobald**, an American painter in Florence, elated by the close contact with classical art but also overwhelmed by the unattainable paragon of perfection it represents. *Serafina, a woman of too philistine and materialist a stamp to understand or appreciate the exceptional qualities of her admirer, a rather coarse and shopworn townswoman, capable ... of betraying her artist's devotion by keeping up a vulgar liaison with another man”*². Serafina, a woman whose once unsurpassable beauty is slowly but inevitably fading, and who is loved

platonically and revered by Theobald as the perfect model of **Madonna** yet to be painted: the epitome of all former Madonnas, rivalling those of **Raphael and Michelangelo**; her lover, a clever and prolific sculptor of commercially successful, obscene zoomorphic statuettes; the circle of American expatriates, lovers and patrons of the arts, who despise Theobald for his inability to bring forth the promised masterpiece; and an occasional friend of the painter's, a young American recently arrived in Florence. An ironic and puzzled observer at first, the latter becomes more and more sympathetic with Theobald and involved in his story: after involuntarily causing him to realize his failure (Serafina is now too old for a Madonna, and the painter is unequal to the task he has been setting himself for twenty years), he becomes the deeply affected witness to his despair and death, and the posthumous defender of his memory and of the actual existence of the masterpiece which, in fact, has never been painted. These are the outlines teeming with literary reminiscences of the story. The painter's friend, whose first-person narrative is in turn framed by that of a nameless narrator, a guest at the same dinner party. James had been an ardent admirer of Rossetti sisters, who influenced Pre-Raphaelite movement not less than Swinburne as well as others. *Rossetti's The Virgin is interpreted as a religious painting by a cultural consensus that extends from the nineteenth century to the present day; it is a painting about women only through ignorance.... or at the point we start breaking the rules.*³

"*The Madonna of the Future*" owes much of its renown to Theobald's passionate plea for art in America, a veritable collection of memorable and oft-quoted sentences: "*We are the disinherited of Art! ... An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European. . . . We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile*". It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that "*The Madonna of the Future*" has always been read as a tale of the artist, as a metafictional treatment of the problem of art for Americans and, more generally, of the role of art in the modern age, when everything has been touched by the vulgar hand of commerce and the great ideals of classical art are no longer viable. Such an interpretation is also supported by a comparison of James's tale with its literary sources: Balzac's "*Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*," Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, and two poems by Browning, "*Pictor Ignotus, Florence*" and "*Andrea delSarto*." Each of these sources is scrupulously cited in the text and from each, as critics have noted, James has drawn themes and situations. Browning's poems stage different versions of the artist's failure: Pictor Ignotus shuns the world for fear of contaminating his art; Andrea delSarto has extraordinary technical skills but does not possess "the soul," that ideal quality which makes Raphael's painting sublime. In Musset's play, Tebaldeo is a minor character, a painter, a pupil of Raphael and an admirer of the old masters, whose technical achievements, however, he cannot hope to emulate: "je sais mieux aimer les arts que je ne sais les exercer"; in James's tale, Theobald's description of his secluded life is taken literally from Tebaldeo's in the play. In "*Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*," old Frenhofer's failure is due to his lackness in perfectionism: in pursuit of an unattainable ideal of absolute truth to nature, he keeps adding layer upon layer of finishing touches to his masterpiece, thus turning it into a chaos of colors and lines whose only definite feature—a relic of masterlines submerged in madness—is a woman's perfect, "living" foot.

Art as an alternative, in other words, is necessarily a delusive one: all it can do is to offer the alienation of self as a free gift in opposition to the alienation of self within the marriage contract. Be it as the chance starting point for an artistic transfiguration which will change an obscure Bohemian into a famous painter or as the "buoyant body" required to keep the parody of a patriarch, "float him into success", woman is equally redefined: in either case her identity is merely instrumental. Either as a wife enclosed in the domestic sphere or as a Muse projected into eternity, her life is not her own and her portrait represents, not her, but the costume someone else has chosen for her: be it a black dress or a yellow shawl.

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Last but not the least, Henry James' literary personality cannot be justified in an article but then, a man of literary taste will definitely conjecture his aesthetic temperament and unique sensibility especially, towards his female characters if he/she really understands James' contemplation& philosophy of art.

REFERENCES

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3. Pearce, Lynne. *Woman/Image/Text. Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature*. p 35