

Why Henry James is Important

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I would like to say a few words about my nearly 50 years of interest in Henry James studies and make some broad remarks about why I think that Henry James studies is important.

I have been interested in Henry James's writing and life since I was a first-year undergraduate in 1977. Let me tell you about the following: the first time I visited James's house in Rye, named Lamb House, on the English Channel in southern England; about my mentors, Edward Chalfant, Jack Shahan, Bob Gale, Josephine Hendin, and Ilse Lind; and how important it was that my university is so close to James's birthplace. I mention all of these details to show how lucky I was to grow up in an academic world where Henry James was very present.

Most of my work recently in Henry James studies is with *The Complete Letters of Henry James* edition, which I direct. In the edition's nineteen volumes to date, we have edited, annotated, and published 2,335 of James's 10,500 known letters. Of the 2,335 letters published, 1,326 are published for the first time. I am also the editor of the *Henry James Review* and was the executive director of the Henry James Society, Inc. (North America) from 1999 to 2018, when the society grew from one with members from North America to one with members from around the world.

Over the past century, according to the MLA International Bibliography, there has been more scholarship published in English on Henry James than on any other U.S.-born novelist. In addition, there have been more than 200 films and television shows produced from James's fiction (Koch). So whether the interest in James is scholarly or public, Henry James's work satisfies it.

Henry James's family biography matters. Let me tell you about Henry James's grandfather and immediate family and explain why they too are important.

While he is known for developing the so-called "American girl" character, James did not invent it (Wadsworth 107–27). Instead, as he did with other elements of his fiction, Henry James borrowed the American Girl character from popular authors. Thus James matters not only as "the father of the modern novel," as it were, but also as an inheritor and recycler of material used by writers now forgotten.

James wrote in his autobiography that he left Harvard because he wanted to be "*just literary*" (Notes 294). But being "*just literary*" was not a matter of James withdrawing from the world to write, as had been commonly thought. Instead, James worked hard to develop himself as a professional. Becoming accepted as a professional writer involved living the life of the professional writer in a way that encouraged the public to accept him as such. By tracking James's path to international literary success, we can also understand what was expected of other professional writers during the later nineteenth century in Britain, where James established his residence. What was expected of him was also expected of them. Let me outline some typical and expected professional practices, as Philip Waller describes them in *Writers, Readers, and Reputations* (see part II: "Writers and the Public: The Price of Fame"), and explain how Henry James carried them out.

Henry James was arguably the first internationally important U.S.-born novelist, successful and esteemed both in the U. S. and in Britain. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound memorialized him in their work (Eliot, "Gerontion" and Pound, *Canto VII*), suggesting James's significance to modern literature.

Hugh Kenner's great book on Pound and modern literature, *The Pound Era*, opens with a scene of Henry James meeting Ezra Pound on the street in London and shaking hands before they part, as if James were passing on his legacy to the twentieth century via Pound (35). At least one similar meeting actually happened in 1912 (Stock 112–113).

For Ernest Hemingway, who worked against the elaborate Jamesian style to achieve something more direct, Henry James must have been on his mind. When Arnold Samuelson, a recent college graduate in 1934, asked Hemingway for advice on which novels to read, Hemingway included Henry James's *The American* in this list (Samuelson 14).

Henry James is important for the range of his work and also for his incredible productivity. He published about 100 pieces of short fiction, two dozen novels, literary criticism and reviews, theater criticism and reviews, his own plays, and wrote at least 10,500 or so letters—the count we have now are of those that survived. Most, if not all, of his fiction is still in print. Cambridge University Press is bringing out a new edition of the novels and short stories in *The Cambridge Edition of the Complete Fiction of Henry James*.

James's writing demonstrates how important a character's point of view is for developing character and plot. He innovated the forerunner to what we call today the "stream of consciousness" technique. He privileged female characters because he thought that women were in general more perceptive and articulate than men. Overall, he published thoughtful, emotionally powerful, beautiful writing. Here are some of my favorite passages.

In the short novel, *Daisy Miller*, in which the title character's name would come to identify a generation of ambitious American women encountering the world outside their home country (Wadsworth 107–27), James gives a scene that pokes fun at Daisy's annoying younger brother and also the American habit, unrivalled in the world at the time, for sugar consumption. This passage shows James's early narrative strategy to use his fiction to depict the ways those whom his characters represented, acted, and lived (679–80).

The current fiction writer's maxim, "show, don't tell," was advanced conceptually in James's still-important 1884 essay "The Art of Fiction" (504). It was developed later through what James called the "scenic method" (*Complete Notebooks* 167). The strategy creates the need for readers to decide how to understand what is shown in a scene, as in life itself, by removing or deemphasizing the narrator's role in telling readers how to understand what is shown. Here is an example of "show, don't tell" from the opening of his great novel from 1881, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1: 1–2).

James showed the literary world how to understand the importance of how characters processed mentally and intellectually what they experienced as an aspect of characterization. Here is an example from the 1881 novel, *Washington Square* (194). Almost every sentence could end with, "she thought."

And twenty years later, from the 1902 novel, *The Wings of the Dove*, is another stunning passage that represents a character's thinking, of processing the scene before her (I: 34).

James employed regularly a range of narrative strategies to show his characters experiencing their worlds, including the flashback (analepsis) and the flash forward (prolepsis). Here is an example from the 1903 novel *The Ambassadors* of how character perception, thinking, and feeling work in combination with the flashback (37–38).

James also understood that there could be great drama, excitement, and interest in showing the mind coming to important realizations about itself, even if there is little or no physical action. Here is a passage from *The Portrait of a Lady*, when the main character, Isabel Archer, finally accepts knowledge about her husband, Gilbert Osmond, and their marriage that she has refused to accept for several years (III: 23–33).

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