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The Questionable Moral Value of Major Characters in the Later Works of Henry James

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THE QUESTIONABLE MORAL VALUE
OF MAJOR CHARACTERS IN THE
LATER WORKS OF HENRY JAMES

by

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Joseph Ralph Fiore
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

As human beings, when we cannot see clearly into the workings of life, we call it ambiguous—and rightly so. Judgment of our own behavior and that of others is always suspect. We have a tendency to label this person as "good" or that act as "evil," but there should always be a certain amount of uncertainty as to whether or not our perceptions and our ensuing judgments are correct. Those of us who are literate have also, by habit, come to look at literature as reflecting the same standards of right and wrong, of good and evil. And yet, we should note a qualitative change in literature since the dawn of the scientific age, particularly since the time of Darwin and Freud. It seems that much of literature has become ambiguous, too. The moral values which are so obviously demonstrated in the works of "preachy" or didactic writers have been obscured in the works of many realistic writers, who—as a matter of method—refuse to comment directly on the morality of the actions of their characters.

Realism in literature, of course, does not necessarily mean that its writers demonstrate no moral lessons; it has rather come to mean that there is a greater distance between the writer and his readers. The writer is thus more of a reporter than a commentator. The reader must reach for himself the moral conclusions toward which the writer directs him. Consequently, the charge of amorality leveled against American realists of the 19th Century was specifically denied by William Dean Howells in his essay "Criticism and Fiction" (1891).
The fiction of Henry James, however, especially his later work, is qualitatively different from that of the other original realists. Perhaps the major difference in James is that he created characters whose moral value to many of us seems questionable. Although much can be said for the moralistic tendencies in the works of fellow-realists (notably Howells and Clemens), the charge of amorality that has been made against James must not be dismissed in any serious discussion of his work. Sustaining objectivity in one's style of writing is admittedly difficult, but the success of James over his contemporaries in having achieved a greater degree of objectivity is amply proven by the amount of critical controversy which surrounds his work. In fact, James has inspired more recent writers, such as James Gould Couzzens and Graham Greene, to create characters whose moral value is left substantially in doubt.

All of the critical controversy can only mean that most critics fail to understand just what Henry James as a realistic writer is doing. To understand his method, we need only read some of the master's comments on writing. James informs us in one of his classic essays, "The Art of Fiction" (1888), that the question of morality in the novel is

...surrounded with difficulties.... What is the meaning of your morality and your conscious moral purpose? Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up?\footnote{The Theory of the American Novel, ed. with an introduction by George Perkins (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 195.}
Few readers seem to understand that this was James's official position on the matter. There are those who judge a character one way and those who judge him another; there are also several who are undecided, despite any number of readings, as to how to judge. That is, we must ask the question: How would the writer have us see them?

Some critics may claim that the reader is at fault for his failure to use all the elements in a work to reach some final judgment; those critics maintain that the writer has led us to making a specific moral judgment but that some of us have failed to read the work carefully enough. Other critics may claim that the author himself is at fault for leaving the moral value of characters—major characters at that—somewhat questionable; such critics themselves have failed to see that perhaps this was done deliberately, the author's conscious design. James has bewildered many critics, because he has consistently refused to judge. He chooses to remain neutral, and it seems that he often goes to great pains to maintain this neutrality.

The method has thus served to baffle such critics as Edmund Wilson, who charges that, although "the element of irony in Henry James is often underestimated by his readers, there are stories which leave us in doubt as to whether or not the author could foresee how his heroes would strike the reader." Mr. Wilson is especially concerned with the ambiguous elements of The Turn of the Screw and The Sacred Fount. Of the latter he says: "... the fundamental question presents itself and never seems to get properly answered: What is the reader to think

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of the protagonist? . . . "3

The two works discussed by Wilson (with the possible addition of The Golden Bowl) have created more critical opposition than any of the other works. We should be aware, however, that many of the major works pose questions for us—works such as The Portrait of a Lady, What Maisie Knew and The Wings of the Dove. (For instance, a good case can be made for the argument that Isabel Archer of The Portrait of a Lady willfully precipitates her own downfall.) But we should limit this discussion, turning briefly to those two works cited by Wilson in an attempt to discover what precisely are the causes of their critical controversy.

Any sensitive reading of The Turn of the Screw will clearly reveal that James is so masterful at being ironic and ambiguous that we are never sure of the values which the governess represents. Is she innocent? Does she have a firm moral commitment to save the children? Does she, in fact, represent the Angel of Light whereas Peter Quint, the dead valet, represents the Angel of Darkness? Or is she—as advocates of a Freudian interpretation suggest—merely inhibited? Does she actually wish to destroy the children or, at least, make them victims of her sexually neurotic fantasies? As the daughter of a parson, does she possibly see herself as the moral savior of Miles and Flora? The difficulty in making a solid interpretation of the story lies largely in the technical viewpoint; we see everything through the eyes of the governess: her perceptions are ours and her experiences are necessarily our own. The content and technique of The Turn of

3 Wilson, p. 97.
the Screw do nothing but raise questions; they fail to answer them. We must remember, this being the case, that goodness and evil are suggested in the tale, but nowhere are they defined. The "evil" of Quint and Miss Jessel is kept so mysterious as to be, quite possibly, imaginary—that is, nonexistent. James presents us with two forces and he shows them in conflict; but nowhere does he give us the moral signals we need for a definite interpretation. If James had ever written an American Western, the "good guys" would not be wearing white hats; both sides would wear hats of an indiscriminate gray.

The Sacred Fount has caused a similar dilemma among readers. The narrator of the novel is similar to the governess: he can be proven neither right nor wrong, sane nor insane. Charles T. Samuels is one Jamesian critic who refuses to get entangled in a discussion of problems which cannot be reasonably solved.

The novel's insoluble ambiguity is partly due... to a logical contradiction between James's need for moral judgments and his knowledge that judgments are ultimately private.... By not facing the evil at Newmarch, James allows us to find the narrator a greater horror than any he suspects. It is a fitting irony that James's need to protect society and thereby protect his idealistic hope for it should eventually cast doubts on both.... Newmarch and the narrator are both so indistinct that we cannot confirm the moral value of either.4

The novel is essentially a record of observations of a certain guest at a weekend gathering; the observer tries to figure out who is having an adulterous affair with whom. Some have called it satire (F. W.

Dupee, Wilson Follett, Maxwell Geismar), others have thought of it merely as an intellectual exercise (Rebecca West, J. W. Beach, Oscar Cargill); but the interesting thing to consider is that so much controversy might not have been generated if we as readers were not fixed to one viewpoint.

We should realize that to engage our interests a character should be able to elicit our sympathies as well. The first-person technique is good for promoting a certain amount of feeling for that character despite his flaws. James, while seldom choosing to write in the first-person (The Aspern Papers, The Turn of the Screw and The Sacred Fount are the only noteworthy examples which spring to mind), employs a technique most similar, and probably superior in that it is not so restrictive: the third-person subjective viewpoint. Whereas we are still permitted intimate glimpses into the consciousness of a single character, the author does not have to depend completely on the all-seeing "I." When an author sustains such a subjective viewpoint for a long period of time, it is quite possible, even probable, that the reader cannot be objective in evaluating that character. This does not necessarily mean that James sympathized as much as any of his readers, for we have known James to make little ironic twists in the narrative road. But we can at least understand why the problem of moral evaluation is complicated when dealing with James.

Wayne C. Booth, whose discussion of viewpoint in James is most invaluable to any serious writer of fiction, has explored the problem of morality and its relationship to narrative form. Booth says:

We have seen that inside views can build sympathy even for the most vicious character. When properly used, this effect can be of immeasurable value in
forcing us to see the human worth of a character whose actions, objectively considered, we would deplore. ... But it is hardly surprising that works in which this effect is used have often led to moral confusion. 5

The serious question regarding James then becomes: If he does have a moral intent, why does he obscure it by using devices such as the "unreliable narrator," thus preventing readers from discovering his moral judgment straight-forwardly? The question is rhetorical; in my opinion, James was not concerned with any sense of morality in fiction. The reason so many critics persist in granting James a conscious moral purpose is that they have been led traditionally to expect that a writer is a moral visionary.

I would personally like to take the argument farther and claim that Henry James was no moral absolutist, and thus a strain of moral ambiguity has always been present in much of his work. Daisy Miller was destroyed because her moral nature was anti-thetical to the morality of those in her society. In The Spoils of Poynton we learn by struggling along in the consciousness of Fleda Vetch that it is truly difficult to make an intelligent moral decision. And in The Golden Bowl we glimpse what is probably the ultimate insight into James's moral philosophy: "What is morality but high intelligence?" The line, thrown off so casually by Fanny Assingham, significantly discloses what so many of James's characters seem to be struggling toward as we explore the consciousness of each of them. Which of them achieve high intelligence, however, would still be a matter of scholarly dispute.

The moral dilemma becomes more acute in late James—what F. O. Matthiessen has termed "the Major Phase." With maturity, James's talent for writing ambiguously has increased; we therefore find in The Ambassadors (written in 1901, but published in 1903), The Wings of the Dove (1902) and The Golden Bowl (1904) characters whose moral values are difficult to determine. In discussing these three late novels, Stephen Spender believes that

...there are no villains. It is important to emphasize this, because in these really savage novels the behavior of some of the characters is exposed in its most brutal form. But the wickedness of the characters lies primarily in their situation. Once the situation is provided the actors cannot behave otherwise. Their only compensation is that by the use of their intelligence, by their ability to understand, to love, and to suffer, they may to some extent atone for the evil which is simply the evil of their modern world.6

James provides us with backgrounds and motivations for his characters, but he goes into great detail—and in that respect he is like one of the French naturalists. He understands, as he has Strether say in The Ambassadors, that the affair of life cannot ever be different, "for it's at the best, a tin mould" and we can only live with "the illusion of freedom." Therefore, according to such a belief, it would be practically useless to speak of moral value when there can be no real moral choice. In other words, we have no alternatives to the way we behave; Strether (and perhaps James) seems to be saying that we have no real freedom of will. When Strether says finally in the same novel, "How

much I have to judge!" he is that much closer to the realization that he will give up judging altogether, because the moral principles he lived by in Woollett have no validity in Paris. James, it seems, was fashioning a philosophy of moral relativism as he wrote, which is why I shall deal with these novels in chronological order. The moral complexities and the ambiguities increase with each novel, so that by the time we reach The Golden Bowl we see that James has truly become a master at providing characters whose moral value eludes us as soon as we try to understand or evaluate them.

In a letter to Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), dated May 10, 1885, James comments on her novel-writing and he informs her: "You have appealed indeed too much to that [moral] sense . . . . You have proposed to yourself too little to make a firm, compact work--and you have been too much in a moral passion! That has put certain exaggerations, over-statements, grossissements, insistencies wanting in tact, into your head. Cool first--write afterwards. Morality is hot--but art is icy!"7 James may not be trying here to deny the moral sense completely, but he does suggest that it be kept in its proper place. James did not approve of excess of any kind. One could possibly theorize that his tendency to underplay moral value makes it more difficult to evaluate his characters. Yet he has definitely made other remarks which make him seem like a moral relativist.

Edwin Perrin informs us, "I doubt if Henry James systematically opposed (or proposed) anything--except art. Once, in fact, when H. G.

Wells referred sweepingly to his view of life and literature, James promptly answered, 'I have no view of life and literature.' 8 Pelham Edgar claims that James had a strong moral sense but that he was artistically cautious in the way he expressed it: "The more competent and conscientious he is as an artist the less will he incline to promulgate his own opinions; therefore, in dealing with such a consummate artist as James it may seem hazardous to ascribe to him any dogmatic intentions of a moral kind." 9 In describing Henry James, Leon Edel states that

For the American novelist there is just life, life infinite in its manifestations and forms, and the reality he could grasp or observe--and describe. Life was good and it was evil; people were innocent...or, on the other hand, predatory and destructive. Life abhorred rigidities, particularly those which man sought to impose on it. It offered no general rules, only "cases," and these were the stock-in-trade of the novelist. 10

We should probably dismiss the notion that James was deeply concerned with moral problems, a notion too easily assumed from the knowledge that his father, Henry James, Sr., was a minor theologian (a follower of Swedenborg).

James describes the moral sense as it operates within the consciousness of a specific character at a specific moment. He nowhere

intrudes by displaying his own moral sense, and those critics who misread and misinterpret James are merely those who have failed to see that the author refuses to judge. Therefore, although his thorough discussion of the concept of evil in James is admirable, J. A. Ward errs when he states that James "assumes absolute standards of good and evil" or that "evil in James is an absolute . . . ." Such statements must inevitably lead to a degree of contradiction when considering the "given situation" as when Ward states, "Evil is above all personal . . . it remains the concern of the private man." In The Ambiguity of Henry James Samuels strays when he fails to recognize James's essential neutrality and when he underestimates the novelist's ability to control his work.

We should also realize that it is possible James was playing an intellectual game with all of us. We need only look at another of his letters, dated September 17, 1913, and written to Auguste Monod, who translated A Small Boy and Others into French: "... [I]t is a relief to me this time to have so utterly defied translation. The new volume will complete that defiance and express for me how much I feel that in a literary work of the least complexity the very form and texture are the substance itself and that the flesh is indetachable from the bones!" The form that James speaks of here seems to be his primary

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12 Ward, p. 169.

13 Ward, p. 170.

concern in writing, an attitude he may well have learned from Flaubert.

In countering the sharp criticism of James by Edmund Wilson, Leon Edel emphasizes the point that ambiguity in James is purposeful.

An author who planned his work as carefully as Henry James and endowed his narrators with special and consistent "points of view," not only knew what he was about, but was actually constructing a puzzle, a maze, a labyrinth, with diabolical ingenuity.... Whatever ambiguity there is, has been willed by James. 15

Edel, the official biographer of Henry James, reaffirms the point that "James's attitude is one of complete neutrality. So neutral is he that he leaves a wide imaginative margin for the reader who, if he is not careful, will be adding material from his own mind to the story." 16 This neutrality, then, lays an unsuspecting trap for most critics, who unwittingly provide us with moral evaluations for James's characters.

In the last major novels of Henry James, some of the questions are these: Do we see Marie de Vionnet as wonderful or wicked? Do we see Merton Densher as heroic or villainous? Do we see Maggie Verver as divine or devious? We sometimes get the impression that James sees these characters both ways simultaneously and that he takes pains to share his overall view with us. James has been praised and damned for not clarifying the moral values of his characters, but most critics content themselves with trying to cut away the jungle growth and to avoid the snares in an effort to find the definitive shape of the moral terrain. What we then find in the critical discussions is a

16 Sacred Fount, p. xxv.
complete range of reactions.

Of Madame de Vionnet in The Ambassadors Robert Marks writes: "Morally she is of comparatively small account, and the glory somewhat fades from her even to Strether's vision."\(^\text{17}\) J. A. Ward perceives her as "weak and mortal humanity, redeemed by beauty and grace."\(^\text{18}\) Maxwell Geismar states that "Mme de Vionnet is punished in the novel because, after all, she is sexual."\(^\text{19}\) Geismar theorizes that, despite her charm, Mme de Vionnet is characterized finally as pitiful because the asexual James found her passion to be degrading. But Charles T. Samuels commends her because her "passion is total. However much it may reduce her to lies and pleading, it is also the source of her grandeur and creativity."\(^\text{20}\) And Elizabeth Stevenson labels Mme de Vionnet "the gentle victim" of Chad Newsome.\(^\text{21}\)

F. W. Dupee suggests that Kate Croy is the real heroine of The Wings of the Dove, if an evil one.\(^\text{22}\) Ronald M. Meldrum calls Kate "a blood-leech of the most virulent species," and he sees "nothing commendable in her uncompromising attitude at the end . . . ."\(^\text{23}\) J. A. Ward claims that Kate Croy's evil is normal, that it springs from "the

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\(^\text{18}\) Ward, p. 126.
\(^\text{20}\) Samuels, p. 207.
need to rise above her unfortunate circumstances."²⁴ F. O. Matthiessen claims she is not "the nakedly brutal villainess that [James] had projected in his notebook. She is a much more living mixture of good and evil, a far more effective register of James' mature vision of human complexity."²⁵

Frederick Crews finally pronounces Kate evil but most unwillingly. He wonders whether we should not place her "somewhere between innocence and guilt."²⁶ He finds her "ability to face the truth, her courage, her sense of honor, her genuine love for Densher, and her unwavering taste ... all of superior caliber."²⁷ Sydy McMillen Conger expresses surprise that in place of a "blackguard villain tweaking his mustache ... we find two young people very much in love who, in spite of the crime they perpetuate, are in many ways most admirable human beings."²⁸ And Sallie Sears claims: "There is a certain beauty in the brave if somewhat harrowing consistency of Kate's character, in her risking everything ... [the bravery of her risk coupled with her refusal to rationalize her behavior, while most of Merton's energy is devoted to rationalization, helps to account for our greater sympathy for Kate."²⁹

²⁴Ward, p. 129.
²⁷Crews, p. 79.
H. R. Hays refers to Merton Densher as a "villain" and as "a scheming and unscrupulous up-holder of the conveniences of money and position." 30 Ward sees Densher as "the nonheroic yet perceptive man," 31 Geismar calls him a "mediocre hero," 32 and Crews states, "The most innocent figure in this intrigue is Merton Densher himself, an out-and-out intellectual who has no pretensions to worldliness." 33

F. W. Dupee refers to The Golden Bowl as "the large problem child" in the Jamesian family of novels. He wonders if the Ververs, Maggie and her father, Adam, share in some way the guilt of their adulterous partners." Dupee adds that the artistic sense in James collided with the moral sense and so "he could not help observing [Maggie] and her father on their weak and even their sinister side ...." 34 As early as 1907 Oliver Elton, referring to Maggie as the "avenger" and to Charlotte as the "culprit," wrote: "Our sympathy .... turns away from the rightful avenger to one of the culprits, while the other culprit [the Prince] has the best of it all in the end. This is very like life ...." 35 F. R. Leavis would probably have agreed; he states: "Actually, if our sympathies are anywhere they are with Charlotte and (a little) the Prince, who represent what, against the general moral background of the book, can only strike us as a decent passion ...." 36 In the

30 "Henry James, the Satirist," Hound and Horn, VII, 3 (April-May, 1934), p. 516.
32 Geismar, p. 236.
33 Crews, p. 66.
34 Dupee, p. 259.
opinion of Joseph J. Firebaugh, Maggie is an all but unmitigated tyrant. S. Gorley Putt states that the "exercises of Maggie's penetrating forgiveness bear, too, all the marks of sadistic satisfaction." On the point of the silken cord which Maggie imagines to be placed around Charlotte's neck, F. O. Matthiessen believes that "James's neglect of the cruelty in such a cord, silken though it be, is nothing short of obscene." Two critics, John A. Clair and Jean Kimball, go so far as to claim that there has been, in fact, no adultery committed, a situation which would clearly make villains of the Ververs and innocent victims of Amerigo and Charlotte. Jean Kimball, presenting a good argument in defense of Charlotte Stant, argues that Charlotte has been victimized by her self-righteous friend Maggie.

On the other side of this intellectual fence, Elizabeth Owen claims that Charlotte Stant is clever, dangerous and brilliantly evil. Without a clear realization of this, the image of her being led about on a cord is intolerably painful; with it, we can only be glad she is tamed, and Maggie's compassionate tears really have the quality of mercy.

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39 Matthiessen, p. 100.
Other critics, such as Austin Warren, stress Maggie's pure virtue; Warren claims, for instance, that "Maggie becomes aware that evil may meet one garbed as an urbane friend, and learns how so to fight evil as to save what she prizes . . . . And the great theme . . . is the discovery that evil exists in the forms most disruptive to civilization: in disloyalty and treason." C. B. Cox agrees when he states, "Instead of looking at the world through the mists of romantic illusion, Maggie has to confront the reality of evil." Quentin Anderson has even dared to raise Maggie and her father to divine heights.

These, then, are some of the diverse critical views of James's characters which must be reconciled or explained away in any sensible discussion of the three novels written during the later phase. I have tried in the following pages to show how James has given us neutral or balanced views of these characters; my analysis thus conflicts with the majority of critical views, which make moral judgments of one kind or another. I must agree with Robert E. Spiller, an historical critic, when he states that one of the novelist's major themes is "the substitution of psychological for ethical measurements of good and evil." For James, as for no other writer of his time, the use of a realistic method meant a necessary breaking away from that sense of absolute morality that had been bound up inextricably with the romantic tradition.

CHAPTER II: THE AMBASSADORS

The most controversial figure in The Ambassadors is perhaps Marie de Vionnet. Of course, our view of her is almost totally dependent on what Lambert Strether sees and thinks. Maria Gostrey sums up the popular view of the woman when she outlines in brief Strether's mission in Paris. At first referring to Chad Newsome, Miss Gostrey states:

"...He's a young man on whose head high hopes are placed at Woollett; a young man a wicked woman has got hold of and whom his family over there have sent you out to rescue. You've accepted the mission of separating him from the wicked woman. Are you quite sure she's very bad for him?" (I, 54)

The latter question is one which I do not think is ever really answered, but the question is posed and that is the important thing. We should also be wondering at this point: Is she very bad at all? Maria Gostrey then warns Strether to be cautious and not to judge the woman without having all the facts. He, of course, having freshly arrived from Woollett, Massachusetts, with its Puritan consciousness, does not agree with her and disapproves of his friend's use of the word "charming." Instead, he labels Mme de Vionnet as "base, venal—out of the streets," (I, 55) and we are almost prepared to accept this judgment since it not only seems to justify Strether's long journey to Europe, but it also serves to vitalize the novel. We are quite anxious that there be a "wicked woman" whom Strether will confront. Later in this same conversation, Strether says of Chad's sister, Mamie Pocock, that "people may differ" (I, 56). It's interesting that many of the characters
here provoke a variety of judgments, and people (readers, that is) will
certainly differ regarding these characters. Such casual remarks as the
above only help to prove that James deliberately wanted us to have sev­
eral views of his characters.

A complex character is undoubtedly more believable, but James does
something peculiarly interesting when delving into complexities; he has
that odd compulsion to allow an incident to reveal conflicting quali­
ties in a character. Part of James's method, therefore, is an indul­
gence in word-play. To my knowledge, no one has concerned himself as
yet with James's playful usage of the words "good" and "bad." We
should note them here because of their moral relevance to the charac­
ters. At various times throughout the novel Mme de Vionnet and Chad
are discussed in terms of their goodness and badness, but nowhere is
it clear that James would have us make a definite judgment. In fact,
he himself almost seems to enjoy a certain comic neutrality. Perhaps
he is attempting to show us the relativity of such labels.

In Book Fourth Maria Gostrey gives us her view of Mme de Vionnet
as she takes an active part in trying to make Strether "see":

"A good woman?" She threw up her arms with a
laugh. "I should call her excellent."
"Then why does he deny her?"
Miss Gostrey thought a moment. "Because she's
too good to admit! Don't you see," she went on,
"how she accounts for him?"
Strether clearly, more and more, did see; yet
it made him also see other things. "But isn't what
we want that he shall account for her?"
"Well, he does. What you have before you is his
way. You must forgive him if it isn't quite out­
spoken. In Paris such debts are tacit."
Strether could imagine; but still---! "Even when
the woman's good?"
Again she laughed out. "Yes, and even when the
man is! There's always a caution in such cases," she more seriously explained—"for what it may seem to show. There's nothing that's taken as showing so much here as sudden unnatural goodness."

"Ah, you're speaking then now," Strether said, "of people who are not nice."

"I delight," she replied, "in your classifications. But do you want me," she asked, "to give you in the matter, on this ground, the wisest advice I'm capable of? Don't consider her, don't judge her at all in herself. Consider her and judge her only in Chad." (I, 170)

At this point Strether is still hung up with his sexually inhibited attitudes. He hasn't yet learned that a "virtuous attachment" (as Little Bilham refers to the relationship between Mme de Vionnet and Chad) may still be erotic in nature. Therefore, in this conversation with Maria Gostrey she uses the word "good" in a different sense than the one in which Strether takes it. Knowing this, Miss Gostrey has asked him to withhold judgment on Mme de Vionnet.

In Book Fifth Strether feels he must have some kind of declaration from Chad. Of Mme de Vionnet, Strether asks Chad, "Is she bad?" Chad echoes the word "bad" without shock but gives Strether a question for an answer: "Is that what's implied?" Strether now feels he's been thrown off-balance; he feels silly for asking the question at all but without an answer he is floundering in a sea of moral uncertainties. Grasping for something, he asks, "Is her life without reproach?" Book Fifth then ends with Chad's response: "Absolutely without reproach," but note that Chad adds to this, "Allez donc voir!" (I, 239) or "See for yourself," which suggests that James would have us, his readers, see for ourselves, too. He would also have us question our traditional use of the words "good" and "bad."
Toward the middle of the novel Strether is engaged in deep conversation with Miss Barrace, who claims that Mme de Vionnet is particularly magnificent that evening for his benefit. Strether is amazed at this, but this time he does not disapprove when his immediate companion refers to the woman as charming. "Of course it's her charm," agrees Strether, and the realization that witches have charms and that Mme de Vionnet is possibly some kind of witch takes hold of us. But even this particular impression has no permanent value as the conversation goes on.

"Well," Miss Barrace explained, "she's just brilliant, as we used to say. That's all. She's various. She's fifty women."
"Ah but only one"—Strether kept it clear—"at a time."
"Perhaps. But in fifty times—!" (I, 264-265)

Strether says it will never come to that and goes on to inquire about Mme de Vionnet's private life, so that we can see his view of her is changing.

A very stunning description of Mme de Vionnet occurs toward the end of Book Sixth. "He could have compared her to a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud, or to a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge" (I, 270). The reference to the woman as a goddess is enough to convince most readers of her essential purity. By mid-novel then we have been as charmed as Strether is. Mme de Vionnet cannot possibly be the "wicked woman" that the folks in Woollett think she is. But immediately James is playing his tricks again, and he will not let the matter rest, nor let our judgment solidify.
She had aspects, characters, days, nights.... She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an uncovered person the next.... Twice during dinner he had met Chad's eyes in a longish look; but these communications only stirred up again old ambiguities--so little was it clear from them whether they were an appeal or an admonition (I, 271).

Mme de Vionnet is seen in various ways; we get this roundness of view, a technique at which James improves in his last novels.

Later in this chapter Strether once again pays tribute to the charm of Mme de Vionnet: "She's a tremendously clever brilliant capable woman, and with an extraordinary charm ... it's rare with any woman." Then Strether reaches his inevitable conclusion: "I understand what a relation with such a woman--what such a high fine friendship--may be. It can't be vulgar or coarse, anyway--and that's the point" (I, 280). Little Bilham, Chad's friend, with whom Strether is conversing, agrees enthusiastically. They both understand that Chad has been remarkably transformed and that Mme de Vionnet is responsible. They also both agree that the change is for the best. But as we are running smoothly along this line of thought, James suddenly jolts us. Bilham, in describing the meeting of Chad and Mme de Vionnet, says that she "made her impression. Then with time and opportunity he made his; and after that she was as bad as he" (I, 282). When Strether takes up on the word "bad," Bilham must quickly explain, "She began, that is, to care--to care very much." But the explanation does not suffice; surely, James has not thrown in the word carelessly, and there is the possibility that a moral implication is meant by the author. We are thus not sure if the woman is wicked for catching Chad into her trap or if she herself is hopelessly trapped in a love affair.
Strether, too, is terribly uncertain about Mme de Vionnet whenever he tries to understand her.

Strether turned away under his quick perception; she was so odd a mixture of lucidity and mystery. She fell in at moments with the theory about her that he most cherished, and she seemed at others to blow it into air. She spoke now as if her art were all an innocence and then again as if her innocence were all an art... (II, 115-116).

This mystification is often welcomed by Strether; he so enjoys the vision he is creating bit by bit that he plainly wants to be deceived by Mme de Vionnet. As long as he keeps Chad in Paris, as long as he delays the younger man's departure, the older man can live vicariously through the younger. Once again we should recall the speech in Gloriani's garden, that injunction to "Live!" and to cherish "the illusion of freedom." Without quite realizing it, Strether, attempting to manipulate the facts, assuming he will widen his consciousness and thus arrive at some long-awaited truth, is an accomplice in the affair of Chad and Mme de Vionnet. He so much enjoys the beauty of the sustained illusion that he is willing to give up the prospect of marrying Chad's mother, Mrs. Newsome.

When we reach Book Ninth Strether and Mme de Vionnet have become open about her reputation as seen by the other ambassadors, Chad's sister, her husband Jim, and Jim's sister Mamie. In announcing that Jim Pocock is on their side (that is, the side of those who would keep Chad in Paris), Strether tells Mme de Vionnet that Jim sees her as "awful."

"'Awful'?' She wanted it all.
"A regular bad one--though of course of a tremendously superior kind. Dreadful, delightful, irresistible."

"Ah dear Jim! I should like to know him. I must."

"Yes, naturally. But will it do? You may, you know," Strether suggested, "disappoint him."

She was droll and humble about it. "I can but try. But my wickedness then," she went on, "is my recommendation for him?" (II, 118).

Although this bit of dialogue can be read as ironic comedy, some could see it as revealing a certain foolishness on the part of our observer. That is, Strether has let himself fall into the world of duplicity created by Mme de Vionnet and sustained by her beauty and charm. It is his kind of outlook which we find condemned by Sarah Pocock, who asks, "Do you consider her even an apology for a decent woman?" (II, 202). Strether, of course, judging by what he sees as Chad's remarkable improvement, now staunchly defends Mme de Vionnet and thinks of her as representing "something rather new and rather good." Readily identifying himself with the handsome made-over Chad, Strether bravely (but perhaps foolishly) confronts Sarah Pocock on this point: "You don't, on your honour, appreciate Chad's fortunate development?" But Sarah, seeing things her way, grows indignant: "Fortunate? ... I call it hideous" (II, 205).

By the time we reach Book Tenth we see that James has fully extended the connotations of "good" and "bad" beyond that of "chaste" and "lewd." It comes to us in that scene where Strether and Little Bilham are once more discussing the "virtuous attachment."

"And what it comes to then," Strether went on, "is that poor awful Chad is simply too good for her."
"Ah too good was what he was after all to be; but it was she herself, and she herself only, who was to have made him so" (II, 172).

Since the words can serve in many ways, we wonder: Is Chad too good for her socially, financially, morally? Little Bilham's remark suggests that we should answer this "socially," since Chad's transformation shows an evolution toward fine manners and poise. Taking it thus, we suspect that James may not be concerned with the morality of his characters. The suspicion is confirmed in the last scene before Strether's trip into the French countryside.¹

This scene is valuable at this point because it prepares us along with Strether for his discovery of the true nature of the relationship between Chad and Mme de Vionnet. In this scene Maria Gostrey tries to show Strether that Sarah Pocock (and thus all of Woollett) have a narrow moral consciousness. Speaking of Sarah, Miss Gostrey states:

"Ah but she's intense--and that by itself will do sometimes as well. If it doesn't do, in this case, at any rate, to deny that Marie's charming, it will do at least to deny that she's good."
"What I claim is that she's good for Chad."
"You don't claim"--she seemed to like it clear--"that she's good for you."
But he continued without heeding. "That's what I wanted them to come out for--to see for themselves if she's bad for him."

¹Although I am using page references to the New York Edition since most critics use them in discussions on James, the New York Edition perpetuates one editor's error by carrying two chapters in reverse order. If the New York Edition had used the correct sequence, the scene mentioned here would immediately precede Strether's walk in the country and his discovery at the river. The second chapter of Book Eleventh, it is now generally conceded, belongs at the end of Book Tenth and what is labeled chapter III should actually be chapter II.
"And now that they've done so they won't admit that she's good even for anything?"
"They do think," Strether presently admitted, "that she's on the whole about as bad for me. But they're consistent, of course, inasmuch as they've their clear view of what's good for both of us" (II, 225).

The words "good" and "bad" are here used in a strictly utilitarian sense. Mme de Vionnet is no longer "good" or "bad" but rather "good for Chad" or "bad for Chad." James himself seems to be saying that he refuses to judge, not only because he refuses to accept a Puritan moral standard but also because he cannot accept any standard of absolute moral values. This may be stretching the truth a bit, and yet we see that James has his characters progress to the point where they are no longer direct, not even ironic, as they say "good" or "bad."

Now James prepares us for the discovery that, indeed, Chad and Mme de Vionnet are having a sexual affair—now that the terms "good" and "bad" have been clarified.

In Book Twelfth, after long contemplation, Strether sees that "he could trust her to make deception right. As she presented things the ugliness—goodness knew why—went out of them; none the less too that she could present them, with an art of her own, by not so much as touching them" (II, 277). Strether is perhaps in love with Mme de Vionnet, but we—having an overall view provided by James himself—are not. Our vision is more objective than Strether's. When Strether says to Mme de Vionnet, "You're wonderful!" she counters with "I'm old and abject and hideous" (II, 288). That we are never totally rooted in the reality of the situation is perhaps one of the few painfully clear facts about this book. We can never form a morally substantial opinion of Mme de Vionnet...
because James himself refuses to provide one. It was not an evasion on his part, but rather a deliberate element of his craft. One of the last conversations in the novel between Strether and Miss Gostrey helps to explain this.

Her friend Strether considered. "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?"
"Well, her beauty of everything. The impression she makes. She has such variety and yet such harmony" (II, 300).

Miss Gostrey sees that Strether has fallen under the spell of Mme de Vionnet; it is the impression he talks about, not the real woman. The avid reader of James knows by now that the author never had any intention of revealing "the real woman." Miss Gostrey also challenges Strether to make a judgment (for it is near the end of the novel), and her motivation here is easily understood. If Strether makes a favorable judgment, she will help bring the two of them together.

It was an offer he could temporarily entertain; but he decided. "She knows perfectly how I see her."
"Not favourably enough, she mentioned to me, to wish ever to see her again. She told me you had taken a final leave of her. She says you've done with her."
"So I have."
Maria had a pause; then she spoke as if for conscience. "She wouldn't have done with you. She feels she has lost you--yet that she might have been better for you."
"Oh she has been quite good enough!" Strether laughed (II, 302-303).

But it is not until the last chapter that Strether confesses his
foolishness to Maria Costrey.

His confession indicates that he is finished with illusions once and for all and that he has finally lived the life he thought he had missed. "I'm not," he tells her, "in real harmony with what surrounds me. You are. I take it too hard. You don't. It makes--that's what it comes to in the end--a fool of me" (II, 320). This statement may herald the true climax of the novel (not the discovery scene of Book Eleventh) since we see not only that Strether has abandoned the provincial moral view of New England, but also that he cannot continue to believe in the illusion created by Mme de Vionnet. There are two views of morality operating here, and Strether finally cannot live by either one. The American view is flawed by intolerance; the European view is flawed by deceit. It is Strether's power of imagination which alienates him from the New England morality; but, ironically, it is that same imagination which blinds him, which keeps him from seeing in Paris all that is actually happening around him. Strether finally does see, but he never quite sees what he sees as any of the others see it, neither as the Americans nor the Europeans.

James presents Strether's confusion in the person of Chad, who is both handsome and poised, yet who is a "brute," so willing to abandon his mistress and take a position in the family business. Strether warns Chad that he'd "be guilty of the last infamy" if he ever forsakes Mme de Vionnet (II, 308). He later says, "You'd not only be, as I say, a brute; you'd be . . . a criminal of the deepest dye" (II, 311). The line is not only comically foolish, it seems to be Strether's last attempt to get Chad to remain in Paris so that Strether can go on
vicariously enjoying the affair. Chad does not take those words to heart; nor perhaps should we. Chad responds, "I should be a beast, eh?" (II, 313). James, we should remember, wrote during the Victorian Age when such liaisons were considered immoral. But as an artist, he could neither applaud nor condemn the affair; and so, like Strether, he shows a certain sympathy for Marie de Vionnet, yet he never condemns Chad, as many critics would have us believe. Strether's last words to Chad before they part are "You're restless" (II, 318), an indication that both Strether and James sympathize with Chad as well. James thus allows Strether to understand Chad's willingness to leave Paris.

Strether's inability to judge is still with him; ironically, the jolting discovery at the river has not made judging any easier; it seems now that Strether will never be able to judge. He will live in a state of moral suspension. James clearly points this out near the beginning of Book Twelfth: "He was mixed up with the typical tale of Paris, and so were they, poor things--how could they altogether help being? They were no worse than he, in short, and he no worse than they--if, queerly enough, no better; and at all events he had settled his hash, so that he went out to begin, from that moment, his day of waiting" (II, 271).
CHAPTER III: THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

The Wings of the Dove was written just after James wrote The Ambassadors but it was published a year before. In this last phase, although some have accused him of senility for evolving a more complex (to some, complicated) style, we see the master becoming more ambiguous and more ironic. Not only do we find his sentence structure complex, but his tendency to write ambiguous passages, a style which permits conflicting interpretations, decidedly increases with each work. This quality is more pervasive in The Wings of the Dove than in The Ambassadors. The lovers in The Wings of the Dove have thus elicited a variety of reactions although most critics seem to consider them morally weak but sympathetic characters. James tells his story carefully—though the novel's overall structure seems awkward—so carefully as to confuse us regarding Kate Croy and Merton Densher; James provides us with moments and scenes in which we cannot tell whether they are heroic or villainous. It is this pair—and not Milly Theale—who are the main characters of the drama. The author devotes most of his novel to the development of Kate Croy and to the consciousness of Merton Densher, who tries to comprehend fully the situation in which he is caught.

It is true that the title refers to Milly herself and to her influence on these two even after her death. But the novel explores the relationship between Kate Croy and Merton Densher, the effects of society and of the cultivated desire for wealth on their ill-fated
love. That is the outstanding judgment James makes in the novel; nowhere does he unequivocally judge his characters as good or evil. Their ethics remain dubious throughout. If one is searching for villains one could possibly cite Lionel Croy, Kate's father, or Maud Lowder, her aunt, or even Lord Mark, for it is the latter who strikes the fatal blow to Milly (or so it seems) by telling her that Densher is engaged to Kate and has been all along. In such a view, the lovers are victimized, not Milly--victimized by the society in which they live.

James's portrayal of Milly Theale is too ideal and unsubstantial for us to really believe in her. She is "pure spirit" as James declares in his preface and so he deals with her indirectly; we see her, for the most part, through the eyes of others. But there is nothing unsubstantial about Kate Croy. She is a character created in the manner of the French naturalists; James uses many vivid details and carefully explores her background. We know far less about Milly Theale than we do about Kate. In the first chapter alone we learn enough about Kate Croy to understand her behavior throughout the novel.

...It was the name, above all, she would take in hand--the precious name she so liked and that, in spite of the harm her wretched father had done it, was not yet past praying for. She loved it in fact the more tenderly for that bleeding wound. But what could a penniless girl do with it but let it go? (I,6).

We see that even in her penniless state, however, Kate possesses grace, stature and presence.

The devotion of Kate to her worthless father and to her family is made clear very early in the novel. She is a selfless person when one considers that she gives up half of a meager inheritance to help her
sister Marian and her sister's children. She tells her father that the money from her mother's will

"...all makes up about two hundred a year for Marian, and two for me, but I give up a hundred to Marian." "Oh, you weak thing!" her father sighed as from depths of enlightened experience. "For you and me together," she went on, "the other hundred would do something" (I, 13).

That Kate is willing to make even further sacrifices is pointed out in the remainder of the first chapter. Lionel Croy urges his daughter to give in to her Aunt Maud and break all ties with him. For this, Aunt Maud has offered to keep Kate as well as to find her a suitable mate. With Kate suitably married, Lionel Croy would resume relations with his daughter. It is only because of her father's urging that Kate decides to accept Aunt Maud's offer.

This sense of familial responsibility is often overlooked or forgotten. Readers and critics are too quick to judge Kate and thus to misjudge her, but James probably wanted us to have a more balanced view. As we are told at the start of Chapter II:

It wouldn't be the first time she had seen herself obliged to accept with smothered irony other people's interpretation of her conduct. She often ended by giving up to them--it seemed really the way to live--the version that met their convenience (I, 25-26).

This passage alone should alert the reader to keep his mind open in regard to Kate's conduct. With this in mind we can better examine another passage. Kate's "villainy" seems to rest on such lines as this: "I shouldn't care for her if she hadn't so much" (II, 52). James has not added the word "money," being purposefully ambiguous, since he intended...
a reference to more than money. After all, Kate and Milly are seen as very happy friends, getting along for so many reasons. To think that Kate was merely interested in Milly's money is to overlook Milly's charm, her tenderness, her gaiety. Many of Kate's remarks can be taken in two ways, as scrupulous or unscrupulous, depending on how one judges her plan with Densher.

Kate soon makes her decision to move to Lancaster Gate and live with her Aunt Maud only because of her father's urging and because she feels compelled to help out her family. At this point Kate still seems relatively admirable; it is Aunt Maud who is the "Britannia of the Market Place" (I, 30) and it is Aunt Maud who is "unscrupulous and immoral" (I, 31). Kate's sin, however, if indeed she commits one, is as elusive as her father's. Supposedly, Lionel Croy has committed some great offense, but it goes without a name because, mysteriously enough, no one will discuss it. While some may say that James kept Croy's evil act unnamed so that our imaginations will make it seem more hideous, we could as well assume that the mysterious act was not evil at all. As Densher tells Kate, "It's so vague that what am I to think but that you may very well be mistaken? What has he done, if no one can name it?" Kate's response is that her father has done "everything," but James has still evaded the issue by refusing to assign a definite name to the act. The interesting thing about the whole matter, however, is that Kate considers herself to be a part of her father's act—a part of his "dishonour," and she claims this with "her note of proud, still pessimism" (I, 68). What we could possibly gain from the situation is that "goodness" and "evil" reside within all of us. Kate sounds pessimistic because she
has accepted the hidden evil as part of her nature without flinching and without struggle. Perhaps James, then, does not name the evil because he cannot name it; that is, he cannot specify what is evil, and so he fails to judge Kate's plan to obtain money—he can only describe its workings and its ultimate effects.

If Kate is overly concerned with material goods, James shows us why. She is surrounded by beautiful things, including the fantastic furniture at Lancaster Gate. She wants money so that she can marry Densher, who is considered too poor to make a good match. She does not scheme to cheat Milly out of anything but plans to sacrifice her lover, Densher, to obtain the desired goal. Kate even explains to Milly how her society operates.

Kate did explain, for her listening friend; every one who had anything to give—it was true they were the fewest—made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return. The strangest thing furthermore was that this might be in cases a happy understanding. The worker in one connexion was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled (I, 179).

James is thus taking pains not to portray Kate as a villainess. That there is some sort of understanding between Milly and Kate is made clear in the passage which ends the same paragraph:

She declined to treat any question of Milly's own "paying" power as discussable; that Milly would pay a hundred per cent—and even to the end, doubtless, through the nose—was just the beautiful basis on which they found themselves (I, 180).

James also makes it clear that his characters "move in a labyrinth"
"That's just the fun of it!" Milly says to her friend Susan Stringham. "I want abysses." James may be saying that we cannot completely fathom the consciousness of one person or another, and that this lack of knowledge creates an abyss between any two persons. Thus, if we cannot fully understand a person's motivations, there may be no real value in making moral judgments. Even the motives of these characters cannot clearly be seen as ethical or unethical.

We should note that Kate also says to Milly, "You may ask what in the world I have to give; and that indeed is just what I'm trying to learn" (I, 180). James thus shows that Kate is being relatively honest with Milly, even to the point of astonishing the American millionairess:

"We're of no use to you—it's decent to tell you. You'd be of use to us, but that's a different matter. My honest advice to you would be—" she went indeed all lengths—"to drop us while you can" (I, 281).

Milly is frightened here but tries to be amused. She mentions her appreciation for having Kate, who nevertheless responds, quite honestly, "Oh you may very well loathe me yet!" (I, 282).

Kate, realizing that Milly is dying and that she has not as yet experienced the fulfillment of love, sees her plan as something more than wicked, a self-awareness that cannot so easily be labeled as rationalization on her part. There is validity, honesty and perhaps a certain amount of virtue in Kate's words to Densher in the middle of the novel: "I want ... to make things pleasant for her. I use, for the purpose, what I have. You're what I have of most precious,
and you're therefore what I use most" (II, 52).

Kate then informs Densher that she has successfully deceived Milly regarding their romantic relationship. In this dialogue we see that Densher knows he is being manipulated, but he seems to trust that Kate will make all things right.

Still he just brooded. "She takes things from you exactly as I do?"
"Exactly as you do."
"She's just such another victim?"
"Just such another. You're a pair." (II, 63)

Densher agrees to go along with Kate's plan, believing that he is doing nothing wrong; and if Kate is barbarous, that quality fails to show when she learns that her "victim" has lost the will to live. "Poor Milly!" she says. Kate then shows surprise that Densher refused to lie about their engagement in order to save Milly's life. Densher claims that it did occur to him to lie but that "it wouldn't have done any good" (II, 323). He then goes on to tell Kate he would have stuck by his word; that is, denying her to Milly, he would have actually broken with Kate. He says he kept silent because Milly never even asked for a denial; Kate's response seems close to anger: "But to save her life--!" Kate clearly shows that she does not anxiously await Milly's death, one of the most significant but overlooked facts in the novel.

Note how, in her following speech, in which she reminds Densher that it is sometimes better to lie, she keeps her head high.

"She never wanted the truth"--Kate had a high headshake. "She wanted you. She would have taken from you what you could give her, and been glad of it, even if she had known it false. You might
Densher still broods as if some terrible guilt has overtaken him. But Kate, having expressed her feelings of pity for Milly, goes on to assure him that their plan, working well, is near fulfillment.

He stood looking at the fire and there was a time without sound. "The great thing," Kate then resumed, "is that she's satisfied. Which," she continued, looking across at him, "is what I've worked for."

"Satisfied to die in the flower of her youth?"
"Well, at peace with you."
"Oh, 'peace'!" he murmured with his eyes on the fire.
"The peace of having loved."
He raised his eyes to her. "Is that peace?"
"Of having been loved," she went on. "That is. Of having," she wound up, "realised her passion. She wanted nothing more. She has had all she wanted" (II, 332).

Kate thus tries to relieve Densher's conscience, speaking to him as if he were a child needing guidance. We see, however, in the process, that her scheme was designed to help Milly as well as themselves.

Kate has been accused of having no conscience; that is one interpretation of her behavior. Another is that she had her own set of values, which were not necessarily evil. She feels that she has always played fair and above board. When Densher asks Kate if she knows how much Milly has left him, she replies:

"Not all of it, no doubt, for it's immense. But money to a large amount. I don't care," Kate
went on, "to know how much." And her strange smile recurred. "I trust her."

"Did she tell you?" Densher asked.
"Never!" Kate visibly flushed at the thought.
"That wouldn't, on my part, have been playing fair with her. And I did," she added, "play fair" (II,385).

Densher admits that she has also played fair with him.

Kate is convinced that she has done nothing wrong, believing that Milly gave up life so that Densher could marry her. "She did it for us," Kate tells Densher at the end of the novel. But he is not easily convinced at this point and refuses to accept the inheritance. This angers Kate, but James is so masterful at writing the scene that we are unsure if Kate is upset over the loss of the money or the loss of Densher. She does seem willing to give up the money altogether if only Densher will deny that he is in love with Milly's memory. Densher evades the question and Kate's subsequent discovery is a pathetic one: "We shall never be again as we were" (II, 405).

Whereas Kate has been accused of definitely making one of the choices offered by Densher, that is, of choosing the cash instead of him, there is no evidence for the accusation. The ending of the novel is so ambiguous as to inspire graduate students to argue the point for hours. It is clear, however, that Kate's whole scheme is based on the assumption that she can marry Densher only if he gets the money. Despite Kate's bitterness, she seems to be willing to marry Densher if he will only deny his love for Milly's memory. Critics too often overlook this final appeal on her part, an appeal that makes her far less a villainess than many suppose. The evidence as James presents it seems to be that Kate will probably marry Lord Mark; at this point,
she will neither accept Densher nor touch Milly's money. The line "her headshake was now the end" refers to both the end of their love affair and the end of the plan to inherit. We should thus find it difficult to judge Kate accurately; but at least we can say that she remains consistent to her beliefs throughout and that her motives are sufficiently explained.

Densher's true motivations, on the other hand, are obscured from our eyes. When Kate asks Densher to visit Milly in London, he complies. He thinks it is to deceive Milly, as Kate plans it. (Nowhere in this novel is deceit equivalent to evil; as Kate Croy suggests, Milly is one of the conspirators--she wishes to be deceived, because only Densher's love can keep her alive.) But once in Milly's presence, Densher is unsure if he is there because of Kate's will or his own. Since Densher knew Milly in New York, he can honestly believe that he wishes to extend their friendship. James never clears up the ambiguity on this point; indeed, James creates it as a part of his story.

To see her alone, the poor girl, he none the less promptly felt, was to see her after all very much on the old basis, the basis of his three visits in New York; the new element, when once he was again face to face with her, not really amounting to much more than a recognition, with a little surprise, of the positive extent of the old basis (II,70).

It may be that Densher is successfully deceiving himself, that he never does fall in love with Milly Theale--even up to the end of the novel. Kate does accuse him of loving Milly's memory, but never are we as readers assured of the fact; Densher himself denies it. The possibility exists, then, that his "love" is just a cover-up for his guilt.
From the very initiation of Kate's plan he realizes that he must be a "brute of a humbug" (II, 25) for playing up to a sick girl, but his will is so weak that he cannot do otherwise; Kate's will has become Densher's will and he trusts in her. But there is also the suggestion that Milly's will is at work, so we are never quite sure if Densher is Kate's agent or not; the majority of critics suggest that he is. A passage that raises doubts about this supposition is one of those many passages in which Densher argues with himself about what to do.

What had happily averted the need of his breaking off, what would as happily continue to avert it, was his own good sense and good humour.... It wasn't so much that he failed of being the kind of man who "chucked," for he knew himself as the kind of man wise enough to mark the case in which chucking might be the minor evil and the least cruelty. It was that he liked too much everyone concerned willingly to show himself merely impracticable (II, 71).

He continues to struggle with himself though he does note that Kate seems to be "making light of a matter that had been costing him sundry qualms .... Either she was too easy or he had been too anxious" (II, 91). His conscience continues to operate so that throughout most of the second half of the novel he oscillates between self-condemnation and self-acquittal.

For all of us there seems to be distinct points in our lives, those inevitable moments of decision when we can turn in one direction or the other. Densher reaches that point the day Milly invites him for a carriage ride: "The system of not pulling up, not breaking off, had already brought him headlong, he seemed to feel, to where they actually
stood; and . . . he must do either one thing or the other" (II, 88). His decision to go with Milly becomes the critical turning point, and Milly's power at this point becomes especially evident. He catches her eyes and finds them "pretty and touching." He is so touched by her that he cannot be sure if she wishes to oblige him or if he wishes "to oblige her; which he had now fully done, by turning his corner. He was quite round it, his corner, by the time the door had closed upon her and he stood there alone" (II, 88-89).

Although Densher seems at times to know what he is doing, at other times he strikes us as stupid or perhaps a bit dense (is that the reason for his name?) He assures Kate that for her he will do anything, but only because she likes him.

She gave at this, with a stare, a disheartened gesture—the sense of which she immediately further expressed. "If you don't believe in me, then, after all, hadn't you better break off, before you've gone further?"

"Break off with you?"
"Break off with Milly. You might go now," she said, "and I'll stay and explain to her why it is" (II, 93).

He backs down, but his thoughts are not clarified for us, and so we cannot tell if he goes through with the scheme out of love for Kate or love for Milly. One might say that Densher is sexually aroused by Kate to the point where he will do anything. In such a state Densher cannot think very straight and Kate rebukes him, saying

... "We've gone too far.... Do you want to kill her?"
He had an hesitation that wasn't all candid.
"Kill, you mean, Aunt Maud?"
"You know whom I mean. We've told too many lies."
Oh at this his head went up. "I, my dear, have told none!" (II, 199).
We are undecided here whether we should praise Densher for his integrity or condemn him for his stupidity. But he does arouse our disdain when he reconsiders the situation and assures Kate, "I'll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires, if you'll only come to me" (II, 200).

In Venice he has much time to think over the whole business, and he concludes that he is torturing himself needlessly. Since he "had only submitted, consented, but too generously indulged and condoned the beginnings of others, he had no call to treat himself with superstitious rigour" (II, 183). He decides that the important thing is to conduct himself like a gentleman. "The law was not to be a brute." He convinces himself here that he has always acted "as a gentleman, oh that indubitably!" (II, 184). James sounds that reference to Densher ironically, perhaps--and it is such references which make it difficult for readers to judge Densher's behavior accurately.

After a while Venice exerts its strange hold on him and he perceives that

--even putting their purity of motive at its highest--it was neither Kate nor he who made his strange relation to Milly, who made her own, so far as it might be, innocent.... Milly herself did everything... Milly herself, and Milly's house, and Milly's hospitality, and Milly's manner, and Milly's character, and, perhaps still more than anything else, Milly's imagination... (II, 239).

When Milly is taken ill and her door is shut to him, Densher, beginning to feel guilty and apprehensive, is uncertain about Milly's refusal to see him: Is it because she's ill or because she's sus-
picious of his behavior? The inner storm as he stands near the Grand Canal is reflected in the way he sees the outer storm. "It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out . . . a Venice of cold, lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes . . ." (II, 259). Densher himself sees the storm as an evil omen; as he walks through the public square, he compares it to "a great drawing room . . . profaned and bewildered by some reverse of fortune" (II, 260). Through the window of Florian's cafe, Densher suddenly catches a glimpse of Lord Mark, whose presence in Venice seems to explain quite a bit: "The vice in the air . . . was too much like the breath of fate. The weather had changed, the rain was ugly, the wind wicked, the sea impossible, because of Lord Mark" (II, 263).

Densher shows some guilt when Susan Stringham visits him to inform him that Milly is dying. He asks her: "You don't think very horridly of me?" and her answer is equivocal: "Oh you've been extraordinary!" (II, 274). Densher soon demands of her, "And what did Lord Mark tell her?" (II, 283). During the course of the scene, Densher refers to Lord Mark as an "idiot of idiots," an "ass," a "horrid little beast" and a "hound" (II, 285, 286, 290, 290). But James writes the scene so ambiguously that we cannot be sure if Densher is condemning Lord Mark because the latter has precipitated Milly's decline by telling her that Densher and Kate are engaged or because he has thus spoiled Kate's plan. When Densher does his best to turn Susan against Lord Mark, his inner nature--effectively hidden by James from our eyes--remains a mystery: Is Densher sincerely upset because Lord Mark has harmed Milly? Or is he merely trying to make Lord Mark a scapegoat--a projection of his own profound sense of guilt? When Susan appeals to Densher to go to
Milly and deny everything, he holds back: "But a denial . . . of exactly what?" (II, 292). We can either loathe him at this point for his duplicity or hope that he has fallen in love with Milly. The scene ends without any resolution—as usual, with ambiguity. Knowing he can only save Milly's life with a denial of "everything," Densher merely moans, "Oh!" into the air of gloom (II, 293).

Our inability to arrive at a solid moral judgment of Densher is further hampered because James does not permit us to view Densher's visit with the dying Milly. We realize that he can save her by assuring her of his love, but what exactly transpires during that visit remains mostly a mystery to us. This seems to be part of a deliberate strategy by the author to keep us guessing. In his first conversation with Kate after his return from Venice, Densher seems to be waiting anxiously for Milly's death. When Kate questions him about his visit with Milly, he explains nervously:

"The manner of her so consciously and helplessly dying?" He had to think a moment. "Well, yes—since you ask me: very terrible to me—so far as, before I came away, I had any sight of it. But I don't think," he went on, "that—though I'll try—I can quite tell you what it was, what it is, for me. That's why I probably just sounded to you," he explained, "as if I hoped it might be over" (II, 317).

Densher could possibly be considered evil because he wrongs both women. He takes Kate before marriage, having refused to consent to going through with her plan until she comes to his rooms. He never gives Milly solid reason for believing he loves her, and his claim that he is in love with her memory at the end of the book is not especially convincing. For all we know it may just be another self-delusion on
his part--inspired by his guilt for participating in what he believes

Densher's contrition, also, is written by James as if he wanted us
to question it. James merely shows Densher attending church and shed­
ding tears at the end of the novel. Densher possibly gains sympathy
by rejecting the inheritance; but, sharing with Lord Mark the responsi­
bility for Milly's death, the handsome young man has already alienated
those sentimental readers who pledged their hearts to the "dove" from
the very beginning.
The Golden Bowl is interesting not only because it is the last great novel completed by James (The Outcry was his last, but hardly great), but also because James almost achieves a perfection at the technique he has been evolving throughout his career: his characters are so drawn as to perplex us the most. What are we to think of Maggie Verver and her father Adam? How do we judge Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant? Only the most naive readers would accuse Amerigo and Charlotte of being gross adulterers, and yet we cannot escape the strong implication that they have committed adultery. Only the most imperceptive reader could fail to see that Adam has purchased the Italian prince for his daughter Maggie, and yet it is difficult to blame the Ververs since the Prince consents so freely to being bought. The moral scale for judging this interesting group clearly runs from good to evil; but James has evaded the critics in providing any clear-cut answers. Controversy rages, with literary scholars taking their positions on one side of the fence or the other.

It is clear from the beginning that Adam Verver has purchased Prince Amerigo for his daughter Maggie. Adam is an art-collector. He has built an entire fortune because of his dealings with art objects. On his negative side, he is reminiscent of the cold Duke of Ferrara in the poem "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning; we might also compare him to Gilbert Osmond, the aesthete in James's Portrait of a Lady. Later in the story he purchases Charlotte Stant in much the same way--
not because he loves her but only because he wishes to acquire a wife (at his daughter's insistence). There is much more to say about Adam Verver, but this point is only brought up because it reflects on the character of his daughter Maggie. She has inherited from her father this same sense of power and the need, perhaps, to manipulate the lives of others. She is also bound to her father by one of the strongest unseen ties imaginable, a kind of psychological incest. She doesn't realize this, of course, and James never mentions the term itself, just as he never mentions the term adultery. But the novel is full of incest and adultery and its story the description of what happens to this particular ménage à quatre. Maggie uncovers the adultery; Charlotte perceives the incestuous relationship of father and daughter. But it is only toward the end of the novel that Maggie begins to acquire the necessary insight into her own behavior. Her own self-ignorance, however, does not really absolve her (nor Adam Verver) from guilt, and so the reader may be more willing to charge the "incestuous" Ververs with a crime than he would the adulterous lovers.

When we first see Charlotte Stant, she is revisiting Europe on the eve of Amerigo's marriage to Maggie. James's physical description of her is by no means charming and is perhaps meant to pull the reader subconsciously away from her: Charlotte's face is too narrow and long, her eyes small, her lips slightly protrude, and "her thick hair was, vulgarly speaking, brown." Then James adds an interesting touch, perhaps to soften the harshness of the portrait--but only momentarily. For, although her hair was brown, "there was a shade of tawny leaf in it for 'appreciation'--a color indescribable and of which he had known
no other case, something that gave her at moments the sylvan head of
a huntress" (I, 46). After continuing the description for another
page, Charlotte's first words are these: "You see you're not rid of
me. How is dear Maggie?" (I, 47). Already we perceive the flash of
impending danger. The image of the "huntress" is thus intensified.
James then tells us, still through the consciousness of Amerigo, that
Charlotte "always dressed her act up" and that her "present motive"
was concealed (I, 50). Thus, we remain on guard, especially when
Charlotte states, "I've been thinking of Maggie, and at last I yearned
for her. I wanted to see her happy . . . " (I, 52). Charlotte informs
Mrs. Assingham that in America she could not find the particular gift
she wanted, and next she invites the Prince to go looking with her for
a suitable wedding gift. On their little shopping trip, Charlotte
confesses to her former-lover:

"I don't care what you make of it, and I don't
ask anything whatever of you--anything but this.
I want to have said it--that's all; I want not to
have failed to say it. To see you once and be
with you, to be as we are now and as we used to
be, for one small hour--or say for two--that's
what I've had for weeks in my head..." (I, 96).

She wants the memory of their affair to remain with him always, even
throughout his marriage to Maggie. Thus, while Charlotte neither im-
plies nor denies the possibility of her hopes for another physical
liaison with Amerigo, she does suggest that there be a strong psycho-
logical bond for the rest of their lives.

It is Maggie who unwittingly helps to create an adulterous situa-
tion by persuading Adam to marry Charlotte. When Maggie characterizes
Charlotte as great in nature and in spirit, Adam asks, "What has she done . . . ?"

"Well, she has been brave and bright," said Maggie. "...She hasn't a creature in the world ...
Only acquaintances who, in all sorts of ways, make use of her, and distant relations who are so afraid she'll make use of them that they seldom let her look at them."

Mr. Verver was struck--and, as usual, to some purpose. "If we get her here to improve us don't we too then make use of her?"

It pulled the Princess up, however, but an instant. "We're old, old friends--we do her good too. I should always, even at the worst--speaking for myself--admire her still more than I used her."

"I see. That always does good" (I, 180-181).

Adam's last words here are possibly ironic. It makes the perceptive reader puzzle over the concept of goodness. In what does goodness consist: In not using others or, at least, in using them for some noble purpose? The whole novel is complex because James raises more definitions of morality than he has previously dealt with.

Even Fanny Assingham's rhetorical question defining morality is only that--a question. It does not sufficiently clear up the matter.

Bob Assingham got up. "And you call me immoral?"

She hesitated. "I'll call you stupid if you prefer. But stupidity pushed to a certain point is, you know, immorality. Just so what is morality but high intelligence?" This he was unable to tell her; which left her more definitely to conclude. "Besides, it's all, at the worst, great fun" (I, 88).

Even James is having fun in this novel; it is certainly his most comic novel. We can only laugh at the absurdity of trying to arrive at firm moral convictions. Certainly, James was laughing at all the critics
who try to show that one character is moral and the other not. As
Charlotte muses, "What do they really suppose . . . becomes of one?
--not so much sentimentally or morally, so to call it, and since that
doesn't matter; but even just physically, materially . . ." (I, 305).

If we keep in mind Charlotte's stated intention, to preserve a
lifetime bond with Amerigo, then we can better appreciate the marvelously
ambiguous and ironic scene in which Charlotte hesitates accepting Adam
Verter's proposal of marriage. Charlotte claims that Adam doesn't un-
derstand her. He responds, "I know enough what it is for me to do."
But she keeps up with her wistful evasiveness, refusing to tell him of
her previous affair with the Prince--now her daughter's husband.

But she shook her head again. "I doubt if you
know. I doubt if you can."
"And why not, please--when I've had you so before
me? That I'm old has at least that fact about it to
the good--that I've known you long and far back."
"Do you think you've 'known' me?" asked Charlotte
Stant (I, 220-221).

The look she wears and the tone she uses seem to make Adam doubt that
he has indeed known her. He then suggests that by marrying her he
will come to know her.

She faced him always--kept it up as for honesty,
and yet at the same time, in her odd way, as for
mercy. "How can you tell whether if you did you
would?" It was ambiguous for an instant, as she
showed she felt. "I mean when it's a question of
learning one learns sometimes too late" (I, 221).

And when Adam calls her "honourable," Charlotte claims, "It's just
what I want to be" (I, 222). The implication is obviously that she
is not honorable. Some may commend Charlotte for trying to dissuade
Adam from wanting to marry her; others, however, possibly condemn her for not telling him enough, or perhaps for using her hesitancy as a means of finding out how much he may really know about her.

One of the interesting elements in Jamesian fiction is that the situation itself can provoke much thought in the reader's mind without James commenting on hidden factors; yet nowhere does he disallow certain interpretations the reader may make. For instance, it seems perfectly reasonable to assume that, after they marry, Adam does not sufficiently attend to the sexual needs of Charlotte. He is aging, and what free time he has is usually spent with Maggie. So Adam may be driving Charlotte to find affection elsewhere. We discover that possibility when Charlotte claims that Adam will not let her bear children. At a time which had limited means of birth prevention, this could mean that their sex life was extremely minimized, and possibly nonexistent.

When Fanny approaches Charlotte at a party in her usual busybody's attempt to find out what is going on, Charlotte neatly puts Fanny into place and communicates the reason she has been escorted by the Prince: because Maggie is home tending to her father. As Charlotte says, "... Maggie thinks more, on the whole, of fathers than of husbands." Fanny soon answers, "You ought to be absolutely happy. You live with such good people" (I, 258). Fanny says it in all sincerity and also as a provocation to Charlotte. But James gives us no information in support of what either woman has said, and he leads us to conclude neither that the Ververs are "good" nor that Charlotte is "bad."

Because of James's potential for irony, it is also difficult
to know what he means by the following passage, which refers to the adultery of the Prince and Charlotte as a result of boredom and not deliberation. "Nothing stranger surely had ever happened to a conscientious, a well-meaning, a perfectly passive pair: no more extraordinary decree had ever been launched than this of forcing them against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid" (I, 289). The first question which arises concerns the responsibility of the lovers: Had they done everything to avoid the situation? The second question concerns the theory of two critics, Clair and Kimball, mentioned earlier: Was adultery even committed? The fullest expression of adultery appears in a scene which is not descriptive of evil; rather the scene is a bit ludicrous. James tells us that Charlotte "could rise to the highest measure of the facts," and she says to her lover, "... we must trust each other--!" He answers, "Oh as we trust the saints in glory." When he adds, "It's all too wonderful," she responds, "It's too beautiful."

And so for a minute they stood together as strongly held and as closely confronted as any hour of their easier past had ever seen them. They were silent at first, only facing and faced, only grasping and grasped, only meeting and met. "It's sacred," he said at last. "It's sacred," she breathed back to him (I, 312).

This passage must be one of the funniest James ever wrote. It is also, at the end of the scene, impossible for us to determine what James would have us think of the two lovers.

Later in the novel, after Maggie suspects her husband and best friend are having an affair, she still thinks of Charlotte as gentle and
wishes not that Charlotte could have been better, but rather only that she "could . . . have been worse!" (II, 138). Charlotte's manners make it difficult for Maggie to scheme silently in order to win back Amerigo. In a confrontation with Maggie on this issue (if one can call it a "confrontation"), Charlotte makes a statement which can elicit our sympathy or our disgust (if we consider it a lie): "I'm aware of no point whatever at which I may have failed you . . . .

If I've been guilty of some fault I've committed it all unconsciously, and am only anxious to hear from you honestly about it" (II, 248).

Many readers would condemn Charlotte for duplicity; however, that would not be a justifiable response. We can continue the claim that there has been no adultery or—if there has been—we could defend it on the grounds that Maggie and Adam have unwittingly thrown their respective mates together. Or we can even applaud Charlotte for not wanting to injure Maggie or Adam. As Fanny Assingham says earlier in the novel: "I don't pretend to be sure in every connexion of what Charlotte knows. She doesn't certainly like to make people suffer—not, in general, as is the case with so many of us, even other women: she likes much rather to put them at their ease with her. She likes, that is—as all pleasant people do—to be liked" (I, 194).

In that same confrontation, then, between the two women, Maggie replies, "I've not felt at any time that you've wronged me."

"How could I come within a mile," Charlotte inquired, "of such a possibility?"

Maggie...said, after a little, something more to the present point. "I accuse you—I accuse you of nothing."

"Ah that's lucky!" (II, 249-250).
Whether Charlotte means this in all sincerity or in all duplicity, we cannot be sure. One could possibly read into this remark a concealed threat by Charlotte to appeal to Maggie's father if his daughter makes any "rash" accusations.

If one really comprehends the novel (and I'm sure no one ever really understands it completely), we see that not only are moral values questioned, but all values and even all ideas. No one is ever really certain what is happening in this novel. The facts are unsubstantial, everything is disputable. The characters lie and tell the truth, but the reader can seldom distinguish which is which. As Fanny tells the Colonel: "We shall have . . . to lie for her . . . ."

"To lie 'for' her?" The Colonel often, at these hours, as from a vague vision of old chivalry in a new form, wandered into apparent lapses from lucidity. "To lie to her, up and down and in and out--it comes to the same thing. It will consist just as much of lying to the others too: to the Prince about one's belief in him; to Charlotte about one's belief in her; to Mr. Verver, dear sweet man, about one's belief in everyone..." (II, 122-123).

Fanny, therefore, lies to Maggie near the novel's end, telling her friend that she sees Charlotte being dragged off to America by Adam Verver without Charlotte being able to "resist or move a little finger" (II, 303). Fanny probably hopes, thus, to console Maggie and to relieve her after all the "suffering" she has endured. Charlotte, of course, gives Maggie another version of her pending departure. "I want," says Charlotte, "to have him [Adam] at last a little to myself: I want . . . to keep the man I've married. And to do so I see I must act" (II, 315). Soon she also adds, "I want really to possess him . . .
I happen also to feel that he's worth it" (II, 316). We cannot tell how Charlotte means her "worth it." Does she mean this materialistically or in some finer way? We cannot know. As Charlotte and Adam prepare to leave Europe, the Prince and Princess discuss Charlotte. Maggie asks,

"But shan't you then so much as miss her a little? She's wonderful and beautiful, and I feel somehow as if she were dying...dying for us--for you and me; and making us feel it by the very fact of there being so much of her left."

The Prince smoked hard a minute. "As you say, she's splendid, but there is...much of her left. Only, as you also say, for others."

"And yet I think," the Princess returned, "that it isn't as if we had wholly done with her. How can we not always think of her? It's as if her unhappiness had been necessary to us--as if we had needed her, at her own cost, to build us up and start us" (II, 346).

Some readers can only sympathize with Charlotte for her "goodness" and her "sacrifice"; others can only speculate on (perhaps with a laugh or two) what she will be giving and to whom she will be giving it once she settles in American City.

The Ververs can possibly be blamed for the situation if one considers their insensitive use of the lovers; the Ververs, with their money and influence, have degraded the lovers to the level of furniture.

The two noble persons seated in conversation at tea fell thus into the splendid effect and the general harmony: Mrs. Verver [Charlotte] and the Prince fairly "placed" themselves, however unwittingly, as high expressions of the kind of human furniture required aesthetically by such a scene. The fusion of their presence with the decorative elements, their contribution to the triumph of selection, was complete and admirable; though to a lingering view...they also
might have figured as concrete attestations of a rare power of purchase. There was much indeed in the tone in which Adam Verver spoke again, and who shall say where his thought stopped? "Le compte y est. You've got some good things" (II, 360).

But much of the moral ambiguity regarding the behavior of Adam and Maggie Verver lies rooted in the fact that the Prince and Charlotte accept their loss of freedom and of each other. Charlotte goes quietly off to American City with Adam Verver; the Prince is willing to cast off his mistress as soon as he sees Maggie scheming to get rid of Charlotte.

Maggie engenders so much sympathy, perhaps, because of her role as the faithful wife who has been wronged by her best friend. Society as it is presently constructed almost demands that we see her in such a role. She is the one who suffers, she is the one who remains sinless and guiltless, she is the one who is almost superhuman in her devotion and in her ability to forgive Amerigo (and even Charlotte). Maggie, of course, has been protected all her life by her father and his wealth; she isn't aware of the evils in the world. Watching her innocence (which some may call "ignorance") as Amerigo courts her, the reader is drawn again to the mystery of the Prince, who claims there is a hidden part of his personality. "Call it the bad part," Maggie says quite casually. We are thus alerted to the possibility that in the course of the novel she will be confronted by some kind of evil, by something she has never had to face before.

Maggie's "goodness" may also be an outgrowth of her evolution as a character. We have seen the American heiress grow through each work
of Henry James. Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Milly Theale and Maggie Verver—they are all basically the same: the innocent (ignorant) young American with money and no culture confronting the Old World of Europe with its intrigue and complexity. They each show themselves triumphant in a sense although they can easily be seen as victims as well. So, too, Maggie's "victimization" engages the sympathies of most readers who would thus automatically evaluate her as the good heroine; readers who, in fact, have been conditioned to their being a good heroine.

Perhaps one set of readers feels convinced of Maggie's goodness because she seems so sure of it herself. In reacting to the suspicion of an affair between her husband and her best friend, Maggie does not break down in hysterics. She reacts relatively calmly and with cool dignity. There are a few tears, delivered on Fanny Assingham's sympathetic shoulder, but Maggie soon displays beautiful composure and a sense of complete self-possession. One can either admire her for her poise under such circumstances or one can hate her as she seizes the opportunity to take matters into her own hands and get rid of Charlotte altogether. But note, in the following excerpt from a conversation with Fanny Assingham, how Maggie believes she is doing all in the name of love; whether or not she is remains an indeterminate matter:

"I can bear anything."
"Oh, 'bear'!" Mrs. Assingham fluted.
"For love," said the Princess.
Fanny hesitated. "Of your father?"
"For love," Maggie repeated.
It kept her friend watching. "Of your husband?"
"For love," Maggie said again (II, 116).

It could very well be love motivating Maggie; on the other hand, it
could be the pride of possession. Maggie wants to keep both her father
and Amerigo, but one of her startling revelations (along with the dis-
covery of her husband's adultery) is that she cannot indeed keep both.
Thus she decides to give up her father in order to keep her husband.

Up to this point Maggie has clearly been manipulating the life of
her father.

She kissed him, she arranged his cravat, she guided
him out, she held his arm, not to be led, but to
lead him, and taking it to her by much the same
intimate pressure she had used when a little girl,
to mark the inseparability of her doll--she did
all these things so that he should sufficiently
fail to dream of what they might be for (II, 83).

The pride of ownership, the attempts at possession and the subtle mani-
pulations are seen everywhere in the novel. For instance, soon after
we are introduced to Maggie's stream-of-consciousness\(^1\) in Volume II,
we see that she desires "to possess and use them [the lovers], even to
the extent . . . of directly exploiting, of possibly quite enjoying,
under cover of an evil duplicity, the felt element of curiosity with
which they regarded her" (II, 49).

There is a significant passage later on in which Maggie imagines
that her father is leading Charlotte by a silken halter.

Charlotte hung behind with emphasized attention;
she stopped when her husband stopped...and the
likeness of their connexion wouldn't have been
wrongly figured if he had been thought of as
holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of
a long silken halter looped round her beautiful
neck. He didn't twitch it, yet it was there; he
didn't drag her, but she came... (II, 287).

\(^1\) I apply this term to James although I realize that stream-of-
consciousness as practiced by Joyce, Faulkner and others is stylistically
different.
James, of course, doesn't usually employ a bit of imagery once and let it drop. He picks it up elsewhere as when Maggie compares her father to a spider. She "felt him still simply weave his web and play out his long fine cord . . ." (II, 358). But the spider imagery is not necessarily designed to lend an evil connotation to Adam Verver's actions; in another section of the novel, James refers to all his characters as social insects endowed with "little protuberant eyes" and "decorative spots on their bodies and wings" (II, 30).

That Maggie is conscious of her manipulations is brought out mostly in the card-playing scene at Fawns. She realizes at this point, as she stands on the terrace looking on at her father, her husband and Charlotte (all playing--with Fanny Assingham) that she has the power to destroy them all with a single word. That she chooses not to destroy anyone's happiness at that moment is perhaps a sign of her supreme decency; but that she has this tremendous power and pulls the strings as if the others are puppets is a criticism of Maggie that such a scene could invite. After all, it is Maggie who uses the knowledge of her husband's love affair to "torture" Charlotte.

Maggie meanwhile at the window knew the strangest thing to be happening: she had suddenly turned to crying, or was at least on the point of it--the lighted square before her all blurred and dim. The high voice went on; its quaver was doubtless for conscious ears only, but there were verily thirty seconds during which it sounded, for our young woman, like the shriek of a soul in pain (II, 292).

There are other passages in which James pushes deep into Maggie's consciousness. In the following one from the novel James uses a
rather conventional image of evil to dramatize what is occurring in Maggie's mind.

She saw at all events why horror itself had almost failed her...the horror of finding evil seated all at it's ease where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously behind, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness. It was the first sharp falsity she had known in her life, to touch at all or be touched by... (II, 237).

Maggie is here imputing her own moral values to the circumstances; it would be so tempting for any reader to accept those values as his own, and I would say that most readers of this novel do. Whether or not James would as well is debatable. Some critics claim that Maggie's moral analysis is the one we should accept, but I think that such critics should pay closer attention to all of Fanny Assingham's observations. Fanny also describes Maggie's confrontation with "Evil," but a few lines later she is also quick to blame Maggie for beginning the "vicious circle" while citing Charlotte and the Prince for being "in their way...so improbably good" (I, 394). It thus becomes clear to me that there is no authoritative view that James would have his readers share.

James does bring up the point that Maggie has initiated the mischief out of selfishness. The Princess admits to her selfishness when she tries to get Adam to take Charlotte back to America (without directly asking him). Maggie wistfully suggests that perhaps the two of them, father and daughter, have been selfish, foolish, and even slightly wicked (II, 261). But the difficult question for readers then
becomes this: How should we respond to Maggie's admitted selfishness after she qualifies it? "I'm selfish, so to speak, for him. I mean . . . he's my motive in everything." Father and daughter have been similar in this respect; each recognizes his own selfishness but can justify it. Adam, we are told, "could from experience fancy what she meant" (II, 262).

Although I have discussed in this chapter only the moral questions surrounding the women, the other two principles, Adam Verver and Prince Amerigo, could also inspire debate, but perhaps not so much. Adam is linked so closely with Maggie that some of the specific questions regarding her morality can also be applied to him. The Prince is morally complex for other reasons, and James alludes to his dual ancestry of saints and sinners to bring this out. But the men are essentially passive, led and controlled by the women, and it is therefore the activities of the women which engage our interests and call for our moral evaluations. James seems to have fun by challenging us, teasing us, even daring us to make judgments of a moral nature. But since he has maintained his usual distance throughout, the only proper response would be to laugh at these beings who have such trouble with their spouses rather than to judge them. Because of the overall sense of neutrality provided by James, anyone who dares to choose sides in their struggles or to morally label them is treading on the thin ice of his own moral sense.
Throughout his career Henry James created a unique kind of literature. It could possibly be called amoral in that he refuses to judge his characters. Thus, James is like Flaubert; they both wrote descriptive rather than prescriptive novels. James, however, is perplexing because he dramatizes situations so ambiguously that we as readers are tempted to define the moral worth of his characters. For unlike Flaubert, James teases us, even daring us to judge; but as much as we may attempt to analyze and to speculate, we cannot hope to arrive at any definite moral evaluations regarding his major characters, especially in the late phase of his career.

James often portrays elements of human nature using a subjective voice, thus allowing his characters to comment on goodness or evil in a given situation, but he nowhere attaches such moral labels himself. For instance, it is true that, in The Beast in the Jungle, John Marcher's egotism and self-obsession lead to his suffering and to the suffering of May Bartram, but in the entire narrative James never points an admonishing finger at Marcher—although Marcher may go so far as to blame himself.

Possession of the will of others is a prominent theme in much of his work, especially in The Golden Bowl, but nowhere does James infer that the attempt at possession is evil; that would be folly for one so attuned to psychological principles. He describes human behavior, he does not prescribe it. And those who would see James as constructing
his own moral system fail to realize how feeble such a construction is, especially when we find that its most explicit expression is Fanny Assingham's "What is morality but high intelligence?" The construction is essentially feeble because the next step of the analysis depends on an adequate definition of intelligence and how it relates to specific Jamesian characters.

In these last great novels James permits us fascinating glimpses of people, how they live, how they think, how they grapple with reality, how they manipulate symbols as well as other characters, and how they attempt to reach self-discovery or to increase their knowledge of the world around them. But nowhere does he provide us with a definite and clear notion of the moral value of his characters.


Hays, H. R. "Henry James, the Satirist," Hound and Horn, VII, 3 (April-May, 1934), 514-522.


