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## "How Should One Love?": Alternative Love Plots and Their Ethical Implications in the Victorian Novel

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"HOW SHOULD ONE LOVE?": ALTERNATIVE LOVE PLOTS AND  
THEIR ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

by

Jennifer J. Carpentier

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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Department of English

Western Michigan University  
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# "HOW SHOULD ONE LOVE?": ALTERNATIVE LOVE PLOTS AND THEIR ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

Jennifer J. Carpentier, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2001

In reading Victorian fiction through an ethical lens, I am attentive to questions of what constitutes the good, loving, well-lived life. It is my contention that Victorian writers turned to fiction – specifically, the rapidly emerging novel form – to explore the ethical implications of being in love, and the problems occasioned by erotic love. The writers I examine modify the basic Aristotelian search for a specification of the good life for human beings: they used novels as testing grounds for the ethical question, “How should one *love*?”

My study of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British fiction reveals a strain of novels deeply interested in examining the ethical implications of love relationships, in putting forth alternative and nontraditional love stories, and in expanding conventional notions of what constitutes a love plot. In my examination of Anne Brontë’s novels, I explore the Victorian courtship customs that preclude empathy and intimacy between men and women, and particularly between coquettes and their “honest” counterparts. Next I study the philosophical and aesthetic ideals that act as defenses against love in Henry James’ The Ambassadors and The Portrait of a Lady, and in Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim.

The following chapter is devoted to the novels of George Eliot; I contend that she is unmatched in her love plots that transcend the possibilities of traditional love, and in her suggestion that different kinds of love – later or second love, paternal love, unrequited love – can compel powerful transformations. Finally, my treatment of unrequited love and its redemptive capacity is more sustained in my discussion of Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities.

All of the novelists I include in this study investigate the ethical potential of alternative love plots. In the cases of Bronte, James, and Conrad, love's ethical potential is more often deferred than fulfilled, whereas Eliot and Dickens are more morally optimistic; love in their novels not only redeems its participants, but diffusively enhances the common good of the surrounding community as well.

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Jennifer J. Carpentier

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## CHAPTER I

### THE ETHICS OF BEING IN LOVE IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL: AN INTRODUCTION

This project has its roots in the perception of injustice I experienced after reading Henry James's The Ambassadors and a good deal of literary criticism on the novel. To my dismay, I discovered that a majority of critics found James's conclusion a comic triumph for Lambert Strether, lauded Strether as indeed "dreadfully right" and unequivocally successful, and dismissed Maria Gostrey as merely another dispensable and incidental confidante in James's long line of literary *ficelles*. Charles Thomas Samuels, for example, has argued that Strether ultimately "becomes noble in a higher sense than [Quixote]" in that he passes through the innocence that engulfs him for much of the novel and emerges with an acceptance of the complexity of life (204). Similarly, William Macnaughton contends that Strether leaves Europe a more complete man, "full of possibility," and therefore "it is a mistake not to be disappointed by the end of The Ambassadors or to read it pessimistically" (79). Even more troubling is Macnaughton's assessment of Maria's fate: "[She] has not been crushed; her wit and pride are intact; she will get over the jilting" (79).

Contrary to Macnaughton's edict, I am horribly disappointed at the end of The Ambassadors. My first objection to such readings as his and Samuel's is that they overestimate Strether's accomplishments and overlook

his losses. The cost of his being "dreadfully right" is the renunciation of Maria's love, of human connection, and of a life fully lived. Strether encourages others to "live! live all you can!" but in the end he evades life's beauty and complexity by fleeing back to the dull safeness of Woollet; his "triumphant departure" is more a fearful exodus executed under the guise of "dreadful rightness."

The insistence that Maria "has not been crushed" ignores the details of the text, and the reassurance that she "will get over the jilting" is an example of the kind of cold-hearted critical patronage that disregards the rare and abiding quality of Maria's love for Strether. Maria vows that "there's nothing in all the world" she would not do for him, "deck[s] him out for others" with unfailing support and perfect generosity, "wish[es] with all her heart" that he stay in Europe, and, when he fears he will expend the last drop of his blood completing his mission, ardently pleads, "Ah you'll please keep a drop for *me*. I shall have use for it!" (346; 198; 244; 246). Moreover, Maria is "the blessing that had become his need," and Strether himself admits that his decision to leave her is "awkward" and "almost stupid" (80; 346). Given all of this, which only grazes the surface of their relationship, I am to believe that Maria emerges unscathed, that Strether's abandonment of her is a mere "jilting," and that he is the better for leaving her? Clearly I was bringing to my reading of the text a compassionate consideration of Maria – a character too many are determined to write off as a stepping stone in Strether's progress, rather than a character as fully human, complex, and feeling as Strether himself.

Finding Martha Nussbaum's chapter on The Ambassadors in her book Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature was akin to gentle vindication. She argues that Strether oversimplifies life, drawing an inviolate distinction between "rightness" and emotional intimacy:

by refusing himself feelings and ways of living that he could not reconcile with his personal demand for perceptual clarity and unselfish general concern, he has prevented himself, in the end, from perceiving a crucial fact about the situation around him (187).

That crucial fact is the presence of love in the lives of those around him, particularly Maria's love for him, which Nussbaum insists Strether cannot see, understand, or return. That very inability is "their comedy and their tragedy" (189). It was and is significant to me that Nussbaum is attentive to Maria's plight, and acknowledges that the novel's conclusion is "theirs," not Strether's alone. Although I quibble with her subsequent claim that the novel's conclusion affirms the moral impossibility of love – a claim I challenge in Chapter Two – I was heartened by Nussbaum's careful study of Maria Gostrey as consequential in her own right, and by her contention that Strether really "triumphs *over* life" rather than indulge in all of life's (and love's) messiness, wonder, and unpredictability.

Nussbaum distinguished herself from the literary critics I found so frustratingly remiss by bringing ethical theory and her background as a moral philosopher to bear on the study of literature. Insisting that the speech of literary theory in recent years has become impoverished, Nussbaum locates the problem as a general unwillingness to talk about literature – particularly novels – as representing life. Such theorists, she contends, refuse

to discuss what truths and possibilities literary works express about life, including questions about morals, justice, human connections, emotions, desire, and what it means to lead a good life. It was precisely this interest in the central ethical questions about human life, and how such questions are articulated and played out in novels, that I found so essential to my reading and understanding of James's novel. Reading Nussbaum sent me on my own exploration of ethical theory and literature, and led me to this study of the ethics of love plots in 19th-century British fiction.

In Love's Knowledge, Nussbaum's self-proclaimed aim is to "establish that certain literary texts ... are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by any means sufficient, but sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete" (23-24). This inquiry is Aristotelian in nature and begins with the sweepingly inclusive question: "How should one live?" She calls this inquiry both empirical and practical: "empirical, in that it is concerned with, takes its 'evidence' from, the experience of life; practical, in that its aim is to find a conception by which human beings can live, and live together" (25). In explaining why she wishes to "dragoon" literature into her philosophical, ethical enterprise, Nussbaum again turns to Aristotle and his observation that literature

is deep, and conducive to our inquiry about how to live, because it does not simply (as history does) record that this or that event happened; it searches for patterns of possibility – of choice, and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance – that turn up in human lives with such persistence because they must be regarded as *our* possibilities (171).

Put simply, literature speaks about us, about our lives, our connections, our



choices, our possibilities, and thus it is particularly relevant to the inquiry into what it is for a human being to live well.

My ethical and literary inquiry is deeply indebted to Nussbaum's work, but is more focused both in terms of its scope and overarching question. I consider literature, particularly novels, as ethically and emotionally valuable in that they represent life. Although we may be removed in time from fictional characters, their choices and relationships and dilemmas are relevant to our daily lives; just as the Victorian novel reflected, shaped and instructed its contemporary readership, it is equally useful to readers today. In reading narrative through an ethical lens, I am most attentive to questions of what constitutes the good, loving, well-lived life. It is my contention that Victorian writers turned to fiction – particularly the rapidly emerging novel form – to explore the ethical implications of being in love, and the problems occasioned by erotic love. These writers modify the basic Aristotelian search for a specification of the good life for human beings: they used novels as testing grounds for the ethical question, "How should one *love*?"

My broad interest in 19th-century British love plots makes my project similar to Robert Polhemus's in Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence. Polhemus argues that erotic faith is the predominant motive, theme, and force in 19th-century and early 20th-century British prose fiction. He defines "erotic faith" as the emotional conviction that meaning, value and hope can be found through erotically focused love; in the throes of "erotic faith," men and women feel that love has redemptive capacity and

constitutes a reason for being. I, too, discuss love as a redemptive force and source of life's meaning in George Eliot's Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss and in Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities. Polhemus and I also share the contention that there existed between the Victorian novel and its readership a symbiotic relationship: just as the novel inspired and instructed readers about being in love (as Samuel Richardson so feared), readers devoted to exploring love's possibilities gave the Victorian novel its subject matter and its popularity. The idea that art both reflects and shapes, acts as social barometer and guide, is certainly not a new one; however, as the novel emerged and flourished in the 19th-century, it was particularly socially influential and reflective, and, as I shall argue, was an ideal vehicle for the exploration of how one should love. My work departs from Polhemus's in that I examine these novels through an ethical lens, whereas he is interested in literature as an alternate religion: ultimately he argues that the British novel was a means for imagining forms of faith that could substitute for or augment orthodox religious visions, and that novels were to erotic faith what Bibles and churches were to Christianity. Moreover, his interest is in reciprocated erotic desire, while I include pertinent examples of unrequited love and of love that transcends the bounds of erotic desire.

My focus on 19th-century love plots also makes my work similar to Joseph Allen Boone's in his Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction. He, too, is interested in the relationship between fiction and its readership, and discusses how narratives can encode and perpetuate ideological structures of belief. Specifically, Boone argues that the novelistic

"tradition" has endorsed conservative, unattainable, and undesirable expectations of marital bliss which more often than not confine and subordinate women; the "counter tradition" narratives, he posits, undo such dominant traditions and evade or explode conservative ideologies of love and wedlock. While I do consider marital relationship, my study is not confined to marriage plots; in fact, in the novels I examine I often find that marriage is an impediment or an impossibility, rather than the relationship at the heart of the narrative. Finally, Boone's selection of primary text is broader than mine in that he takes up 19th-century and modern love plots in both British and American literature.

Certainly the concept of novels as sites of ethical reflection is not a theory without detractors, and Frederic Jameson is one of the more vocal. Jameson's basic argument against ethics is that it legitimates and supports a network of binary moral oppositions, pitting the dominant group against the "Other" group and designating the former "good" and the latter "evil." Ethics is inevitably judgmental, Jameson argues, endlessly categorizing and separating "good" and "bad" and often doing so in racist, classist, and elitist ways (Adamson 6). Unquestionably, ethics can be judgmental in the ways Jameson suggests, and that is why theorists and readers who want to bring ethical theory to bear on literature must do so temperately and thoughtfully, with a keen awareness that ethics must be about recognizing common human bonds and experiences, not about leveling egocentric verdicts against "Other" human beings. Sympathy must be at the core of ethical theory. I am not suggesting that an ethical study resists decisive conclusions or rigorous

analysis, but I do suggest that ethical theory resists readings that, to return to my original example, simplistically privilege a character like Strether at the expense of those like Maria. Such reductive distinctions between triumphant heroes and defeated outcasts are, in many ways, precisely the kind that Jameson deplores.

My rebuttal to Jameson is very similar to David Parker's, who acknowledges that judgmentalism is an unavoidable possibility within ethics, but contends that Jameson's argument is deficient "in not recognising [the] perception of commonality as a possibility *within* ethics" (6). It is this perception of commonality, Parker suggests, that allows one to "transcend the self/other binarism of the judgmental attitude" (6). Parker's literary example is that of the gospel story of the adulterous woman about to be stoned to death for her sin; the Pharisees only spare her life after they are forced to examine their own consciences and acknowledge that they too are sinners; their shared iniquitous pasts are the roots of sympathy. I submit a similar example in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice: Shylock makes an appeal to commonality, albeit unsuccessfully, in his "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech. He attempts to budge his Christian persecutors to compassionate empathy, but his pleas fall on ears deafened by the conviction that a Jewish heart is not a fully human heart.

Another common opposition to an ethical investigation of literature is the belief that moral or ethical philosophy is only usefully applicable to real lives and to real people. In 1992, Peter Brooks convincingly addressed the relevance of ethics to fiction at an international conference on Literature and

Ethics at the University of Wales. In answer to the question of why we have and want fictional characters, and what work they do for us, Brooks had this to say:

To discuss them fully, I believe that one needs to ... engage in the field of ethics. The multiple associations of the word 'character' are not accident, and the ethical implications need to be explored if one is to account for the power of fictional dramatizations of persons negotiating the plots in which they figure (Adamson 13).

If we did not find fictional persons and their lives worthy of ethical consideration, we would not become, as so many readers do, so intellectually and emotionally invested in the act of reading, particularly when reading our favorite books. I think of Jeanette Winterson's suggestion that what moves us most about words, language and art is that they can affect us across time, not merely for the hours we spend reading. She writes: "A reader can fall in love with what is alive through time. Such a book is not an object, it is a relationship" (171).

I now turn to a more positive and pertinent (if broad) question: what exactly *is* literature's, and more specifically, the novel's, ethical dimension? Representing life, literature lends itself to classical philosophical and ethical questions, such as what obligations we owe our fellow human beings, how we negotiate conflicting claims, how we can behave virtuously and responsibly, and what does and does not constitute "the good life." Certainly novels were not and are not the only means of exploring love and living, but as Nussbaum has argued, the novel form, compared to plays, poetry, and everyday examples, is more open-ended, better able to characterize life richly, truly, and precisely (47). Novels also provide us with opportunities to

imagine ourselves into relationships and situations, to make ethical queries, to explore various and different moral possibilities, and to experience the results of all of the above from a safe distance and without harm to ourselves or others; novel reading affords us a buffer that protects us from the acute suffering of real life, and protects others we may affect in the course of real life and real decision making. Finally, literature brings us into contact with persons, problems, and possibilities we otherwise would not meet; it allows us to see/know the parallel lives we otherwise sense but cannot plumb.

My study of 19th-century British fiction reveals a strain of novels deeply interested in examining the ethical implications of love relationships, in putting forth alternative and nontraditional love stories, and in expanding conventional notions of what constitutes a love plot. In my examination of Anne Brontë's novels, I explore the Victorian courtship customs that preclude empathy and intimacy between men and women, and particularly between coquettes and their "honest" counterparts. Next I study the philosophical and aesthetic ideals that act as defenses against love in Henry James' The Ambassadors and The Portrait of a Lady, and in Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim. The following chapter is devoted to the novels of George Eliot; I contend that she is unmatched in her love plots that transcend the possibilities of traditional love, and in her suggestion that different kinds of love – later or second love, paternal love, unrequited love – can compel powerful transformations. Finally, my treatment of unrequited love and its redemptive capacity is more sustained in my discussion of Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities.

All of the novelists I include in this study investigate the ethical

potential of alternative love plots. In the cases of Bronte, James, and Conrad, love's ethical potential is more often deferred than fulfilled, whereas Eliot and Dickens are more morally optimistic; love in their novels not only redeems its participants, but diffusively enhances the common good of the surrounding community as well.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRUGGLE TO LOVE AMIDST "FALSE, FAIR FACES" AND "D—D DECEITFUL TONGUES" IN THE NOVELS OF ANNE BRONTE

In the novels of Anne Bronte, feminine duplicity is expected, rewarded and punished. A single woman on the courtship scene presumably and necessarily cultivates physical beauty in order to win suitors; moreover, her society anticipates that her actions and personality are, like her external beauty, affected and calculated. It is the designing woman who is successful in games of courtship because she conforms to the role of cunning, beautiful coquette; the honest woman struggles painfully while courting because although she does not play the coquette, she is assumed to *be* one by the very nature of her sex, so that even her most sincere actions and words are construed as coy connivances. These societal assumptions about the very nature of the female character configure women inherently, or necessarily, duplicitous, and consequently render the existence of honest women unlikely.

More often than not in these novels a woman must be or play the coquette or wind up a "spinster" and burden upon her community. In Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848), the heroine Helen Huntingdon is endlessly vexed due to her inability, or perhaps more accurately, her refusal to employ a coquettish façade – a refusal that bewilders and maddens her suitors and her companions, and thus precludes successful participation in



her social milieu. Agnes Grey, in the novel named for her (1847), repudiates the coquette's desire to refine exterior charm at the expense of the heart's cultivation; nonetheless, Agnes spends a great deal of time lamenting the lack of attention she receives, especially compared to the beautiful and flirtatious Rosalie. For both Helen and Agnes the price of maintaining her integrity is anguish and isolation. Yet for all of the suffering endured by Bronte's two heroines, both women ultimately triumph as their coquettish counterparts fall from grace. The power designated the duplicitous woman is fleeting and cannot save her from her ultimate fate of wife and "conquest." Although her mastery of pretense and her physical loveliness endow her with the power of seduction, such power inevitably dissipates when she submits to marriage and no longer needs or is allowed to exert her feminine charms; as a wife, the superficial charisma that was once the root of her influence and appeal is no longer available to her; her "self" as she and others knew it no longer exists. On the other hand, Helen and Agnes emerge independent and happily married, their integral selves intact, and their success is attributable to their ethical refusal to "play double."

Neither novel, however, simply affirms and celebrates the honest protagonists while denouncing the coquettes and the social circles that expect and even demand their duplicity. The sweeping patriarchal presumption that women are inherently shallow, two-faced creatures (with what, then, besides a pretty face does a woman have to concern herself?) ensnares both men and women: men either perpetuate the premise of female duplicity by

playing the game and expecting feminine participation, or unsuspecting men enter into marriages with women who aren't what they appeared to be; women either play the game and pay the grave price of saying "I do," or suffer social isolation and tremulously hope that someone, someday will recognize their essential integrity and love them for it. The ethical implications are devastating: a ruinous reduction of the female and male character, a network of social and romantic relationships based on personal deceit and fraudulent social suppositions, a divisive dynamic between women, and perhaps most importantly, a diminished capacity among everyone for empathy and love. The question at hand, then, is less "how should one love?" than "how can one love?" given these deplorably inhumane conditions. How can one behave ethically if her integrity is denied and her duplicity assumed; or, how can even the best-intentioned, most well-meaning person establish meaningful relationships when the essential veracity and very identity of everyone around him is dubious at best? And given this complicated paradigm that asks for deception in exchange for "success," to what extent can we hold people accountable for their choices, or for how they play the game of courtship? Ultimately, I will argue that Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon are not just exceptions to the general rule, but are instructive models Bronte puts forth as alternatives to the kind of social behavior that is, while more prevalent, also destructive to the human soul.

A prolific examiner of Anne Bronte's life and works, Elizabeth Langland is one of very few critics to pay the least-known Bronte sister the

attention she deserves.<sup>1</sup> Relevant here is Langland's assessment of the educational, courtship and marital experiences of young Victorian women as it relates to Bronte's articulation of the patriarchal constraints that constricted her female characters. The goal of women's education in Victorian England was to refine a girl's manners by encouraging the acquisition of "showy accomplishments . . . French, German, music, singing, dancing, fancy-work, and a little drawing;" this curriculum produced women possessed of little solid knowledge, ruled by vanity (Langland 25). As Langland also demonstrates, it was difficult, if not simply undesirable, for women to "counteract the influence of a society bent on producing women whose minds were wholly occupied with the details of costume, coquetry, and conquest" (25). The "conquest" involved, however, is ultimately the man's, not the coquette's: although the coquette experiences a fleeting sense of control as she is courted and wooed, she ultimately is rendered vulnerable by a lack of education and opportunity, by her parents' ambitions for her financially advantageous marriage, and by her male suitor's ultimate authority.

After marriage, any illusion of power the one-time coquette once possessed, or believed to have possessed, is extinguished entirely by her inevitable lack of economic, legal, and personal rights and by her new

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<sup>1</sup> Early and mid-twentieth century examinations of Anne Bronte are scarce but commendatory. In this 1924 book *Conversations in Ebury Street*, George Moore insists that the genius expressed in *Tenants* is comparable to Jane Austen's, and that *Agnes Grey* is "the most perfect prose narrative in English literature" (257). Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford give Bronte more extensive attention in *Anne Bronte: Her Life and Work*, a 1959 biography in which they urge that the "stone at the mouth of Anne's tomb for something over a hundred years," placed there by her sister Charlotte, be rolled away (245). A. Craig Bell offers the most

identity as a wife and mother. To be a woman in Victorian England was to be “a silent partner in a social contract” and “passive [participant] who read the laws, suffered the conventions and followed the rules” (Kostka 41). A wife was a non-person under 19<sup>th</sup>-century British law: her husband could abuse her freely and she was bound to him socially and legally nonetheless; she had no legal rights to even her children; she lacked access to financial earnings, even her own; and divorce was always the decision of the husband and the fault of the wife (Langland 24-25). Moreover, the veil of sexual allure and mystery the coquette once wore as a source of influence and control must be cast off entirely: she must drop the coy, flirtatious pretense that scored her a husband, and adopt the mantle of devoted, passive, sexless wife.

While this patriarchal ideology enforced the view of “good” women as essentially passionless wives, the sexual woman was configured either a fallen woman or a prostitute. Langland articulates Victorian society’s conception of the “fallen woman:” “The patriarchal ideology that professes to explain the social event of a woman’s fall has recourse to woman’s nature rather than her nurture. The fallen woman, then, is a daughter of Eve, innately corrupt” (27). Unless a woman wishes to marry and assume the ironically powerless role of “angel in the house,” or adopt the life of the asexual, burdensome old maid, the patriarchal ideology to which Langland refers configures her as bad by nature: she is either the sexually promiscuous, morally corrupt fallen woman or the deeply deceitful, scheming coquette; as

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ferent defense of Tenants in “Anne Brontë: A Re-Appraisal” (1966), lauding the novel as

long as she conform to a role supportive of and in deference to the good of her husband and society as a whole, she can transcend her historical affiliation with Eve, the supposed instigator of the fall of mankind. In her novels, Anne Bronte reveals the extent to which women were inescapably confined to such personally destructive and ethically untenable categories. In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Agnes Grey, Bronte creates women who fit neatly into such an ideological framework, and women who courageously, improbably transcend the paradigm: the young coquette on the courting scene (Eliza), the miserably married, former coquette (Rosalie), the irrevocably fallen woman (Annabella), the lonely governess (Agnes), and the courageous runaway wife (Helen).<sup>2</sup>

The Tenant's Gilbert Markham is initially involved with the young and coquettish Eliza, whom he depicts as "charming beyond description, coquettish without affectation, and evidently more desirous to engage my attention than that of all the room besides," a fact "plainly legible in her glowing face and heaving bosom, however belied by saucy words and gestures" (61). Markham's observation of Eliza reinforces the injurious supposition that women may very well be coquettes by nature: he sees "coquettish"-ness and "affectation" as mutually exclusive rather than inextricable; in doing so, he views Eliza as a woman inherently coquettish. In

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"greater than Jane Eyre, and a close rival of Wuthering Heights" (321).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the strikingly similar experiences of coquettes, unmarried and newly married women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, see Cathy Davidson's chapter "Privileging the Femme Covert: the Sociology of Sentimental Fiction" in Revolution & the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (110-150). See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's discussion of the representation of coquettes and "virtuous" women in the American novel (160-184).

other words, Eliza does not have to affect coquettishness, she is coquettish. Moreover, Markham presumes that Eliza, despite her attractive duplicity, is quite readable; he can easily distinguish between her desire for him and the “saucy” charms she relies on to keep him by her side.

Helen is not possessed of such common superficiality. Instead, of her Markham claims:

Where her opinions and sentiments tallied with mine, it was her extreme good sense, her exquisite taste and feeling that delighted me; where they differed, it was still her uncompromising boldness in the avowal or defense of that difference – her earnestness and keenness that piqued my fancy; and even when she angered me by her unkind words or looks . . . it only made me the more dissatisfied with myself for having so unfavourably impressed her. . . . (85)

In Helen, difference of opinion, sincerity, and directness in word and deed are not only palatable, but attractive to Markham. Helen’s forthrightness and manifestation of displeasure can be compared usefully to Eliza’s coquettish behavior as the former steadily wins Markham’s favor and the latter falls from it. Markham complains that Eliza

did not manifest her chagrin by keen reproaches, bitter sarcasms, or pouting, sullen silence – any or all of these I could have easily endured or lightly laughed away; but she showed it by a kind of gentle melancholy, a mild, reproachful sadness that cut me to the heart (90).

Eliza’s somber and injured façade, affects Markham “to the heart,” yet direct signs of displeasure (“keen reproaches, bitter sarcasms”) would not have moved Markham – he would have mocked or entirely ignored such shows as “shows” rather than real expressions of sincere emotion. Eliza’s status as coquette, as duplicitous woman, ironically makes her quite readable. His

expectation that she will play double on every occasion renders her not only legible, but also vulnerable to dismissal as a potential wife and thinking woman. The role of the coquette, then, is not one to be cast on and off for the convenience of courting, but rather a role that defines one's self and precludes one's participation in any kind of honest relationship.

Despite the fact that she is the most honest character in the novel, Helen cannot be read, interpreted or categorized so easily, a fact repeatedly underscored by the text and by Helen herself. She scorns those who employ artificial devices to attract men, who to her "appeared so provokingly mindless, and heartless and artificial" (151), and she cannot bring herself to partake in their games. She reports to Hargrave, "I never cry for effect; nor can I conceive how anyone can" (250). Not only does she refuse to participate, she admits an inability to do so, thus subtly refuting the social presumption that duplicity is an inherently feminine characteristic. Just as Eliza's duplicity makes her supremely readable, Helen's honesty makes her illegible, a fact most painfully expressed when Markham convicts her of duplicitous action without any substantial evidence of her guilt. After seeing her walk the garden with her brother and falsely presuming that she is cuckolding him, Markham bemoans: "The contrast between her outward seeming and her inward mind, as I supposed, — between my former and present opinion of her, was so harrowing — so distressing to my feelings that it swallowed up every lighter consideration" (142). Since he can comfortably

assume that women are inherently “seeming” creatures, he can just as groundlessly presume that she has deceived him.

Markham’s unfounded distrust of Helen and his rash, vehement denouncement of her carries echoes of Shakespeare’s Othello, a text with which Bronte was undoubtedly familiar.<sup>3</sup> Markham’s error in perception resonates especially forcibly when compared to Othello’s strikingly similar, though more tragic, misconception. In Othello, the consequences of blind masculine faith in the capacity of feminine duplicity are brutally expressed in the smothering of the innocent Desdemona. Othello not only believes that his wife is a “seeming” and “subtile whore,” but also that hers is a sin common to women that “makes men mad” (V.ii.111). Accordingly, when he ultimately subdues his wife, he believes he is acting as an instrument of justice on behalf of all men: “She must die, else she’ll betray more men” (V.ii.6). Just as Othello universalizes Desdemona’s supposed transgression by configuring himself as an avenger of mankind, he also amplifies her sin and duplicity by insisting that his one-time “rose-lipped cherubin” is now a keeper of “the gate of hell” and the very “devil.” Markham reacts in a remarkably similar manner, insisting that Helen, in revealing herself to be the very opposite of what he supposed her to be, transformed his life into a living hell:

Then the dawn of bitter recollection that succeeded – the waking to find life a blank – teeming with torment and misery – not a mere barren wilderness, but full of thorns and briars – to find myself

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<sup>3</sup> Noted Bronte scholar and biographer Winifred Gerin records in Branwell Bronte that the Heaton family put at the disposal of the Bronte family their extensive library at Ponden House which contained a First Folio edition of Shakespeare (44). Further, the school-room in which Anne spent the majority of her two years at Thorp Green Hall contained Bell’s Shakespeare (220).



deceived, duped, hopeless, my affections trampled on, my angel not my angel, and my friend a fiend incarnate. . . . (126-127)

The trust Markham invests in Helen (trust he would never deign to bestow on the silly flirt Eliza) is shattered in one moment of ambiguity; in spite of his affection for Helen, his trust in her is fragile because of one inescapable fact – that she is a woman, and therefore always possesses the potential for duplicity. The outrageous notion that a duplicitous woman constitutes a moral and mortal threat to mankind renders honest, loving relations between genders not only thorny but impossible, given that one sex is constructed by the other as inhuman, as the devil herself. In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, the feminine archetype Eve devolves into the feminization of Satan.

Grimsby reiterates this demonization of women: “It’s all these cursed women! They’re the very bane of the world! They bring trouble and discomfort wherever they come, with their false, fair faces and their d—d deceitful tongues” (305). Such women are also presumed to exert some sort of irresistible control over their male victims, control which renders men unaccountable for any actions performed under a woman’s seductive sway. After Othello has rashly and unjustly murdered his innocent wife, he finds it appropriate to vindicate herself even as he laments her demise: “I pray you, in your letters, / When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, . . . / Then must you speak / Of one that lov’d not wisely but too well” (V.ii.340-344). In these last lines of his faux-confession, Othello not only fails to blame his own jealous, willful blindness for his wife’s death, but he actually identifies himself as a victim of sorts, as a man so spellbound by love that he is

unaccountable for his actions; in doing so, Othello does more than absolve himself, he implicates Desdemona as a sort of enchantress, as it was her effect on him which dictated, even necessitated his unwise love and its deadly consequences. Of course Othello's misogyny is instigated and persistently kindled by Iago, whereas Grimsby's is solely the result of his own insipidness.

Upon learning of Helen's innocence, Markham stridently echoes Othello, "If I did wrong, love alone was my incentive" (145). Like Othello, Markham not only asserts his innocence, but implicates love as a destructive, seductive force against which he had no power, no agency. Both men may as well have also claimed, in their verbal self-absolutions, that "she didn't deceive me as I believed, but given feminine duplicity is so prevalent, so destructive, my mistake is understandable, as was my subsequent reaction." Given these circumstances, even a good and noble man (which, truly, Othello is), in his effort to love conceivably may be thwarted by the culturally embedded presumption that women, at best, are not to be trusted, at worst, morally and mortally dangerous.

Helen's refusal to play the role of coquette complicates her relationship not only with Markham, but with Boarham and Huntingdon as well. After she vehemently and repeatedly rebukes the proposals of the appropriately-named Boarham, her suitor insists that he will "have no young lady's affections and caprices" and encourages her to "speak out at once" in acquiescence to his overtures (158). Boarham confidently assumes that Helen

is protesting falsely when she is not, and his assumption makes communication with her impossible since she is indeed "speaking plainly" – a language he cannot understand. Exasperated by the end of their interview, Helen admits, "I found [Boarham] very troublesome, and very hard to convince that I really meant what I said, and really was so obstinate and blind to my own interests" (159). Helen's honesty contradicts the affected façade typical of coquettes, thus utterly thwarting her attempts at forthright interaction with her suitors. Moreover, Boarham is truly perplexed when Helen fails to seize the protection and security afforded by marriage to him; her desire for mutual respect, love and compatibility is not in her best interest socially or financially, and this proves yet another obstacle in her communication with Boarham. Only after his "pertinaciously returning to the same point and repeating his same argument over and over again, forcing her to the same replies," does he give up out of sheer irritation and bewilderment, and although he walks away "disconcerted and offended," he is nonetheless confident that it "surely was not [his] fault" (159). Were it not so vexing for Helen, the scenario would be comic: Helen's patient candor precludes meaningful communication with Boarham, and moreover earns her harassment and contempt while Boarham, boorish and baffled, leaves the exchange with his pride and sense of rightness intact. On the other hand, one might question the extent to which Boarham is culpable for his failure to comprehend Helen, given that Helen is an anomaly in their social milieu, and his experience with women is contrary to all that Helen embodies.

While Boarham's exit is certainly welcome relief, the interpretive problems Helen poses for Huntingdon costs her what she perceives to be a true opportunity for love. During one exchange when Helen perceives that Arthur can palpably feel her warm affection for him, he abruptly leaves her to attach himself for the evening to the "vehemently coquetting Annabella Wilmot;" Helen reflects, "So then, he despises me, because he knows I love him" (172). Helen further observes that Annabella rightfully "attributes [Arthur's attention] to her own superior charms and blandishments; but I am truly miserable" (178). As this scene plays out before her, Helen comes to the painful realization that coquetting is the "superior" behavior that draws male attention, while her own tender, flustered attempts to convey her fondness for Arthur compels his prompt flight from her. Coquetting is the mode of behavior Arthur and his peers find predictable, comforting, gratifying; for that circle of courtiers, communication means coy banter, flashy repartee, playful flirtation. Despite evidence that Annabella's mode of operation is successful, Helen is unwilling, even unable, to play the game. Her self-respect prohibits coquetting, but does not grant her the power of transcendence as compensation: "Pride refuses to aid me. It has brought me into the scrape, and will not help me out of it" (178). Annabella's charms win her affection, and Helen's integrity costs her the possibility of love. Not only is Helen's virtue, or pride, of little social value, it actually plunges her into an abyss of loneliness and despair. Not even knowledge of her own ethical

integrity brings Helen solace – utter isolation overwhelms any such self-satisfaction.

Honesty and virtue not only jeopardize Helen's happiness but potentially Huntingdon's as well. Helen realizes:

It is not my loss, nor her triumph that I deplore so greatly as the wreck of my fond hopes for his advantage, and her unworthiness of his affection, and the injury he will do himself by trusting his happiness to her. She does not love him; she thinks only of herself. . . . She will neither deplore his faults nor attempt their amendment, but rather aggravate them by her own. (178)

Not only does Helen suffer for her refusal to play the game, but the participants of the game suffer as well. In seeking the coquette, the suitor seeks an unworthy mate and makes a dreadful match in which neither partner is capable of or interested in growth or empathy. The relationship is one based upon fraud: most often, the suitor masquerades as an ardent lover, often to degenerate into a disinterested if not abusive husband; the coquette only need maintain her carefully crafted façade until marriage, after which she can reveal her true self and heart, however dark or loving her self and heart might be; essentially, the coquette and suitor marry as strangers. Further, the third party in this triangle, in this case Helen, is resentful due to her unwillingness to make her own coquettish play for Arthur's heart, and heartbroken at her own and his dreadful prospects.

Helen's above assessment of Arthur's potential future with Annabella is disturbing for two further reasons. First, she places the burden of male happiness and moral health squarely upon female shoulders. She envies Annabella's opportunity to improve Arthur's character, to chasten his faults,

to cultivate his advantage and happiness; she fails to mention any harm Annabella might incur in such a relationship, or any measure of happiness it might cost her. Second, and related to the first point, Helen articulates the competitive, acrimonious relationship between the coquette and the “honest” woman. Helen obviously is contemptuous of Annabella’s shallow nature, dishonest intention, and inability to love Arthur sufficiently. The empathy Helen harbors in abundance for Arthur, she lacks entirely for Annabella: she refuses to see Annabella as exercising what she may perceive as her only choice as a single woman, and she also denies Annabella’s right to happiness and affection. In such a triangular configuration, clearly, everyone loses, and love is lost on all sides.

In Agnes Grey, earnest governess Agnes Grey, young clergyman Weston, and spoiled coquette Rosalie form a similar triangle. Agnes considers herself the best match for Weston, but also estimates her chances at winning a place in his heart as very slim:

Besides my hope in God, my only consolation was thinking that, though he knew it or not, I was more worthy of his love than Rosalie Murray, charming and engaging as she was; for I could appreciate his excellence, which she could not; I would devote my life to the promotion of his happiness; she would destroy his happiness for the momentary gratification of her own vanity. (199)

Again, the emphasis is on which woman is better willing and able to enrich the man’s life, and it happens, again, that the more aesthetically beautiful and charming woman is both the most unworthy and the most likely to be “chosen.” Agnes can only content herself with the knowledge that she *could* make him happy – a bitter consolation indeed. Like Rosalie’s, Agnes’s

scenario imagines a loveless union between Rosalie and Weston with Agnes remaining in the margin, capable of being happy and cultivating another's happiness, but denied the opportunity to do so; again, external charm is valued at the expense of everyone's happiness and fulfillment. And again, the coquette is vilified by the more worthy, more honest woman. Whether in regard to Weston (with whom Rosalie merely toys) or any of her other suitors, Agnes does not consider Rosalie as a woman exercising what she has learned is her only choice – to win a husband by employing her beauty and flirtatiousness – but instead assumes Rosalie to be thoroughly artificial, devoid of any desire to make a loving married life, and even possessed of malignant intent. When Rosalie becomes engaged to Sir Thomas Ashby, Agnes knows that it is an “inauspicious match,” based upon mutual flattery rather than mutual love, but disgusted by “the depths of [Rosalie's] heartless coquetry,” she purges her heart of any pity for the new bride: “She deserves it. Sir Thomas cannot be too bad for her; and the sooner she is incapacitated from deceiving and injuring others the better” (194; 195). Agnes's condemnation carries echoes of Othello's, Markham's, and Grimsby's in that she wishes an ill fate might thwart a woman's inevitable efforts to do harm to others.

Not only does Rosalie's rampant flirting, as Agnes perceives it, impede intimacy between herself and Weston, but between Agnes and Rosalie as well. Agnes draws strength from her confidence that she is morally upstanding and inherently beautiful while Rosalie is morally ugly and

superficially pretty. The fact that these two women exist on two very distinct social planes also consistently prevents any relationship from blossoming between them, despite Rosalie's attempt to establish one after she is married to another man. Even in Agnes's moments of profound loneliness she reinforces an immutable barrier between herself and Rosalie. The establishment of this barrier is prompted by the class disparity – Rosalie is indisputably a lady, both socially and economically, while Agnes as a governess must maintain the the miens of both servant and lady – but it is rendered utterly inviolate by Agnes's conviction that her honest nature and unshakeable uprightness make her superior to her coquettish counterpart. While Agnes's belief in her moral superiority is self-serving and rather pitiless, at least Agnes can find comfort and strength in her ethical integrity – a kind of solace that often eludes Helen in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.

Despite Rosalie's enviable allure, coquettish power is illusory, a point emphasized continually and poignantly in both of Bronte's novels. In Tenant, Helen identifies the tenuous nature of the coquette's influence as she watches Annabella interact with Lord Lowborough and Huntingdon: "I see she is playing double between him and Lord Lowborough, and while she amuses herself with the lively Huntingdon, she tries her utmost to enslave his friends" (178). The important point is that neither man will truly be enslaved, for this would imply that Miss Wilmot has the upper hand and ultimate control of the situation. Indeed, the coquette may enjoy a fleeting taste of power as two men entertain or pursue her, but this power is empty and



elusive. Helen articulates the eventual plight of every coquette: "If [Huntingdon] observes [Miss Wilmot's] artful by-play, it gives him no uneasiness, but rather adds new zest to his diversion by opposing a stimulating check to his otherwise too easy conquest" (178). Flirting is merely a diversion and a light challenge for the man; the woman inevitably suffers the fate of "conquest." Though her artifice allows her the temporary power of attraction, such power relies on the man's willing participation in the game, a condition especially disturbing when one considers the fact that a woman in pursuit of a husband has no choice but to play. Even Annabella's charms are effective only because they cause Huntingdon "no uneasiness." The coquette only tastes the illusion of power that accompanies male attention; ultimately, the power is entirely the man's as he decides whether or not to engage her, and subsequently whether or not to make her his "conquest."

The imbalance of power between coquette and suitor is again evident with Huntingdon and Lady Lowborough. Helen once more acutely analyzes Lady Lowborough as she flirts with Huntingdon:

Her efforts were not unnoticed by him: I frequently saw him smiling to himself at her artful manoeuvres: but, to his praise be it spoken, her shafts fell powerless by his side. Her most bewitching smiles, her haughtiest frowns were received with the same immutable, careless good humor; till, finding he was indeed impenetrable, she suddenly remitted her efforts.... (281)

The power of her charm implicitly depends upon whether he chooses to render himself penetrable; only if he is receptive are her "shafts" effective. Lady Lowborough hauls out the arsenal – her "most bewitching smiles" and

"haughtiest frowns" – only to be met with cold and bemused impenetrability. Truly, the potency of the coquette's weapons is unpredictable given that the object of her attack can always opt to shield himself with armor. Having wasted her time and considerable energy, Lady Lowborough accepts her defeat and retreats, humiliated.

If the illusory nature of the coquette's authority is foreshadowed before marriage, it is more painfully evident after the wedding, as in the case of Rosalie in Agnes Grey. Although Rosalie's artifice allows her temporary power of attraction, such power necessarily dissipates when she is "conquered" and her womanly charms rendered both ineffective and inappropriate. Elizabeth Langland argues that "[Bronte] deserves recognition for the clarity with which she details men's contempt for women in Victorian society and for the corollary recognition that, given this contempt and the power men hold in marriage, women are likely to suffer in that relationship" (112). Rosalie makes the mistake of believing that the power which gained her Lord Ashby's affections will remain at her disposal during their marriage. On the contrary, she quickly discovers that "*he will* do as he pleases, and I must be a prisoner and slave" (237). The coquette falls prey to coquetry. Ironically, Rosalie accuses her husband of feigning sincere affection and genuine concern while he courted her, or in other words, of behaving in precisely the way she did: "I thought he adored me, and would let me have my own way – he did pretend to do so at first; but now he does not care a bit about me" (237). In turn, Lord Ashby maligns her for continuing to coquette

about and refusing to accept the role of proper wife. Rosalie cries, "The moment he saw I could enjoy myself without him, and that others knew my value better than himself, the selfish wretch began to accuse me of coquetry and extravagance" (237). She is coming to the distressing realization that now there is only one man to charm, one man to value her, and he is utterly untouched by her outdated arsenal of flirty slings and arrows. In Rosalie we can view the painful transition coquettes must endure as their artificial power fades – the transition from vibrant, manipulative flirt to submissive, lonely wife, or, as Rosalie herself depicts it, from a carefree life to "the life of a nun" (237).

A coquette's sense of control is also threatened by the most innate of human activities, particularly falling in love. Falling in love is a dangerous and abhorrent proposition, as Rosalie articulates: "To think that I could be such a fool as to fall in love! It is quite beneath the dignity of a woman to do such a thing. Love! I detest the word! as applied to one of our sex, I think it is a perfect insult!" (172). To fall in love is to relinquish control, to make oneself vulnerable and to shatter the coy aloofness upon which single, young coquettes like Rosalie rely. She claims that love is only dangerous for the female sex, a claim that forgets she exists in a milieu in which no one operates without guile and every decision and feeling is made according to an implicit social code, and one's own self-interest. Further, falling in love is an emotional response, rather than a calculated economic and social decision regarding a husband, and Rosalie literally cannot afford to act so illogically.

She believes that to apply the word "love" to women is an insult because it implies forgetting one's "rank and station," a mistake she would not make even for "the most delightful man that ever breathed" (172). Indeed, when considering marriage to Lord Ashby, she considers not the man, but the acquisition of his property. "The fact is," she plainly states, "I *must* have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me" (172). Love is indeed a perilous possibility for one whose desperate, deep-rooted priority is to ensure a socially and financially secure future.

Had she her way, Rosalie would reject marriage altogether, but even she realizes that such freedom is a fantastic hope:

. . . if I could be always young, I would be always single. I should like to enjoy myself thoroughly, and coquet with all the world, till I am on the verge of being called an old maid; and then, to escape the infamy of that, after having made ten thousand conquests, to break all their hearts save one, by marrying some high-born, rich, indulgent husband, whom, on the other hand, fifty ladies were dying to have (136).

Rosalie's statement is appalling for a number of sentiments, among them that her happiness is partially contingent upon the desperate envy of a score of rejected women, and that she harbors the delusion that she, not any man, will always be the romantic conquistador. She is remarkably clear-sighted, however, in reviewing the stages of a woman's life: coquetting is for the young, and once a woman reaches a point of maturity she marries or fades into an old maid; for Rosalie, the former option is repugnantly confining while the latter is nothing less than infamy.

To a great extent, Bronte suggests that a culture that so prizes female beauty literally imperils women's hearts and minds. The isolated, often entirely loveless life of a governess stirs dark, mortal dread in Agnes:

I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting, and I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all my better faculties be sunk, at last, beneath the baleful influence of such a mode of life (155).

How chillingly ironic that Agnes, who lacking beauty and social rank finds her self-worth in her impressive intellect and sense of moral duty, fears the petrification of those faculties, a loss that would leave her with, quite literally, nothing (no internal or external resources). The lack of beauty costs her love and companionship which in turn costs her very mind and soul. Rosalie, on the other hand, never possessed of intellectual cleverness or any profound inner-life, enjoys enormous social and romantic attention at the expense of a petrified heart. Again it is ironic that the woman who has the opportunity to love detests the very word, and instead determinedly cultivates her own heartlessness. After callously rejecting Mr. Hatfield's proposal, Rosalie revels in her victory: "I am delighted with myself for my prudence, my self-command, my *heartlessness*, if you please" (179). Indeed, it is this cold and calculated mode of comportment that coquettishness requires, and that Rosalie's pretty face enables (temporarily, at least): to Mr. Hatfield she "just acted and spoke as [she] ought to have done" (179). In fact, in referring to Rosalie's "heartless coquetry," Agnes makes mention of her horror at Mrs. Murray's apparently inherited and inherent "heartlessness."

In a less dire moment, Agnes strives to convince herself that “It is foolish to wish for beauty.... If the mind be but well cultivated, and the heart well disposed, no one ever cares for the exterior” (193). She then muses that such a theory is judicious and proper, “but are such assertions supported by actual experience?” (193). While Agnes as yet has no personal supporting experience, I contend that Bronte’s text(s) are testaments to the validity of such a theory. Emotional restraint and suppression of feeling is a startlingly unnatural human response (although not at all uncommon in Victorian England), and while it provides tangible safety for Rosalie and many of her peers, it neglects “the heart’s desire.” Even for Rosalie the heart is not an eternally suppressible organ. Agnes reflects as she leaves Rosalie’s home:

It was no slight additional proof of [Rosalie’s] unhappiness, that she should so cling to the consolation of my presence, and earnestly desire the company of one whose general tastes and ideas were so little congenial to her own, whom she had completely forgotten in her hours of prosperity, and whose presence would be rather a nuisance than a pleasure, if she could but have half her heart’s desire. (239)

Again Agnes refers to the seemingly impassable gulf between them, created by their disparate stations in life, but even this gulf Rosalie is desperate to bridge for simple human companionship. Tragically, Rosalie prefers the company of a woman with whom she has nothing in common, whom previously she had neglected and even abused, to the company of her own husband, with whom she is socially and generally compatible, whom she tirelessly pursued and courted. In choosing her life’s partner and thus her future so coldly, Rosalie never achieves even “*half* her heart’s desire” and lacks or self-protectively represses the ability to identify exactly what she’s

missing. In all of her discussions with Agnes, Rosalie notes her misery but cannot touch the cause, an inability that Agnes disapprovingly attributes to "her false idea of happiness and disregard of duty" (237). Meticulously raised to be only "superficially attractive and showily accomplished," she is unable to even imagine herself into a different life. Even were divorce an option, one expects that Rosalie's training is irrevocable, her aspirations hopelessly misguided, and a portion of her heart forever stagnant from lack of exercise. The coquettish role that seemed so promising for her ends up hindering genuine human relationships, with men, with women, and even with herself; she can neither achieve intimacy with Agnes nor achieve marital happiness with "the wretched partner with whom her fate was linked;" perhaps most importantly, she lacks the self-awareness or self-knowledge that might permit her to seek her own happiness and reconstruct her own life.

For Rosalie, emotional restraint is instinctual and even effortless when compared to the efforts of Agnes and Helen to mask desire and love. For the latter, suppression of emotion must be learned in order for Helen to endure misguided attempts to "read her," and in order for Agnes to patiently bear a love which is, initially, unrequited. On several occasions Helen must physically hide feeling since she cannot bury it altogether, nor can she employ an artificial façade to conceal it. To prevent her aunt from guessing her love for Huntingdon, she physically closes herself off: "I felt my face glow with redoubled fires, kindled by a complication of emotions, of which indignant, swelling anger was chief. I offered no reply, however, but pushed aside

the curtain and looked into the night" (164). When expecting Huntingdon's arrival with a "bounding heart," Helen "turned to the window to hide or subdue emotion" (171). Such bodily concealment is only effective for so long. After marriage to Helen, Huntingdon predictably deteriorates into an abusive and taunting tyrant, and Helen no longer needs to hide her affection, but instead to endure Huntingdon's torturous scrutiny. She trains herself in restraint:

I used to fly into passions or melt into tears at first, but seeing that his delight increased in proportion to my anger and agitation, I have since endeavoured to suppress my feelings and receive his revelations in the silence of calm contempt; but still, he reads the inward struggle in my face, and misconstrues my bitterness of soul for his unworthiness into the pangs of wounded jealousy. (221)

Even when Helen attempts to adopt a false countenance, attempts to "play double" as is expected of her sex, she remains unreadable: Huntingdon detects her effort at suppression but misreads bitterness for jealousy.

Toward the end of the novel Helen acknowledges that she has learned to appear calm, to adopt a façade which still does not render her comprehensible to her society. Lord Lowborough insists, "You smile, Mrs. Huntingdon – nothing moves you. I wish my nature were as calm as yours!" Helen replies, "I have learned to appear so by dint of hard lessons, and many repeated efforts" (349). She has trained herself to seem calm, but has not altered her essential nature; her innate sincerity and honesty prevent such severe modification. Still, Lowborough misinterprets her placid look as a sign of inward placidity. Langland argues that Bronte understood the fact that no interpretation or reading of a person, book or episode is definitive,



particularly without full contextual knowledge (127). The crux of Helen's problem is that she holds no position whatsoever within the context of her society, and therefore any attempt to read her within it will inevitably fail. Moreover, her very nature impedes social assimilation because her world is dependent upon the ironic reliability of duplicity and façade.

In the Preface to The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Bronte insists that her reason for writing was "to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it." Clearly, Agnes and Helen enjoy favorable endings because they maintain their essential integrity and sense of rightness, refusing to partake in duplicitous games, even when lack of complicity thwarts successful participation within their social milieus. That "honesty, not dishonesty, pays off" is hardly the message at the heart of these intricate novels. In Bronte's texts, duplicity functions as the proverbial double-edged sword: the feminine employment of artifice and the masculine deference to coquetry allow young women temporary power to attract suitors and potential husbands; yet, such duplicity ultimately precludes empathy, love, friendship and intimacy between genders. The societal dynamic which encourages and expects women to "play double" and the corollary assumption that women are inherently duplicitous neglect the demands of the heart. Helen realizes this when she compares her emotional sincerity to Gilbert Markham's, the man with whom she eventually shares a deep and abiding love:

If you loved as I do, she earnestly replied, you would not have so nearly lost me – these scruples of false delicacy and pride would never

thus have troubled you – you would have seen that the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies in rank, birth and fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls. (487)

Markham's initial impulse to bow to the popular belief that phony titles and superficial differences determine a human being's value very nearly costs him the chance for real love. Similarly, Agnes recognizes that Rosalie's material achievements and empty social prestige are utterly unable to compensate for her emotional barrenness. She notices Rosalie's "smile of pleasure, that soon, however, vanished, and was followed by a melancholy sigh, as if in consideration of the insufficiency of all such baubles to the happiness of the human heart, and their woeful inability to supply its insatiate demands" (231).

Deceitful, pretentious living ensures light creature comforts and social mobility, and furthermore functions as a glue that superficially binds society together, delicately stabilizing it and preserving its heartless artificiality. In Bronte's novels, it is precisely this artificiality that is a community's safest mode of functioning, because while it precludes love and compassion, it also staves off darker emotions like grief and heartache; for instance, the deepest level of pain Rosalie is capable of experiencing is wistful melancholy. It is only appropriate that a society operating on the most superficial plane of human existence is capable of merely the most superficial degrees of human feeling.

In his "defense" of Tenant, Sir Linton Andrews applauds Bronte's "zeal" and "authentic Bronte vitality," but nonetheless indicts her: "Indignation burned up her compassion for human frailty. Her picture of certain ills

of society is distorted. She puts man on trial, but in my judgment not nearly enough is said in his defense" (30). This condescending view overlooks the fact that Bronte thoughtfully scrutinizes society's ills: her novels not only indict "human frailty" but locate its source and cause as well. Moreover, Bronte's analysis is particularly sophisticated in that she exposes a society that is only *seemingly* working: people marry without love, communicate without honesty, pursue security without happiness, live without ethical integrity. As for Andrews' complaint that Huntingdon (an abusive, egotistical, drunken brute) is unfairly treated by the narrator, he seems to be operating under the assumption that characters must always and necessarily reveal sympathetic qualities and receive unqualified sympathetic authorial treatment. Who has maligned Shakespeare for Iago, or perhaps more appropriately, Lady Macbeth? Andrews also falsely assumes "that few if any novels have been written with a more transparently conscientious purpose than The Tenant" (25). Putting aside the presumption that an author having an evident purpose in writing is a regrettable thing, Linton severely underestimates the complexity of Bronte's task, as many critics have before and since him. Agnes Grey and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall represent more than the affirmation of honest women and the denunciation of coquettes and rakes. The "happy endings" enjoyed by Helen and Agnes (Helen escapes the cruel Huntingdon and finds love with Markham; Agnes marries and begins a family with her beloved Weston) do not eclipse the fact that the route to love was torturous for both heroines, that their coquettish counterparts are both

deeply flawed and deeply poignant characters, and that the social dynamic in place at the beginning *and* end of both novels devastates the human soul.

Romantic entanglements and social communication often involve or even require a degree of reticence, discretion, or even concealment for the sake of politeness and civility or in order to spare hurt feelings. In Anne Brontë's novels, however, deceit and distrust are the very foundations of "civilized" society. The characters most invested in living in accordance with their socially proscribed duplicitous roles are not coincidentally the characters most incapable of love or even simple contentment, Brontë does not indict these individual players as much as the patriarchal ideology that rules them. Not only are some of the more artificial characters sympathetic, but Brontë also illustrates how the alternative – nonconformity – is perilous. Agnes and Helen quickly discover that once they behave in direct contradiction to the expectations and experiences of others, social interaction and assimilation become impossibilities. Rather than starkly differentiate between the good, honest heroines and their ethically deplorable counterparts, Brontë complicates the narrative by acknowledging her heroines' fallibility (both Agnes and Helen are susceptible to jealousy, self-pity, and judgmentalism), and by rendering her less savory characters (like Rosalie and Markham in his initial phases), sympathetic and their choices surprisingly comprehensible. Clearly, Rosalie believes that coquetry and a loveless marriage are not just means to security and social standing, but to her very salvation; she hasn't been raised to value meaningful human connection, and

sees her future well-being solely contingent upon stable financial and social standing. Markham's initial inability to discern and reciprocate Helen's honesty and integrity is attributable not only to his weakness of character, but also to the fact that she is an utter anomaly, a foreigner speaking in a different language. Both characters are accountable but not vilified for their choices,<sup>4</sup> choices we as readers are not incapable of seeing ourselves making.

Both of Bronte's novels have optimistic Victorian conclusions that affirm the value of their heroines' earnestness, patience and uncompromised integrity. These are not unequivocally comic, marriage-heals-all endings, however, first because there are too many human casualties – Rosalie being the most poignant. Second, we are left with the disturbing implication that the patriarchal social structure as firmly in place in the last pages as in the first will gradually, inevitably result in the utter devaluation of the human heart; Bronte proposes that a society which produces only emotionally impotent participants will itself devolve into a state of impotence. These social worlds are so toxic, so hostile to the cultivation of compassion and sympathy that Agnes and Helen ultimately must establish their family lives in physically and morally separate spheres. Agnes and Weston establish themselves at his modest parish, where he works "surprising reforms" and they "never [attempt] to imitate [their] richer neighbours"; Helen and Markham leave Grassdale where "there are painful associations ... she cannot

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Huntingdon is a case apart from characters like Eliza, Annabella, Rosalie, Markham and Boarham. Huntingdon is not just shallow and duplicitous, he is a profligate drunkard and abusive husband.

easily overcome” for a country retreat where they enjoy seasons “of invigorating relaxation and social retirement” (251; 489-490).

In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Agnes Grey, duplicity is not just a possibility, but a way of living that precludes romantic and platonic love and threatens the future of civilized society. In many ways, lying and role-playing are means of evading love and life, and of disengaging from reality in order to instead participate in a fraudulent existence. In Chapter 3 I will discuss two heroes, poised between the Victorian and Modern eras, who respond to the face of love by disengaging from life entirely; one does so literally, and the other figuratively but just as irrevocably.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PURSUIT OF "DREADFUL RIGHTNESS" AND THE "SHADOWY IDEAL OF CONDUCT" AT THE EXPENSE OF LOVE IN JAMES'S THE AMBASSADORS AND CONRAD'S LORD JIM

Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim and Henry James's The Ambassadors are both novels about a man's quest for redemption, moral absolution, and glory, quests compelled by perceived moral failures. Lord Jim betrays his conscience and his heroic ideals when, as the crewman of a doomed ship, he abandons the sinking vessel and its hundreds of sleeping occupants; he spends the rest of his life struggling with guilt and seeking not only atonement, but a dramatic opportunity for glory he has dreamt of since boyhood. Comparatively, The Ambassador's Lambert Strether has never lived a grand or heroic life, and in fact, one could argue that he hasn't ever fully lived life; thus, on his ambassadorial mission abroad to rescue his betrothed's son from a presumably debauched and decadent European lifestyle, Strether vows to be Chad's savior and moral guide, and in the process decides to make up for his own lost youth and to redeem his dreary, gray soul. Sprung from missed opportunities, these quests for redemption and glory are temporarily waylaid by the introduction of women, and subsequently by the possibility of love that complicates the protagonists' ethical choices.

How should one love? Strether and Jim ultimately answer one should not. Confronted by love and love's obligations, Strether and Jim flee in pursuit of vague ideals and moral absolution: Strether abstrusely claims that the "right" thing to do is to complete his hallowed mission (for he really does see himself as Chad's redeemer) and return to the staid safeness of Wollett; Jim wishes to fulfill his boyish dream of greatness, and in so doing atone for his past sin. While both men renounce love in the name of purity and righteousness, they achieve neither. I contend that these abstract quests are in fact excuses that justify the avoidance of love and suffering: when confronted with the possibility of love and all of its messiness, passion, and uncertainty, both Strether and Jim flee, evading intimacy and thus human completeness. In choosing to "triumph over life" rather than immerse themselves in it, both men deny themselves not only love, but ethical integrity as well. Seeking to behave ethically, both men act profoundly unethically by ignoring the consequences for the women they leave behind, and by answering the call to transcendent greatness and glory, rather than the call to real life.

It is precisely the call to living that Maria and Jewel offer: both offer a combination of vitality and safe harbor; as much as they encourage Strether and Jim to embrace a meaningful way of living in the world, they also offer the understandably wary heroes havens apart from the often perilous and complex world, havens where it is safe to be vulnerable, and to love. While both men temporarily acquiesce to the ways of living and loving Maria and Jewel represent, ultimately they reject both, and in doing so compromise their



ethical integrity and their very lives. In offering safe haven from the world, domestic affection, and tender understanding, Maria and Jewel at a glance seem to fulfill the conventional Victorian role of the “angel in the house;” traditionally, men negotiated the complicated world of commerce, while the women created a safe domestic space completely distinct from the ills and evils of the public sphere; such “angels” offered shelters from life even as they were sheltered from it. In The Ambassadors and Lord Jim, however, these once inviolate distinctions between public and private spheres and between gender roles collapse. Maria and Jewel are hardly unworldly innocents ensconced in their respective domiciles: indeed, Maria functions as a tour guide leading others through the very world from which most Victorian women were barred, and often navigates that world with greater deftness than Strether; Jewel inhabits a realm defined by adventure and danger, and is frequently inseparable from Jim both at home and in the world. It is perhaps this duality – this ability to function and exert power in both the private and public spheres – that unsettles Strether and Jim, men who are wary of and not entirely comfortable in either sphere.

Jim’s choices at the end of Lord Jim, are, I think, more ethically egregious than Strether’s in that he not only denies and deludes himself, but Jewel as well, a fact that, like love’s obligation, he refuses to confront. Jim deliberately deprives Jewel of the truth that could liberate her from the interminable guilt and despair the final pages promise for her. The consequences of Jim’s choices for Jewel are also more devastating than Strether’s

for Maria, a fact that, as I shall discuss, is as much a result of his actions as Conrad's possibly misogynistic rendering of Jewel. While this study is very concerned with the ethical implications of these masculine heroic quests, it is just as much if not more concerned with illuminating two characters too often overlooked (or even maligned) by studies more preoccupied with the leading men. As readers we should not make the mistake of leaving Maria and Jewel behind as cavalierly as Strether and Jim do. It is too easy, however, to dismiss these heroines as victims, for to do so is to deny their agency and the powerful lessons about the human condition that they have to offer. Strether and Jim disavow love's moral capacity – for them, moral truth lies in some showy, grand action – and this is yet another example of their peripheral blindness, for the very people they abandon are the very people who are, as I shall argue, proof of love's moral possibility. How should one love? We should, as most others have not, turn to Maria and Jewel for guidance.

Lambert Strether, who sets off to Paris with a relatively simple goal – to persuade Chad to abandon his presumably frivolous lifestyle and return to America – transforms it into a task of monumental importance: he won't merely haul Chad home, he will act as his self-appointed savior. He refers to himself as such on many occasions, as when speaking to Little Bilham: "What did I come out for but to save him?" (168). Strether also displays a penchant for martyrdom, as when he repeatedly suggests that his mission requires that he deny his selfhood and act solely for others: he insists unbaited that he doesn't have a life of his own, that he has "a life only for other people" (160).

The self-sacrifice Strether claims he is engaging in is really irresponsible evasion under the guise of selfless heroism. Rather than live *for* others, he lives through or via others, and this allows him to deny personal responsibility and avoid personal growth since he refuses to live his own life.

This evasion of the self is further evident in the vicarious youth he enjoys from his relationship with Chad:

I don't get drunk; I don't pursue the ladies; I don't spend money; I don't even write sonnets. But nevertheless I'm making up late for what I didn't have early. I cultivate my little benefit in my own little way. It amuses me more than anything that has happened to me in all my life. They may say what they like – it's my surrender, it's my tribute to youth. One puts that in where one can – it has to come in somewhere, if only out of the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons. Chad gives me the sense of it... and *she* does the same.... Though they're young enough, my pair, I don't say they're in the freshest way.... The point is that they're mine. Yes, they're my youth.... (199)

Instead of engaging in life in any capacity, whether it be revelry, sociability or artistry, Strether pilfers the vigor and creative energy of others. Not only does he settle for an ersatz mode of being in the world, he denies his own independent existence and the individualism and separateness of Chad and Marie, referring to them as “[his] pair,” insisting that “they’re mine” and that “they’re my youth.” Such greedy appropriation grants Strether a measure of pleasure without the unpleasantness, disappointment, and pain that inevitably accompany a fully lived life. Vicarious living is Strether’s defense, allowing him to skim the surface of life without dipping below the surface to experience the depths of love, loss, joy, pain.

Strether's attempt to sequester his heart affects Maria Gostrey, the woman who loves him, most profoundly. The narrator aligns us with Strether, calling him "our friend" and telling the story through his perspective, but it is Maria Gostrey who emerges as our trusted confidante, sage observer, selfless friend, and moral and intellectual touchstone. James admits in his "Preface" that it is Maria in whom the readers can invest their trust and affection: "She is the reader's friend...; and she acts in that capacity, and really in that capacity alone, with exemplary devotion, from beginning to end of the book" (12). Maria is a "general guide" who plucks up hapless tourists, acts as their "companion at large" and then invariably sends them home: "I always want them to go, and I send them as fast as I can" (35). That she doesn't form attachments capriciously, and that Strether is the first visitor she wants to hold onto is indicative of the rare and abiding quality of her affection for him. Her chambers quickly become a retreat to which Strether can escape to pour out and sort through all of the elements complicating his ambassadorial mission. There, in the "innermost nook of the shrine," he experiences almost mystical elucidation about everything confounding him: "After a full look at his hostess he knew none the less what most concerned him. The circle in which they stood together was warm with life, and every question between them would live there as nowhere else" (80). Not only is Maria the mystic or goddess of her own shrine, and her very presence elicits a clarity of thinking Strether otherwise feels himself incapable of, but it is Maria and her home that is associated with life, heat, exchange of ideas,

understanding. There Strether finds a vibrant warmth at odds with his usual cool *modus operandi*, as well as acceptance and intimacy denied him in Wollett. Maria's extraordinary, even unearthly capacity for generosity and empathy are further evident in Strether's estimation of her value: "She was the blessing that had now become his need, and what could prove it better than that without her he had lost himself?" (80). There is an important distinction to be made between Strether as he exists with Maria and as he exists with others like Chad. Without Maria, he feels "he had lost himself" because it is only *with* her that he is vulnerable enough to feelingly respond to and struggle with his real life. Conversely, with Chad he loses himself in that he disengages from his real life, choosing instead to siphon off the experiences and energies of others. Maria's domicile is a refuge full of life; vicarious living is Strether's refuge from life.

That Strether appropriates the lives of those around him has received critical attention before, but that he actually begins to live, to emerge from his "grey" existence in Maria's presence and with her gentle guidance and encouragement is a point less widely discussed. Strether reflects upon his past as "grey in the shadow of his solitude... a solitude of life, or choice, of community;" he laments "the pale figure of his real youth, which held against its breast the two presences paler than itself—the young wife he had early lost and the son he had stupidly sacrificed" (61). Having lost the two lives closest to him, Strether responds by renouncing his own, even depicting his past as a living death: pale, shadowy, grey, removed. He claims that "all he had to

show at fifty-five" was "this acceptance of fate," a resignation to loneliness and mediocrity particularly poignant given the hopes and aspirations he once harbored, aspirations firmly associated with his previous European excursion.

Newly-married, sailing home after an excursion abroad, Strether believes "he had gained something great, and his theory – with an elaborate, innocent plan of reading, digesting, coming back even, every few years – had then been to preserve, cherish and extend it" (62). "Such plans as these had come to nothing," except a "handful of seed" he "should have lost account of" (62). It is this "handful of seed," the remnants of Strether's potential and youth, that merely two days under Maria's tutelage begin to demonstrate signs of surprising vitality.

Buried for long years in dark corners at any rate these few germs had sprouted again under forty-eight hours in Paris. The process of yesterday had really been the process of feeling the general stirred life of connexions long since individually dropped. Strether had become acquainted even on this ground with short gusts of speculation—sudden flights of fancy in Louvre galleries, hungry gazes through clear plates behind which lemon-coloured volumes were as fresh as fruit on the tree.<sup>5</sup> (62-63)

Note that all of the imagery is associated with life and appetite: sprouting germs, gusts, sudden flights of fancy, hungry gazes, colour, volumes fresh as fruit. Before Strether ultimately decides that he "wasn't there to dip, to consume," he does enjoy the first stages of a rebirth, inspired by the rich

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<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 5, I discuss how Sydney Carton undergoes similar spiritual renewal, also compelled by love. Just as Strether undergoes "the process of feeling the general stirred life of connexions long since individually dropped," Carton claims that Lucie Manette inspires "stirred old shadows that [he] thought had died out," and that since making her acquaintance,

beauty and culture of Paris, and by the woman who takes him into her “nest” – the ideal place for Strether to find both safety, nourishment, and a site to test the wings he thought had long ago petrified for lack of use. When Strether declares to Maria, “I think I’m only better since I’ve known *you!*” he is perfectly right.

It is important to understand the quality of Strether’s life between the death of his wife and child and his European sojourn in order to understand and sympathize with him, for he truly is “our hero” even if we find some of his behavior deeply regrettable. As I mentioned above, the loss of his wife and son mark the beginning of Strether’s hiatus from life, a hiatus of some 30 years that is temporarily and occasionally interrupted while he is in Europe with Maria. In Woollett, his existence is one of restraint – of sexual celibacy, emotional repression, singular commitment to duty, propriety, and service to others. Even his ostensible “love interest” and perennial fiancée Mrs. Newsome is a “highly nervous,” “not at all strong” “American invalid,” and Strether’s chief occupation is doing her bidding and sheltering her from all things “unsafe” (46). Given that Strether has been “living” in this manner for decades, one can hardly expect him to dive headfirst into a life of decadence, passion and abandon; he is emotionally, psychologically and most likely physically incapable. But this is exactly why a life with Maria is Strether’s best option. She invites him to tiptoe back into life, offers to gradually resuscitate his heart, and she never makes demands that would overwhelm

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he has “heard whispers from old voices impelling me upward, that [he] thought were silent

his understandably fragile and bruised psyche. It is Maria, James makes us comprehend, who possesses the unique ability and willingness to gently help Strether transform his "secret habit of sorrow" into a habit of affection.

Maria's patient tenderness is important: certainly we would not expect that Marie de Vionnet could perform such a role, as her irrepressible sensuality would deter rather than encourage him. Strether is lovable and harbors enormous potential, which is precisely why his choices and conduct are so lamentable.

Even though Strether is at his most self-reflective, animated and indulgent in feeling when with Maria, he still exhibits a degree of egocentric, appropriating behavior in neglecting to acknowledge her independent personhood, her needs and desires. He refers to her love as his blessing, his need, his best self, and is always eager to consume her gifts without contemplation of reciprocation. Maria, in return, is perfectly willing to complement and even be absorbed by him, entirely for his benefit and for those he "saves:"

...it was as if she had shrunk to a secondary element and had consented to shrinkage with the perfection of tact. This perfection never had failed her.... She had decked him out for others, and he saw at this point at least nothing she would ever ask for. She only wondered and questioned and listened, rendering him the homage of a wistful speculation. She expressed it repeatedly; he was already far beyond her, and she must prepare herself to lose him (198).

While many readers may categorize Maria as a defeatist martyr at best, as a pitiful and proverbial "doormat" at worst, I would argue that her willingness

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for ever" (181).



to love despite obstacles and without the reward of reciprocity is a stunningly admirable model of moral love. For all of the self-aggrandizing Strether does, one must wonder how “successful” Strether’s travels and negotiations would have been without Maria’s unfailing support and perfect generosity. Ironically, the “homage” she pays him and the “shrinkage” she undergoes for him only make her loom finer and larger, rather than render her pathetic and obsequious. For all of her wisdom and savviness, Maria cannot disentangle herself (as Strether does in the face of potential loss) from a relationship she knows will culminate in her loss, yet or more to the point, she will not cease loving even though she simultaneously must prepare to lose the object of that love. Given these two responses to romantic uncertainty and complication – flee (Strether) or persevere (Maria) – one can imagine many readers relating to Strether’s impulse toward self-protection. As the novel was published on the brink of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, one can also see Strether as James’s answer or even antidote to Victorian earnest optimism (for example, the triumph of sincerity and patient love as discussed in Chapter 1) or Victorian romantic idealism (as will be discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities). If Strether’s final exit is indeed a modernist, warily pessimistic response to love and desire, it is not necessarily an example to emulate, particularly given the alternative that Maria embodies.

A popular critical take on the novel’s conclusion is that Strether emerges unequivocally triumphant, having been transformed into a more fulfilled, more morally whole man. In his Henry James and the Modern

Moral Life, Robert B. Pippin contends: "The novel is, after all, about how exquisitely and fully Strether has begun to live, finally" (159). He also depicts Strether as "an enlightener, and as fine and admirable a character as James ever created, his best hero by far" (150).<sup>6</sup> I wholeheartedly agree with Pippin that Strether gradually demonstrates the capacity and desire to live a more satisfying, imaginative existence. He arrives in Paris suffering from the "failure to enjoy," as Maria puts it, which Strether admits is "the failure of Woollet" (25). Consistently, Woollet is associated with images of rigid Puritanism, cultural bereftness, cold capitalism, and general bleakness; at times James seems to delight in scorning rather than celebrating the American dream, and the notion of American innocence. With the exception of Chad and Strether, it is the Americans in the novel who exhibit naïve moral judgmentalism, a lack of imagination, and stifling pragmatism: Waymarsh is consistently appalled when Strether sympathizes with the "debauched" Europeans, or strays from his mission; Mrs. Newsome attempts to keep Strether on a short tether, and when she senses her impending failure, sends the Pocock brigade to haul him safely home; all of the above characters mistakenly and unfoundedly assume that Madame de Vionnet and Europe generally are corruptive, even evil, influences on the innocent and impressionable Chad; in fact, the opposite is true, and Marie's intentions are beautifully loving and pure while Chad's motives are often rather dubious

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<sup>6</sup> Macnaughton, for example, contends that Strether leaves Europe a more complete man, "full of possibility," and that therefore "it is a mistake to be disappointed by the end of *The Ambassadors* or to read it pessimistically" (79). Similarly, Charles Thomas Samuels has

and selfish. It is, moreover, in America where Strether has self-admittedly squandered his youth, and America that he associates with regret, and grief and guilt over the deaths of his wife and son.<sup>7</sup>

On the contrary, Europe proves to be a place of freedom, adventure, and imagination, and while Strether often finds its sensuality overwhelming and its affairs complicated, guidance is one purpose Maria serves, and when he falls into her hands, he declares, "nothing more extraordinary has ever happened to me" (25). And so that Strether "begins to live exquisitely" is true, but he refuses to sustain an elevated, vital lifestyle; only for a time does Strether immerse himself in sensory pleasures like high art, enchanting landscapes, fine wine, and yellowed French novels, and only for a while does he enjoy a vibrant lifestyle and find a "haven" in Maria's love. In fleeing Paris, he not only rejects Maria, but also his opportunity to fully live and to cast off all of the regret and longing that burdens him upon his arrival. I would never suggest that Strether is cold-hearted – his forays into life are proof enough that he is not – but I do contend that he chooses to harden his heart in order to renounce all that he loves.<sup>8</sup> Early in his European sojourn, Strether contemplates "old ghosts of experiments," "old recoveries with their relapses," "broken moments of good faith" – all "promises to himself that he had after his other visit never kept" (62). Strether's tragedy is that he allows

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argued that Strether ultimately "becomes noble in a higher sense than Quixote" in that he passes through innocence into a more mature acceptance of the complexity of life (204).

<sup>7</sup> Pippin acknowledges that Strether "seems for a time simply to have leapt into the European garden as if it were life, and Woollet death" (161).

this episode, this gift of new life and love, to pass away as yet another discarded experiment, another missed opportunity, another promise to himself broken.

Renunciation is certainly a favorite Jamesian resolution for his heroes, as in the cases of Merton Densher in Wings of the Dove, and Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady. I would argue, and do in Chapter 3, that Isabel Archer sacrifices for the good of others as well as to preserve her own moral integrity, whereas Strether's "sacrifice" is morally irresponsible, intellectually misguided, and logically fuzzy. To refuse to marry one woman on another woman's money is a valid point, but he had indeed completed his mission to the best of his ability, and to return (ostensibly) to a woman he does not love at the expense of a woman he does love is grossly unfair to both; further, Strether is dreadfully vague about what constitutes rightness, and his implicit claim that Maria, of all people, would "make him wrong" is the height of irony. To renounce for the sake of renunciation, for the sake of some ideal he can barely articulate, is neither ethically admirable nor mindful of the self and others; ironically, the gesture that fleetingly gratifies his ego (for Strether as he leaves Maria's does seem rather smug in his "rightness") depletes his soul.

Readers bent on painting Strether as a hero pay no heed to critical questions that, for me, strike to the heart of the novel's moral complexity, such as: Is Strether's abandonment of Maria in pursuit of a vague,

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<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Hocks argues that in the end Strether "severs himself" from life, love, and self-control and that "as a quondam ambassador, he has known power for a time and then squandered it" (58).

unspeakable ideal ethically responsible? Who, if anyone, pays the price for Strether's opportunity to be "dreadfully right"? What conception of the "right" way to love does the novel finally endorse? (Is love an action at odds with morality?) Martha Nussbaum, one of few scholars I have encountered who address these very questions, has argued that in the conclusion of The Ambassadors, James affirms the moral impossibility of love. Nussbaum classifies Strether as a perfect, detached perceiver of life: he is free to explore all of its fine perceptions, but holds at bay all of the violence, arbitrariness, passion, and delicious or dreadful surprises that real personal relationships entail. Strether approaches the world very much like a novelist or novel-reader, standing somewhat or entirely apart from the complexity of the human scene, avoiding immersion in that scene, and thus avoiding human completeness. Ultimately, Strether

achieves a certain clarity of vision at the expense of a certain emotional depth; one that forgoes, or even scorns, immersion in the darker, messier passions, one that 'reduces' them all to a simplified generic story, read only with a reader's interest (Nussbaum 186-189).

In describing Strether as a man "convinced that loneliness is the condition of luminous perception," Nussbaum offers a plausible explanation for his refusal to stay with Maria Gostrey in spite of, or because of, the haven of intimacy she offers. In short, Strether will always choose a detached vision of life, "luminous" as that vision may be, rather than life itself.

Nussbaum alludes to the effect Strether's choice has on Maria and extrapolates his dilemma to the possibility of human love in general:

around him, but of deliberately choosing to reject that love in favor of the loneliness of luminous perception.

That Maria loves while maintaining clarity of perception, desires while maintaining a vast capacity for sympathy, is moving evidence that disputes Nussbaum's theory on the impossibility of moral love. Nussbaum argues:

For so long as our eyes are open, we are wonderful and lovable and finely responsive; but when we immerse ourselves in the most powerful responses, entering silence, closing our eyes, are we then capable at all of asking questions about friends, of thinking of the good of the community? And if we are not capable of this, are we worthy of the deepest feelings and commitments of others? (189)

Strether does indeed close his eyes to Maria and to the good of those around him, ironic behavior for one who so privileges clarity of vision, but can we say the same for Maria? I contend that we cannot, for Maria never forgets the well-being of others, never loses sight of reality or truth, and loves Strether all the while. A keen perceiver of life, Maria is always and accurately predicting and analyzing the complex tangle of people and events, of political and emotional connections around her; indeed, it is her job to guide the often hapless, willfully blind Strether through such complications. Further, she is able to turn analysis upon herself, even when she must come to the painful realization that she has "ceased to serve" Strether, and that subsequently the pleasure of his company is at his discretion. Maria moreover accepts truth rather than denying it or deluding herself; when Strether finds himself able to "toddle alone" through Paris, he notes the "strange sweetness – a melancholy mildness that touched him – in [Maria's] acceptance of the altered order" (198). Her acceptance, however, must not be mistaken for contentment. She

around him, but of deliberately choosing to reject that love in favor of the loneliness of luminous perception.

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"wish[es] with all her heart" that Strether stay, and when he fears he will expend the last drop of his blood during his mission, she ardenly pleads, "Ah you'll please keep a drop for *me*. I shall have a use for it!" (244; 246). Indeed, if only Strether were to expend his energy and lifeblood on Maria, she would have a use for it, and he a more purposeful existence. That Maria is not more insistent, does not attempt to mold Strether's destiny into a shape more in keeping with her needs and desire is further evidence of her lucid grasp of reality, and her refusal to partake in the self-deception passion often entails; to be sure, her resolve to love Strether despite the inevitability of her losing him is testimony to her ability to honor love over her own self-interest. We may pity Strether if he is, as Nussbaum suggests, incapable of or disinclined to perception *and* passion, but he is complicit and even content in his incapacity, whereas Maria harbors great potential for moral love – a potential tragically unfulfilled through no fault of her own.

One might reasonably wonder if Maria loves Strether in a similarly detached way, given her apparent unwillingness to expose herself, to risk less in an attempt to regret less. She is contained and acutely, even coolly, watchful rather than amorously demanding. Until the last chapter, Maria, wisely, only intimates her affection for Strether, as in this exchange:

[Maria]: "Don't you remember how in those first days of our meeting it was *I* who was to see you through?"

"Remember? Tenderly, deeply" – he always rose to it. "You're just doing your part in letting me maunder to you thus."

"Ah don't speak as if my part were small; since whatever fails you—" "You won't, ever, ever, ever?" – he thus took her up. "Oh I beg your pardon; you necessarily, you inevitably *will*. Your conditions – that's what I mean – won't allow me anything to do for you."



"Let alone – I see what you mean – that I'm drearily dreadfully old. I am, but there's a service – possible for you to render – that I know, all the same, I shall think of."

"And what will it be?"

This, in fine, she would never tell him. "You shall hear only if your smash takes place. As that's really out of the question, I won't expose myself—" a point at which, for reasons of his own, Strether ceased to press. (200)

Characteristically, Strether does not allow Maria to express herself, but instead puts words in her mouth and transforms her desire into desire more in accordance with his own: he does not want to hear her promise to never fail him, for even that would be too confrontational for him, so he deters her by insisting that such a vow *would be*, were she to make it, ridiculous since she inevitably will fail him. Thus deterred, Maria understandably changes her course and claims that she won't then expose herself. Maria's reticence is less self-protectiveness than suppression imposed on her by Strether as he consistently preempts the articulation of her desire. Maria learns how to love Strether, and that she must often do it silently is not a sign of self-protection or general feebleness, but instead of her devotion, patience, and intimate understanding of him. Toward the end of the preceding exchange, Strether does in fact ask her what service he could possibly render her, a question she refuses to answer, and one could interpret this as a missed opportunity to reveal her desire. However, one must take note of why she won't expose herself – she cannot until or if his "smash takes place," further evidence of her emotional attunement with him because she knows he will never be available to love her until his mission reaches its "smash;" whether that smash be a calamity or a triumph, Strether cannot, will not compromise his mission by at

the same time seeking personal advantage. Further, for her to behave otherwise would be contrary to Nussbaum's definition of moral love as she would be losing herself in her own longing, and acting in a manner at odds with "the deepest feelings and commitments of others."<sup>9</sup>

Jamesian scholar William Macnaughton has insisted that in the end "Maria has not been crushed; her wit and pride are intact; she will get over the jilting" (79). While Maria is certainly resilient, to characterize Strether's desertion as a mere "jilting" that Maria should simply "get over" is appallingly dismissive of her love for him, and of the value of the human heart. Macnaughton's accompanying suggestion is that "almost everything Strether says and does in the last part of the occasion communicates his kindness" and evokes the reader's sympathy. I contend that this is also a dubious claim, as well as one disproved by the last exchange between the couple:

"There's nothing, you know, I wouldn't do for you."  
 "Oh yes – I know."  
 "There's nothing," she repeated, "in all the world."  
 "I know. I know. But all the same I must go." He had got it at last.  
 "To be right."  
 "To be right?"  
 She had echoed it in vague deprecation, but he felt it already clear for her. "That, you see is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself."  
 She thought. "But with your wonderful impressions you'll have got a great deal." (346-347)

I don't perceive Strether's response as kind, but as supremely arrogant: when Maria's attempts to persuade him to submit to love, he cavalierly rebuffs her

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<sup>9</sup> That Maria "would never tell [Strether]" the service he could render her is narrative foreshadowing, not an indication that Maria herself is resolved from early on never to reveal her heart to him.

three times with "I know;" in an attempt at emotional self-protection, he refuses to even hear her or to acknowledge her unconditional devotion, thereby denying the validity of her feelings. Furthermore, unlike Maria, Strether is certainly wont to lament his plight and bemoan what his heroism costs him. Considering his obsession with perception and rightness, it seems particularly thoughtless that he claims to have gleaned nothing from his excursion, and particularly insensitive that he does not include Maria's affection and loyalty in his calculation. Ironically, it is Maria, who stands to lose the most and gain the least, who must endure his egotism and remind him that he does not in fact leave Paris emptier than he arrived, that at the very least he has his "wonderful impressions."

The last exchange between Strether and Maria encapsulates their ethical stances. Strether declares to Maria, "You can't resist me," referring to his intellectual argument that he must leave in order to be right; Maria responds, "I can't indeed resist you" (347). What Strether misses is the passion behind Maria's response: she emotionally and erotically cannot resist him, which is her tragedy. This conversation reveals their ethical priorities in that Strether privileges his personal sense of "rightness" at the expense of Maria's – and his own – heart, while Maria chooses to immerse herself in love's murkiness even in the face of rejection. Strether believes that in leaving Maria and Europe, he is redeeming himself by doing something right (leaving a woman he met while traveling on behalf of another woman) after having committed a wrong (being unable to advocate Chad's return to America).

"Then there [they] are:" Strether in his "triumph," Maria broken in "defeat." One must wonder when Strether will recognize his squandered opportunity for real redemption (if he doesn't already sense it as he stands on Maria's doorstep); for Strether is broken, too, but recoils from Maria and the chance for healing. Strether may be "our hero," but it is Maria who stands for ethical responsibility and integrity and for the possibility of moral love.

Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim is comparable to James's novel in several salient ways, the first of which is the parallel between the two heroes, both of whom are oft-heralded despite their deeply equivocal fates and morally unsound behavior.<sup>10</sup> Both men decide to triumph over life, to adhere to an elusive and ethically untenable masculine code of honor rather than fall vulnerable to love, or more specifically, to feminine sexuality and power. In both men's minds, glory and reputation preclude the defenselessness love (and often, life) demands, even though privileging the former ensures their defeat while honoring the latter could bring about redemption.

That said, just as Strether harbors beautiful potential temporarily tapped by Maria, initially there is something promising and even enchantingly exceptional about Jim's character, as well as something truly heartrending about his *Patna* failure and its psychological ramifications. The carrier of Jim's story, Marlow, is instantly smitten by Jim's physical presence, and impresses upon the reader Jim's distinctiveness among his crewmates,

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<sup>10</sup> Albert J. Guerard has insisted that only a casual or first-time reader of the novel "ignores or minimizes the important evidence *against* Lord Jim, is insensitive to ironic overtone and

who Marlow describes variously as “sallow-faced,” “mean,” “little,” “vexed” and having the “air of jaunty imbecility” (28). Quite the opposite, Jim is a stunning white vision, “spotlessly neat, appareled in immaculate white from shoes to hat,” “clean-limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet” (7; 28).<sup>11</sup> It is of course ironic, or perhaps appropriate, that after the *Patna* episode and Jim’s fall from grace and heroic stature, he crosses a brown stream to be embraced by a dark race, married to a brown girl and defeated by Gentleman Brown.<sup>12</sup> He is equally associated with great vision and promise, which makes his *Patna* cowardice and, in my reading, his moral failure in the end all the more tragic. The narrator marvels that initially Jim’s head is perpetually “full of valorous deeds” and “dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements,” all of which gave him “unbounded confidence” and made him “drunk” (17). His vision had “a gorgeous virility,” but once Jim refashions his dream into a relentless pursuit of a single dramatic opportunity, it takes on a deathly, lifeless pallor. Prior to the calamity at sea, Jim’s reveries focus on prospective acts of chivalry and opportunities to do good for *others* (which

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illustrative digression, assumes that Conrad wholly approved of his hero, and is quite certain that Jim ‘redeemed himself’ in Patusan” (400-401).

<sup>11</sup> It must be remembered that we receive all of this through the filter of Marlow, whose narrative reliability has been exhaustively debated: his position is deeply ambivalent when it comes to Jim, as he assesses his friend in one moment with distrust and disapproval, and in the next with starry-eyed wonder and even envy; in this way Marlow resembles Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway. Carraway is a narrator similarly torn between censure and awe when it comes to his much grander, more impressive friend Gatsby, even though Nick’s own sense of righteousness and morality *should* prevent admiration (and in Nick’s case, should prevent his collusion in some of Gatsby’s unethical dealings).

<sup>12</sup> Marianne De Koven argues that Jim’s dazzling white racial identity and masculinity are both overdone, and therefore questionable. She further argues that the “destructive element” in *Lord Jim* is constituted by the brown Patusan race and by the maternal feminine represented by Jewel. See her chapter in *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).

will also bring him a good measure of satisfaction). After the *Patna*, Jim becomes egocentrically obsessed with a single chance to recoup the “glamour [that] had gone with the ship in the night” (80). He insists “the proper thing was to face it out – alone – for myself – wait for another chance – find out...” (81). Here the chapter climactically ends as Jim’s voice trails off, but we can imagine him finishing his musing this way: “find out, for himself, if he possesses the constitution of a hero, or a coward; to find out, if he would face or flee death.” Never does Jim consider other hearts or lives his quest might cost.

I do not mean to minimize the agony and regret Jim endures, or that his spirit and view of the world is irrevocably altered: it was “as if a cold finger-tip had touched his heart,” as if he “had jumped into a well – into an everlasting deep hole...” (54; 70). Marlow locates the ship as a particularly fickle companion and the sea as a precarious home, and when either fails you, the world is never the same:

When your ship fails you, your whole world seems to fail you; the world that made you, restrained you, took care of you. It is as if the souls of men floating on an abyss and in touch with immensity had been set free for any excess of heroism, absurdity or abomination (75).

While such compassionate estimations of Jim do serve to make his character more sympathetic, which indeed he must be to warrant Marlow’s devotion, Jewel’s love, and the fidelity of the Patusan people, a life-altering event and the betrayal of the sea, if you will, do not justify Jim’s response, which in my reading is to embark upon the path of self- and other-destructiveness.

Before Jim's need for atonement quickly develops into a need to achieve a kind of greatness that will supplant his moment of instinctive weakness, he seeks relief by verbally reliving the shameful incident to Marlow, his captive audience. Like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, retelling his story brings relief and a sense of human connection, but not long-term absolution, and so rather than continue recounting his failure, Jim resolves to rewrite or reinvent himself as a tragic hero, a role that will inevitably culminate in his death. "Wholly and naturally concerned for what he had failed to obtain," Jim single-mindedly pursues a second dramatic opportunity, and does so "as unflinching as a hero in a book" (*Lord Jim*: 53; 9).<sup>13</sup> It is this very single-mindedness that costs Jim his integrity, his ability to see anyone outside of the narrow tunnel of his own desire and ambition, and consequently, his moral wholeness. Further, by fictionalizing himself and adopting a persona or character, Jim abdicates his human particularity and individuality. Abandoning the presumably sinking *Patna* was both a very cowardly and a very human response, but instead of repenting his sin and accepting his imperfect condition, Jim chooses to dispense with the very concept of human frailty (for his heroic persona will not accommodate it). This choice will dictate reckless ethical and physical behavior that contributes to the destruction of himself and those who love him.

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<sup>13</sup> Conrad/Marlow echoes this phrase when Jim ostensibly is on the brink of achieving his heroic vision: as he takes Doramin's bullet in the heart, "the white man sent right and left at all those faces a proud and unflinching glance" (246).

Philip M. Weinstein has also contended that after the *Patna* disgrace, Jim loses his identity, ceases to live, and further, that he embarks upon the fulfillment of a death-wish: "His life has lost its unfolding promise, has become (essentially) a suspension. Rooted mentally to the time and place of one traumatic scene, he lives to prove that he will know how to die next time" (161). Indeed, in reference to his jump from the *Patna*, Jim claims, "It was like cheating the dead," at which point Marlow must remind him that no one died (82). It is possible that Jim was not referring to the crew of the sinking vessel, but to himself, and that *he* had cheated *death*. Jim also "wished [he] could die," and Marlow is several times contemptuous of Jim's penchant for "deliberating about death" and squandering his promise (70; 80). Weinstein further argues that Jim's continual risking of his life on Patusan is evidence that he has already conceded his life: he regularly drinks the Rajah's potentially poisoned coffee every month, he pledges his last drop of blood and last breath to the Patusan people, and he relishes Doramin's recounting of a death scene "too intensely for it not to relate massively to his own" (161-162). Whether you believe Weinstein's case for Jim's death-wish, or that Jim is no longer himself-as-himself but instead himself-as-tragic hero, or simply that Jim is seeking an act of compensatory heroism, it is hugely problematic that he draws others – not coincidentally, but intimately – into his quest without informing them that they are players in his tragic psychic drama. Most irrevocably altered is Jewel, the woman who, like Maria Gostrey, offers him a sanctuary from loneliness and an alternative redemptive possibility.



Soon after Jim and Jewel meet, they are inseparable, even in the most literal of ways: “they walked side by side, openly, he holding her arm under his – pressed to his side – thus – in a most extraordinary way;” they were “two white forms very close, his arm about her waist, her head on his shoulder” (168; 169). It is in Jewel, and only in her, that Jim finds safe shelter from the solitude, often as self-imposed, and torment that shadows him from the time he abandons his ship: “he realized that for him there was no refuge from that loneliness which centupled all his dangers except – in her” (178). He admits to Marlow, “I thought ... that if I went away from her it would be the end of everything somehow” (178). First, he considers Jewel as a desirable alternative to his solitary, reckless existence, and second, he predicts that forsaking her will be “the end of everything.” Their relationship is defined in other ways than absence or lack (lack of loneliness, lack of danger, lack of peril), it is also the site of healing and redemption: “Their soft murmurs... penetrating, tender, with a calm sad note in the stillness of the night, like a self-communion of one being carried on in two tones” (169). It is “as if they had been indissolubly united” and in their love they experience a spiritual and even physical wholeness that eludes them individually.

That Jim loves Jewel profoundly may seem like a simple point, but it is important that Jim does not consider Jewel a mere diversion, or use their relationship a source of escape or forgetfulness. Even the natural world reveres and illuminates the couple: “The light in which they stood made a sense blackness all around, and only above their heads there was an opulent

glitter of stars.... A lovely night seemed to breathe on them a soft caress" (177). It is as if their love is cosmically ordained and of mythical proportions: "they came together under the shadow of life's disaster, like knight and maiden meeting to exchange vows amongst haunted ruins" (185). Marlow certainly depicts their bond in highly romantic, quixotic language – he often seems to be in love with their love – but this "love story" (as he so often reminds us it is) is also "a strange uneasy romance" with dangerous implications that Jim eventually recoils from.

Jewel's loveliness is explicitly dark, as is her sexuality, as is her love. What Marlow "remembers best" about her is her exotic darkness: the "even, olive pallor of her complexion," "the intense blue-black gleams of her hair, flowing abundantly from under a small crimson cap," that "she blushed a dusky red" (168). Her duskiess is not only a direct contrast to Jim's pristine whiteness, but is associated with danger and domination. All of the darker elements in the last half of the novel – the Patusan people, the landscape, Jewel – are configured as threats to Jim's independence: "The land, the people, the forests were [Jewel's] accomplices, guarding him with vigilant accord, with an air of seclusion, of mystery, of invincible possession" (169). As much as Jewel represents safety and salvation for Jim, she paradoxically is the "destructive element," and Marlow at times seems to justify Jim's ultimate renunciation of Jewel as, ironically, a form of self-preservation. Contemplating the "big sombre orbits of her eyes" that seem "an immensely deep well," Marlow wonders if "a blind monster" dwells there, and then goes on to

claim that she is “more inscrutable ... than the Sphinx propounding childish riddles to wayfarers” (182-183). With these hardly ambiguous references to Jewel’s all-consuming monstrosity, Marlow suggests that she may engulf Jim, imperiling his independence, identity and integrity; like a hopeless Theban before the sphinx, Jim is vulnerable to being devoured by Jewel. This mentality, that conceives the feminine, more specifically female sexuality, as a dark threat to masculine power and dominance, justifies Jim’s refusal to submit to his love for Jewel; even though leaving her results in his death, at least he dies with his integrity and masculinity intact. At least that is the line of reasoning Marlow and Jim (and perhaps Conrad) embrace.

In Conrad in Perspective, Zdzislaw Najder argues that Lord Jim is a Romantic tragedy of honour that reminds us of classical tragedy because one of the novel’s basic features is the inescapability of fate, and an irrevocable course of events: “In Lord Jim the action rolls on with the inevitability of an avalanche; we are conscious of the necessity of nearly everything which happens, as if, indeed, merciless fate had decided it all” (91). I disagree that Jim was borne along helplessly on the tide of fate, for to suggest that is to disregard the deliberate, conscious choice he makes to die rather than fight as Jewel urges. Earlier in the novel, Jim even weighs his options. As he vows, “I shall be faithful, I shall be faithful,” referring to his commitment to “follow the dream,” Marlow reminds him of the alternative, “And then there’s Jewel” (198). Jim then acknowledges that he is willing to concede the woman he loves: “Yes.... In time she will come to understand” (199). Najder supposes

that Jim does not perceive any options, and therefore his death is an inevitability to which he must bravely resign himself. While the range of responses is scant and perhaps inglorious, a range does exist: he could flee, seek atonement and reconciliation, or fight the fight that would ensure Jewel of his love and respect for her. Instead he chooses the option that has the appearance of self-sacrifice but is ultimately self-serving. In submitting to death, Jim avails himself of a romantic gesture that saves him from having to confront both himself and the consequences of his choices.

Najder's insistence that Jim's fate is unavoidable is undermined by his subsequent suggestion that his fate is a consequence of his principles. According to Najder, "the voice of his conscience, a source of his honesty and humility in dealing with others, was the noblest trait in Jim's character, and also the direct cause of his debacle" (92-93). If Jim's conscience and personal attributes contribute to his death, then Jim is an active agent, not merely destiny's pawn. Further, I dispute that Jim's supposed conscience, honesty and humility were factors when he decided to take the bullet in his heart. Doesn't our conscience usually hold us accountable for the pain we cause others? Was it honest of Jim to keep the secret that would have enabled Jewel to at least understand his decision, and honestly mourn him? Was it humility that compelled Jim to put his own heroic self-image before the people who love him? Finally, Najder asserts that, in keeping with the traditions of the Romantic tragedy, "Jim's moral victory has been purchased not only with his own life but also with the pain and sorrow of those closest and dearest to

him" (93). It seems to me that this assertion cancels itself out. That his victory was purchased with the devastation and grief of his loved ones precludes it from being a "moral victory." Purchasing victory and self-aggrandizement with the blood and broken hearts of others is unambiguously immoral.

My goal in this study is not merely to interrogate the popular notion that Jim dies a redeemed hero, but also to call attention to Jewel, a character who, like Maria Gostrey, is too often either demeaned or ignored by critics and readers alike.<sup>14</sup> Jewel, again like Maria, harbors untapped heroic possibility: she is the woman who calls Jim to ethical responsibility, who introduces him to the possibility of true moral redemption. Yet her tragedy is nearly always subsumed by Jim's in discussions of the novel. Jewel's problem is a problem of knowledge: what she knows and what she is not permitted to know. What she objectively and subjectively knows is the history of weeping women in her family, and what she doesn't know is the *Patna* secret that Jim and Marlow deliberately keep from her.

One could conceivably argue that Jim does relate the story and the truth to Jewel based upon Marlow's insistence that Jim "had told her;" however, a careful reading of that entire section of Marlow's narrative, which is rather bewilderingly disjointed, supports my reading that Jewel was indeed unenlightened by the truth that could have saved her. Marlow insists that

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<sup>14</sup> Albert J. Guerard, for example, considers Jewel and women generally the most regrettable elements in the entire novel: "We may add that a characteristic mediocrity sets in with the

Jim will never leave her because “no one wants him” (188). The following exchange then occurs:

“Why?” she repeated louder; “tell me!” And as I remained confounded, she stamped with her foot like a spoilt child. “Why? Speak.” “You want to know,” I asked in a fury. “Yes!” she cried. “Because he is not good enough,” I said brutally. [...] Without raising her voice, she threw into it an infinity of scathing contempt, bitterness, and despair.  
[Jewel:] “This is the very thing he said.... You lie!” (189)  
[Soon after this, Marlow’s narrative breaks, and the first thing he says when he resumes is:] “He had told her—that’s all. She did not believe him – nothing more” (190).

What Marlow told Jewel is that Jim “is not good enough,” which is according to her “the very thing [Jim] said,” which Jewel believes is a “lie” based on her intuition, on her knowledge of Jim’s character, and on her ignorance of the *Patna* incident. So we know that Marlow told her that Jim is not good enough, and that Jim told her the very same thing, and *that* is what Marlow refers to when he says that Jim “had told her – that’s all.” Of course Jewel believes they are lying given her lack of context; had she known Jim’s past, she would understand Jim’s self-indictment, and although she may not agree that he “is not good enough,” she would not call his self-assessment (and Marlow’s assessment of him) a “lie.” Moreover, Jewel’s lack of knowledge is substantiated by her reaction to Jim’s death: the fact that she does not comprehend his final act and refusal to fight reveals that she does not know the *Patna* story or its indelible effect on him; had she known, she could have surmised why he took his own life, even if she opposed his decision; the

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introduction of Jewel in Chapter 28: with women and their frightening ‘extra-terrestrial touch’...” (419).

profundity of her grief is contingent upon her conviction that his death is a form of flight from her. Even as Jim departs from her for the last time, he preserves the ambiguity of his motives. Jewel accuses him, "You are false!" to which he replies, "Forgive me" (245). Logically Jewel would assume that he is asking pardon for the crime she accuses him of – the infidelity and desertion she has so dreaded.<sup>15</sup>

Painfully aware of man's proclivity for abandonment, Jewel fears she will inherit the legacy of loneliness passed on from her grandmother and her mother, both women who died weeping after being forsaken and betrayed by the men they loved. Understandably then, she profoundly doubts Jim's promise that he will never leave her because, as she tells Marlow: "Other men had sworn the same thing" (187). Marlow questions her distrust:

Why couldn't she believe? Wherefore this craving for incertitude, this clinging to fear, as if incertitude and fear had been the safeguards of her love. It was monstrous. She should have made for herself a shelter of inexpugnable peace out of that honest affection. She had not the knowledge... (186).

In that last line, Marlow answers his own question. What Jewel knows is that men leave; this is the fearful legacy she has inherited. The knowledge Jewel doesn't have is the secret she intuitively knows will take Jim from her suddenly and irrevocably. Because she has these doubts, because she lacks critical information, she is unable to build a shelter of peace and affection for herself, and instead erects a defense against love, the safeguards of which are

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<sup>15</sup> I also find it significant that Marlow consistently describes Jewel as a petulant child; in doing so, he can falsely assume that she lacks the maturity and sophistication needed to

fear and incertitude. Ironically, Jewel loves even as she builds a barrier against love. "Why couldn't she believe?" Because experience teaches her to harden her heart even as her love for Jim demands vulnerability. Like Strether (given the loss of his wife and son), experience has taught Jewel to anticipate pain.

Although she does not know the secret Jim conceals, she feels its existence and anticipates its power:

You all remember something! You all go back to it. What is it? You tell me! What is this thing? Is it alive?—is it dead? I hate it. It is cruel. Has it got a face and a voice—this calamity? Will he see it—will he hear it? In his sleep perhaps when he cannot see me—and then arise and go (187).

How can she contend with or comprehend this dream, this enigma of which she has no knowledge, over which she has no control? The men (*"you all remember," "you all go back;"* my italics) presume that ignorance will protect her. Marlow claims that he would have "given anything for the power to soothe her frail soul," and I believe he is sincere, yet he is perpetuating a cycle in which women are forbidden access to the masculine realm of knowledge, and as a result must suffer preventable suffering and loss. Jewel's lack of information does not protect her, but instead establishes a barrier of fear and insecurity between herself and Jim, and ultimately herself and her entire community. Marlow, and perhaps Jim, worry that access to the *Patna* secret will wound her "fragile soul," but Jewel desperately needs to be vulnerable, because vulnerability will dismantle the defenses and safeguards she has

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receive and comprehend the secret of Jim's past and his subsequent efforts to recover his



carefully erected around herself. She does not need protection, she needs and deserves the honesty that will allow her to freely act and feel.

In Shakespeare's Othello, Othello narrates to Desdemona "the story of [his] life / From year to year, the battle, sieges, fortune / That [he had] passed... / from [his] boyish days" (I.iii.128-131), and "with a greedy ear" she did "devour up [his] discourse" (I.iii.148-149). Othello acknowledges, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (I.iii.166-167). Intimate and particular knowledge of Othello's history not only inspires Desdemona's love, but also her pity. It is precisely this kind of compassionate empathy that is missing from Jim and Jewel's relationship because, unlike Othello, Jim withholds from Jewel the story of his life and the dangers he had passed. Unlike many of Conrad's women, among them Kurtz's Intended, who are content in their ignorance and resistant of dark information, Jewel demands Jim's story, a story she knows will foster a deeper understanding of the man she wants to love completely, but Jim denies her this opportunity. Aware in the end that Desdemona was the only person who knew him in his entirety and loved him entirely, Othello dies with the excruciating knowledge of what he has lost; Jim is tragically unencumbered by such knowledge. The presence of another person who knows and pities, understands and loves, that contributes to Othello's demise could have saved Jim from his.

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masculine honor.

Jewel does bear some responsibility for her ignorance in that rather than probe Jim or Marlow and express receptivity, she assumes they are lying, and indicts them instead of questioning them further. She is so paranoid of unfaithfulness, given her history, that she is quicker to disbelieve than to believe. This unshakable expectation of betrayal is a form of self-protection, but it also compels Jewel perversely to act against her own best interests: even had Jim or Marlow wanted to penetrate her defenses, her predisposition to disbelief makes such an endeavor inordinately difficult. In these ways, Jewel collaborates with Jim and Marlow to ensure her abandonment. Storytelling is the shared responsibility of the teller and the receiver.

In his chapter on Lord Jim in his book On Moral Personhood, Richard Eldridge argues that Jim's decision to die is actually a sign of his commitment to and respect for Jewel and for their relationship. Eldridge writes: "Though Jewel, afraid of losing Jim, may not see the situation so sharply, it is nonetheless true in large measure that for Jim to run would be to reject or deny the person he has been with her. And this in turn would also be to reject her, in failing to take seriously her commitment to that person" (96). I concur that to run would be an evasive and cowardly act inconsistent with the man Jewel has come to love, but I believe Eldridge glosses over the fact that Jewel "may not see the situation so sharply." If Jim truly respected Jewel and, as Eldridge argues, her personhood, he would have provided her with the truth that would allow her to act and choose unencumbered by doubts and falsehoods. By keeping the secret, Jim operates on a higher level of knowledge and

awareness than Jewel does, and thus he tips the scale of their relationship in his favor. Thus Jim is rejecting Jewel by preserving the ignorance that torments and ultimately destroys her. Moreover, failing to take seriously their commitment to each other is precisely what Jim does. He acknowledges that they share a “trust,” and that he has been “made to understand every day that [his] existence is necessary – you see, absolutely necessary – to another person” (181). This admission makes it quite clear that Jim is eminently aware of Jewel’s fundamental reliance upon him – a reliance he cultivates – and he nevertheless betrays his commitment to her, a betrayal which, given the intensity of their mutual dependence, will ensure her tragedy.

It is paradoxical that in trying to regain his integrity and compensate for his past unethical choices, Jim makes another egregious choice. His last act is one of massive egoism, and Jewel verbalizes it when she tells Marlow, “You always leave us – for your own ends” (206). Jewel recognizes that Jim’s quest – that male quests in general – always entail some form of ego-driven flight, often from women. One of the reasons women die weeping, in Jewel’s experience, is because they understand themselves to be toxic, or even fatal influences from which men must run in order to retain their wholeness, to be faithful to their masculine code of honor. Jewel urges Jim to do the truly heroic thing, “to fight,” and to this Marlow responds, “there was nothing to fight for,” and Jim claims, “I have no life [to fight for]” (242). Eldridge interprets Marlow’s and Jim’s reactions more literally than I do: he contends that they are right, that Jim has no just cause to fight (95). In urging Jim to

fight, I believe Jewel's meaning is deeper than that she wants him literally to battle Doramin and the Patusan people: she wants him to fight his urge to surrender to death, to fight – not necessarily with weapons – to restore his standing in the community, to fight for her. Jewel may not know the secret of Jim's (of man's) soul, but she understands the essential, ethical truths that elude those who seek "shadowy ideal[s] of conduct" (246).

Marlow suggests that women are somehow inherently capable of bearing pain and grief in a way that men cannot, and that subsequently Jewel will suffer but will also survive (perhaps as Maria will "get over the jilting"): "Women find their inspiration in the stress of moments that for us are merely awful, absurd, or futile" (188). He implies that men escape whereas women endure, that a man's value lies in grand action whereas a woman's value lies in her capacity to survive the cruel world from which she is allowed no escape, nor any heroic opportunity. Marlow insists that "our common fate fastens upon the woman with a peculiar cruelty," and he might have added "an *unavoidable* peculiar cruelty" (165). For not only is Jewel unable to save Jim due to her lack of knowledge, she is also denied the opportunity to avert her own agony and to save herself. Perhaps if Jewel had been privy to the truth and had accepted it, she would have willingly died with him, preserving their bond in mutual sacrifice; she would at the very least understand the course of events. As it is, she laments, "It would have been easy to die with him," thus realizing his death for what it really is – an "easy" evasion, an avoidance of responsibility (206). The point really is not what Jewel might

or should have done, but that Jim denied her the opportunity to choose and to honestly grieve.

Jewel's fate is sealed by words Jim never utters, and it is important to appreciate the magnitude of her suffering, for it is the consequence of Jim's choice. In discussing the novel within the context of a Romantic tragedy, Najder admits that tremendous grief and political chaos follow on the heels of Jim's death, but suggests that we interpret it "within the framework of the traditions of literature concerned with chivalric ethos: there, after the hero's death follow usual scenes of grief and mourning" (93). By writing off grief and mourning as mere literary conventions, and by considering the mourners as an indeterminate general group, I believe Najder severely underestimates the impact on Jewel: she is not merely grieving, but irreparably damaged, even destroyed. Jim's death "turn[s] her passion to stone," robs her of her capacity for love and forgiveness, and transforms her into a lifeless wanderer Marlow barely recognizes. Jewel understands Jim as making a choice between her and an ugly death, and he makes this choice directly in the face of her pleas and pain: "He could see my face, hear my voice, hear my grief.... He went away from me as if I had been worse than death. He fled as if driven by some accursed thing he had heard or seen in his sleep..." (207). Jim "remains for her who loved him best a cruel and insoluble mystery" (233). For the rest of her life she will live under the apprehensions that Jim deliberately chose a nightmarish, "accursed thing" over her, and that women are destined to die weeping because of the inevitable infidelity of men.

Marlow is equivocal about Jewel's fate, at first pitying "the living woman" Jim deserts to "celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (246). It is significant that Marlow invokes wedding imagery here and in referring to Jim's heroic opportunity as an "Eastern bride:" he is emphasizing that Jim weds death rather than Jewel. Yet, even as he finds Jim's act unforgivable, he significantly qualifies it, musing: "And yet is not mankind itself, pushing on its blind way, driven by a dream of its greatness and its power upon the dark paths of excessive cruelty and devotion?" (207). His question implies that Jim pursues a dream all men have, but few have the courage to pursue, and that Jim does so blindly, unable to see beyond his dream to its alternatives and consequences. Furthermore, Marlow dismisses Jewel's fate as rather inconsequential, or at least a secondary concern: "[Jim] is gone, inscrutable at heart, and the poor girl is leading a sort of soundless, inert life in Stein's house" (246). Jim warrants fame and an enduring heroic legend that Marlow will undoubtedly narrate again and again, but Jewel warrants only a passing, rather flippant reference to her tragedy; Marlow does not even grant her the dignity of her name, infantilizing her again as a "poor girl." The narrative ends with the image of Stein's loss and world-weariness, and Jewel is once again forgotten, lost in the mysterious mist of man's secret yearnings.

When telling the tale of Jim and Jewel, Marlow incessantly reminds us that "this is a love story." I would suggest that this tale hardly qualifies as a conventional love story given that in the end personal ambition trumps love,

and our ostensible “lovers” both abdicate love forever. More appropriately, this is a ghost story haunted by the specter of the once promising and vibrant Jewel. The tale fails to qualify as a love story, and Jim fails to reconstitute himself as a tragic hero. Like Othello, he is “the base Indian [whose hand] threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe” (V.ii.343-344) (Jim squanders not his pearl, but “his jewel”), but unlike Othello, Jim never achieves the moment of epiphany in which he can see beyond his delusions to the beloved woman and opportunity he has neglected; while Othello dies repentant and enlightened, Jim dies with “a proud and unflinching glance,” smug in his own “dreadful rightness.”

My point of contention is not that Strether and Jim refuse to reciprocate love, or merely that they hurt the women who love them, or that they privilege an ethical principle over a romantic relationship. Instead, it is that they fashion their personal morality to accommodate their quests for righteousness and the appearance of nobility, and in order to justify their evasions of life and ethical responsibility. Consequently, the casualties are not only Maria and Jewel, but Strether and Jim as well: Jim quite literally destroys himself while Strether obliterates what we can presume is his last chance to recoup his lost youth and liberate himself from his grey and shadowy solitude. Strether temporarily and wonderfully demonstrates both the capacity and desire to rejoin the land of the living, but in the end he readopts Woollett’s brand of cold, moral absolutism which he had shirked when it suited him (when he wanted to immerse himself in the European landscape)

and then resumes when convenient (when he needs an excuse to flee life's and love's complexity and unpleasantness). Jim, on the other hand, never loses sight of his self-destructive dream, which makes his relationship with and betrayal of Jewel all the more ethically egregious.

To return to my earlier point that these novels deconstruct the "angel in the house"/man in the world dichotomy, I submit that Strether and Jim are profoundly unnerved by the mutable boundary between the public and the private. For them, the domestic shelter offered by women is in some ways just as dangerous as the public world, for there they are required to be vulnerable, to love, and to fully live. On the other hand, neither hero exhibits mastery or competence in the public sphere: Strether feels he has failed his ambassadorial mission, and Jim feels he failed his long-awaited test of manhood when he abandoned the *Patna*. Unable or unwilling to find a place in a world where the domestic and the public, the feminine and the masculine, are not comfortably distinct, our heroes choose death – Jim literally so, and Strether by choosing the unlived life.

If Strether's and Jim's wariness, fear, and distrust constitute a distinctly Modern response to love, Jewel and Maria represent a more traditionally mid-Victorian belief in love's redemptive power (see Chapters 5 and 6). If Maria resembles a Modern heroine rather than a Victorian heroine (and I think she does – she is remarkably independent and relatively unencumbered by societal and patriarchal conventions), her faith in love's power of improvement, power to "recall to life" makes her seem like an escapee from a Dickens



or Eliot novel. Jewel, while also a Victorianesque proponent of love's redemptive capacity, is ironically proof of the "destructive element" that is often a component of passion and desire; she is poised between a Victorian and Modern heroine, then, in that she proves that love is both a promising and a perilous proposition. Jewel is spared nothing – her pain, devastation and loss is absolute and irrevocable. We leave her a nameless, loveless, lifeless wanderer, acquainted only with grief, destined to be another woman who dies weeping. Although both Marlow's and the omniscient narrator's judgment of Jim is equivocal, both leave open the possibility that Jim does indeed redeem himself and fulfill his lifelong dream. No such redemptive possibility exists for Jewel, possibly and only because she is a woman. According to the narrative, a woman's source of value is also her source of destruction: her strength lies not in what she can do, but in what she can endure, as "fate fastens upon the women with a peculiar cruelty" (165). This capacity to bear suffering does not apply, however, to Jim's secret, which Jewel is deemed unable to comprehend or survive; of course not having the secret is precisely what precludes her survival in the end. In the novel, then, to be a woman is to be assured of great and inescapable anguish, whereas to be a man is to be assured of the opportunity to flee or transcend suffering.

## CHAPTER IV

### "GREAT ART" AT "VULGAR" COST: DEADLY AESTHETICISM AND ITS RECUPERATION IN HENRY JAMES'S THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

That Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady is a novel deeply steeped in aestheticism is hardly arguable: the text is both a portrait and examination of the aesthetic lifestyle, is populated by aesthetes, and is itself a piece of art. It has been suggested, variously, that James uses his novel to satirize, celebrate, or skewer the late Victorian aesthetic movement, and while such arguments are persuasive, each alone is too simplistic, too stark a conclusion. A closer examination reveals two distinct brands of aestheticism coursing through The Portrait of a Lady, one of which, practiced by Isabel Archer, affirms life and love, while the other, exercised by her husband Gilbert Osmond, represents an evasion of and even stifling of life.

Isabel Archer begins the novel as an admirable if amateur Paterian aesthete, who responds to art and to life thrillingly and imaginatively. It is precisely this Paterian desire to be moved deeply by beauty that contributes to her objectification and collection by Gilbert Osmond. It is he, the man she marries for his promise of a life overflowing with lustrous and soul-stirring beauty, who ironically seeks to transform her into a lovely and untouchable object enclosed in a glass case. He attempts to control the company she keeps, determine her environment, and snuff out her desperately sought

independence. In his book on James, Professions of Taste, Jonathan Freedman asserts that Osmond embodies all of the caustic criticisms launched on aesthetes by late 19<sup>th</sup>-century satirists: he is indolent, “languid, weary, enervated, bored; he prefers inaction to action” (147). I read Osmond as much more than a dastardly satiric caricature. Throughout the novel, Osmond’s depraved, life-stifling brand of aestheticism requires that he treat people, from his wife to his daughter to his companions, as objets d’art, that he collect them rather than love them, that he keep them at arm’s length as fascinating specimens rather than regard them as fellow human beings. Indeed, it is his deeply unethical aesthetic that not only denies the humanity of those around him, but profoundly diminishes his own humanity and soul as well.

That Isabel escapes Osmond’s lethal grasp but nonetheless returns to her marriage for the sake of Pansy are not particularly original arguments, and are only parts of my reading of the novel. As I mentioned above, Isabel embodies certain Paterian characteristics (an abiding attraction to beautiful things, a vibrant imagination) that render her vulnerable to Osmond, but eventually she achieves a higher set of Paterian ideals (sympathy, the capacity to feel deeply) that facilitate her redemption at the end of the story. Freedman argues that during her midnight reverie in chapter 42, Isabel experiences a recuperative “aestheticizing vision,” – heightened, perfect perception – which distinguishes her aestheticism from Osmond’s and enables her to “step beyond the narrative frame within which she is enclosed, to move out of ‘The

Portrait of a Lady'" (162-166). I would continue Freedman's argument by suggesting that the transcendent aesthetic consciousness Isabel achieves not only frees her from Osmond's trappings, but also compels her rebirth and will enable the redemption of Osmond's other possessions, particularly Serena Merle and Pansy. The aesthetic choice James ultimately offers us is between Isabel's redemptive, life-affirming aesthetic consciousness and Osmond's baser, deeply destructive aestheticism; the former entails a life in which love is possible, while the latter entails a life deferred to art.

Isabel arrives in Europe from America absolutely driven by her desire for autonomy, open paths, and free choice, and above all, the venues in which to satisfy her thirst for beauty and experience: it was "her determination to see, to try, to know;" "the immense curiosity about life" she harbored compelled her desire to "feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world" (54; 41). As to her view of marriage, "she held that a woman ought to be able to live to herself, in the absence of exceptional flimsiness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex" (55). Initially, Osmond seems to fulfill these requirements in that he offers opportunity without encumbrance, guidance without impediment. Put simply, he cannot constitute a threat because what he constitutes most is nothingness. Madame Merle refers to him as having "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future no anything" (169). Mrs. Touchett attests that "he has no money; he has no name; he has no importance" (277).

Even Isabel herself claims that she is "marrying a perfect nonentity,"<sup>16</sup> and Gilbert's proposal to her includes the admission, "I offer nothing," which in most cases would hardly be a persuasive point. That Osmond can only be defined in terms of insignificance comforts rather than dissuades Isabel. When Mrs. Touchett reiterates, "There's nothing of him," Isabel poignantly replies, "Then he can't hurt me" (277).

When compared to Osmond, Caspar Goodwood does constitute a threat of sorts to Isabel's goals of a beautiful aesthetic life and complete independence; whereas Osmond is defined by absence, Goodwood is very much defined by his presence, a presence Isabel more often than not resents. An indefatigable suitor, Goodwood's persistence despite Isabel's consistent rebuffs, and his strong, forceful manner are contrary to Isabel's desire to marry "a perfect nonentity;" given that Isabel likes Osmond for being "representative of the human race" (242), Goodwood's Americanness also works against him. The very resolve and directness that ostensibly would make Goodwood a desirable love interest repel Isabel, who feels most in control in the presence of Osmond's vacuity.

Osmond's one defining characteristic is the one that both will initially attract Isabel and eventually suffocate her. As often as Osmond is identified by his poverties he is recognized for his exquisite taste and artistic sensibilities. Variouslly depicted as "the incarnation of taste," as "artistic through and through," and as principally "fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and

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<sup>16</sup> Isabel makes this claim to rebuff the persistent suitor Goodwood, so her seriousness is

the exquisite," he appears not just willing to permit Isabel her liberty, but also able to provide her immersion in and even guidance through the gardens of life (286; 207; 253). It is precisely Osmond's existence as "nothing" except the embodiment of aesthetic discrimination and appreciation that both necessitates his collection of Isabel and facilitates her ensnarement. He envisions her as the star piece of his artistic collection, someone to reflect well upon him, making him more beautiful; Isabel, touched by the "contagion" of aestheticism, gravitates to Osmond's promise of a golden life resembling "a long summer afternoon" gilded by a "golden haze" and "Italian colouring" (291). Freedman does characterize aestheticism as a pervasive, contaminating influence: "in this novel aestheticism is understood as being an endemic—indeed epidemic—contagion, ultimately infecting even the author himself" (153). Freedman's further contention that James ultimately repudiates this Osmondian plague is a point I will return to later.

According to Freedman, Osmond's appeal to Isabel is partly because "she shares a good many of the more problematic qualities of Osmond's aestheticism, albeit in a more benign shape, and it is precisely these qualities that cause her to fall under his control" (155). As he also notes, James invokes language from Pater's The Renaissance, depicting his heroine as possessing a "delicate... flame like spirit" and a "quickenened consciousness" (155). I would further posit that Isabel displays many of the intrinsic qualities of Pater's ideal aesthete. In the "Preface" to The Renaissance, Pater claims, "it is not

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questionable, but her language is significant nonetheless.

that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (546-547). This kind of disposition is nowhere more evident than in Isabel's response to St. Peter's:

I may not attempt to report in fullness our young woman's response to the deep appeal of Rome, to analyse her feelings as she trod the pavement of the Forum, or to number her pulsations as she crossed the threshold of Saint Peter's.... These things strongly moved her, but moved her all inwardly.... Her consciousness was so mixed that she scarcely knew where the different parts of it would lead her, and she went about in a repressed ecstasy of contemplation, seeing often in things a great deal more than was there, and yet not seeing many of the items enumerated in her Murray. (240)

Clearly, Isabel gauges aesthetic value not by what the Murray recommends, not by what is conventionally pleasurable, but instead by her visceral response to and depth of engagement with each art object. She readily acknowledges her status as an unrefined, amateur aesthete, admitting she is anxious about revealing her "possible grossness of perception," and this too likens her to a Paterian aesthete. According to Pater and to Sainte-Beauvre whom he quotes, the goal of aesthetes is to "confine themselves by these [perceptions], as sensitive amateurs do" (Pater 546). As beautiful and, as Freedman notes, benign as Isabel's subjective, rapturous perception is, it has dark implications as well. Just as "she scarcely knew where the different parts of [her mixed consciousness] would lead her" at St. Peter's, she similarly wanders into Osmond's museum, where there too she will "[see] often in things a great deal more than [is] there."

Having married a man for his “nothingness” because that emptiness presumably makes him safe and nonthreatening, Isabel is then confronted with his moral and spiritual poverty. She responds by filling in his blanks and gaps, and imaginatively coloring his dreary grayness: “It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours” (288). The Osmond Isabel married is an “invention” of her imagination. To love someone in spite of his weaknesses, or for his idiosyncrasies can be signs of love’s authenticity, but Isabel loves Osmond for his “poverties,” for what is not even there; moreover, not even his poverties are genuine – they are “dressed out as honours,” or in other words, disguised as virtues. When, early on, Osmond describes his fastidious lifestyle to Isabel, it “would have been a rather dry account of Mr. Osmond’s career if Isabel had fully believed it; but her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting” (223). This is one of Isabel’s more tragic errors of perception. She is no longer merely embellishing Osmond’s character, but supplying him with his very humanity, convinced all the while that it is not lacking in the first place. Oblivious, perhaps willfully so, to her husband’s profound deficiencies, she glosses over them with her compensatory imagination, ignoring the one truth that could save her – that her husband harbors monstrous potential. Further, in crafting this image of Osmond in her mind and in beautifying him for her own ends (to



maintain a false sense of safety and control), Isabel is treating Osmond as he will soon treat her – as an aesthetic object.

Because he is unlike any person she has ever known, Isabel is unable to categorize her husband, and so in the absence of a discernible personality or particular moral fiber, she chooses to classify him as a rare and exceptional “find:” “He resembled no one she had ever seen; most of the people she knew might be divided into groups of half a dozen specimens.... Her mind contained no class offering a natural place for Mr. Osmond—he was a specimen apart” (219-220). Consequently, while Isabel found her husband’s pictures, medallions and his tapestries “interesting,” she “felt the owner much more so” (219). Freedman notes of these passages: “What Isabel fails to realize is that Gilbert’s ambiguousness is a result of his limitations, not a sign of subtlety or fineness of his character” (156). Rather than question how or why her husband resembles no other species of humankind, Isabel jumps to the conclusion that his difference constitutes superiority. That Osmond is even more fascinating, rare and exceptional than even his art collection arouses Isabel’s aesthetic sensibilities: Osmond is her portrait of a gentleman.

I would argue that Isabel does not exhibit willful blindness as much as selective vision, due in part to her tremendous desire to bask in the luminosity of beautiful things. When becoming acquainted with Osmond and his milieu, “Isabel found him interesting” because “she liked so to think of him” (232), not because he necessarily deserves such admiration. The narrative continues: “She had carried away an image from her visit to his hill-top

which her subsequent knowledge of him did nothing to efface and which put on for her a particular harmony with other supposed and divined things..." (232). Unconcerned with truth (or "knowledge"), Isabel defers to her impressions and other notions she presumes or conjectures; her chief priority is to preserve "a particular harmony," or at least the illusion of it. Subsequently, there are places Isabel chooses not to look, places she intuitively knows will shatter the flawless beauty of her collected impressions: "she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners" (171). She can claim, "I don't see horrors anywhere.... Everything seems to me beautiful and precious," because she doesn't see everything; she restricts her vision to bright spots and refuses to peer beyond facades. Like one of James's other creations, Lambert Strether, Isabel exercises selective perception in order to insulate herself against the unpleasant truths that might offend her delicate sensibility. Her impression of her surroundings is in direct contrast to what we know of Osmond's mausoleum-like dwelling that "was cold even in the month of May": "There was something grave and strong in the place; it looked somehow as if, once you were in, you would need an act of energy to get out" (214; 213). As others have noted, Osmond's house represents masculine control<sup>17</sup>, but Isabel regrettably mistakes it for the site of beauty and freedom.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Sarah B. Daugherty's chapter "James and the ethics of control: aspiring architects and their floating creatures" in *Enacting History in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Freedman posits that Isabel's "unwitting Osmondian tendency to see Osmond as he sees himself – as a rare and fine work of art – leads to her equally unwitting Osmondian attempt to collect Osmond" (157). This unconscious quest fails, however, for in "seeking to collect a collector, she finds herself collected" (157). Osmond has no interest in marrying an artist; he is pursuing a work of art. Moreover, she will be the "star of his collection" not for her particular beauty and value, but because she will absorb his ideas, his imagination, and reflect them to the world more beautifully than he could himself. Her rejection of Lord Warburton makes her a particularly valuable commodity: "[Osmond] perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand" (253). Once acquired, Osmond undertakes to supplant Isabel's theories and tastes with his own, openly stating that she has "too many ideas" that "must be sacrificed," and that he wishes her to "make a new collection" of intimates, given that hers are insufficiently sophisticated. This process of refinement is first a source of entertainment for Osmond; he imagines that her intelligence would be "a silver plate... that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of saved dessert" (290). Once Osmond improves, or more accurately, replaces Isabel's imagination with his own, conversation with her will be like conversation with himself, save that she will articulate his philosophies more prettily than he.

The renovated Isabel will not just be an object for Osmond's private enjoyment, but for public consumption as well. Just as art reflects its collector's tastes and sensibility, so will Isabel reflect Osmond's, and in doing so she will fulfill the "dream of his youth" that he "have something or other to show for his 'parts'": "His 'style' was what the girl had discovered with a little help; and now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. She would do the thing *for* him, and he would not have waited in vain" (254-255). Like Lambert Strether, who appropriates Chad's youth having not the energy or courage to live for himself, Osmond will use Isabel to earn the world's respect and attention, having not the ability to earn it himself. As Ralph later notes, the "free, keen girl had become quite another person," a person whose very self has been shelved in some dusty corner of her psyche; "she represented Gilbert Osmond" (324). Isabel even comes to physically and emotionally resemble a portrait moreso than a living, breathing woman: "she wore a mask [that] completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said – it was a representation, it was even an advertisement" (323).

Osmond has already similarly transformed life into art with the person of Madame Merle, the woman who comes to represent Isabel's fate should Isabel not free herself from Osmond's aesthetic grasp. Just as looking into Isabel's face is like gazing at a mask, watching the aptly named Serena move was like "rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move" (449). In drawing

Serena Merle, James even invokes the language Pater uses in his famous analysis of the Mona Lisa. Pater likens da Vinci's masterpiece to a "vampire" as well as a beauty touched by sufferings of centuries past (550). Similarly, Serena admits that she is "old and faded," and when comparing herself to a piece of pottery, she describes her ideal environment as a vampire might describe a coffin: "I try to remain in the cupboard—the quiet, dusky cupboard... as much as I can. But when I've come out and into a strong light—then my dear, I'm a horror!" (168; 166). Pater goes on to imagine the Mona Lisa as a beauty "into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the worlds have etched and moulded there..." (550). Serena similarly claims a relationship to antiquity and an acquaintance with historical suffering: "I speak as if I were a hundred years old, you say? Well, I am, if you please; I was born before the French Revolution. Ah, my dear, *je viens de loin*; I belong to the old, old world" (168). Yet for all of her vampiric, otherworldly qualities, Serena Merle, like the Mona Lisa, possesses a beautiful and mystic semblance, and a mysteriously alluring quality:

The other rooms meanwhile had become conscious of the arrival of Madame Merle, who, wherever she went, produced an impression when she entered. How she did it the most attentive spectator could not have told you, for she neither spoke loud, nor laughed profusely, nor moved rapidly, nor dressed with splendour, nor appealed in any appreciable manner to the audience. Large, fair, smiling, serene, there was something in her very tranquility that diffused itself, and when people looked round it was because of a sudden quiet. (307)

Such is the paradox of Osmond's "artistry": he produces exquisite but soulless masterpieces; he succeeds as an artist and fails as a human being; or as Ralph puts it, his "motive was as vulgar as the art was great" (324).

Jonathan Freedman persuasively argues that ultimately Isabel experiences a recuperative form of aestheticism that enables her to transcend the trappings Osmond has constructed around her. This occurs on two occasions, during her midnight reverie in Chapter 42 and her ride on the Campagna:

As her aestheticizing vision moves beyond the reifying aestheticism so thoroughly implicated in Osmondism, it progresses to a higher form of aestheticism – if 'aesthetic' is understood as informed by the original sense of *aesthesis*, as a heightening or perfection of the act of perception (162-163).

Freedman likens James to Pater in that both privilege occasions when "a quickened, multiplied consciousness" powerfully emerges: "Pater's aesthete and James's heroine both achieve a perfect moment of intense vision which, for their authors, is the highest – perhaps the only – consummation possible in a world shadowed over by death and human failure" (163). Freedman argues that "James is like Osmond in enmeshing Isabel in a plot whose goal is to aestheticize her," but by ultimately spoiling Osmond's attempt to transform Isabel into a petrified portrait of a lady, James acts as a non-Osmondian author and opens up the plot, refusing comic or tragic closure (165). That he enables "Isabel to step beyond the narrative frame within which she is enclosed, to move out of the 'Portrait of a Lady'" is James's "most deeply treasured, and most arduously won, triumph" (165-166).

I am thoroughly convinced by Freedman's argument, and compelled to examine questions Freedman does not address, specifically: What begets Isabel's aesthesis, and what are the particular ramifications for not only Isabel, but for the other women in Osmond's collection? In answer to the former, I would suggest that Ralph's death and his deep love for her are the principle stimulants in Isabel's aesthetic transformation; in response to the latter question, I contend that Isabel's new form of aestheticism incorporates both profound empathy and profound suffering, and that Isabel recuperates not only herself, but to varying degrees Pansy and Madame Merle as well. Finally, while Freedman concentrates on James's "triumph" and authorial repudiation of Osmond's aesthetic philosophy, my focus is how and why Isabel revises the aesthetic ideals with which she begins the novel – ideals that for much of the narrative necessitate her unfeeling blindness and make possible Osmond's entrapment of her.

As I argued earlier, Isabel is complicit in her aestheticization in that she chooses to imaginatively supply her husband with grace and wit he does not possess, and she ignores the darker parts of his soul just as she ignores the darker corners of the house. But in the darkness is where the truth resides, and so it is appropriate that it is throughout the night, in the lightlessness and coldness of her chambers that Isabel confronts the fact that her life is not an "infinite vista," but instead "a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end" (349). Her much discussed "dark night of the soul" in Chapter 42 follows Osmond's request that she abuse her influence over her former suitor, Lord

Warburton, and convince him to marry Pansy; Osmond “[sets] a great price on [his] daughter,” a price that Warburton and not Rosier, the man Pansy loves, can afford. In contemplating how to respond to Osmond’s odious request, she is forced to confront the fact that not only is her husband willing to sell his daughter to the highest bidder, but that he expects her complicity in the exchange. Suddenly a human life hangs in the balance, a fact Isabel cannot disregard or apply a pretty gloss to.

In Chapter 42 James replaces the images of blindness (or selective vision) and naivete previously associated with Isabel with images of revelation and clear-sightedness. Isabel is devastated by the the growing awareness that for years she has been duped: “she had been immensely under [his] charm,” and “the supreme conviction” that “he was better than anyone else... had filled her life for months” (350-351). While Osmond’s malevolent intent was masked by his gilded surface – “his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers” – Isabel acknowledges her responsibility in what she now sees as her entrapment (353). She had glided through life on its most superficial plane, “she had imagined a world of things that had no substance,” refusing even to hear the truth when it was plainly articulated: “He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them. He had told her that already, before their marriage; but then she had not noticed it; it had come back to her only afterwards” (350; 352). Now able to see the whole of her husband (before “she had seen only half his nature”), she no longer labors under the illusion that her marriage is a union or



partnership: rather, “a gulf had opened between them over which they looked at each other with eyes that were on either side of a declaration of deception suffered” (349). Both parties keenly feel that the other party has violated an implicit contract: Gilbert feels betrayed because Isabel suddenly refuses to be a malleable representation of himself; Isabel feels deceived because Gilbert reveals himself to be the very antithesis of the beautiful aesthete she imagined. Indeed, “there was more in the bond than she had meant to put her name to;” she hadn’t known that in marrying Osmond she was wagering her soul.

Simply achieving this level of intense and heightened awareness brings Isabel in direct confrontation with the truth, but the truth alone will not save her. In fact, at times “she envied Ralph his dying... the idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank” (457). Isabel equivocates between hope and despair, possibility and grief well after her midnight epiphany and it is Ralph who eventually inspires Isabel’s commitment to new life. This claim is quite contrary to Freedman’s reading of Ralph. Arguing that Ralph is contaminated by Osmond’s aesthetic contagion, Freedman maintains: “Despite his own desire to do otherwise, Ralph is forced by the very nature of his perception to reify and then aestheticize Isabel, to treat her with the detached but appreciative vision of the discerning connoisseur” (154). Ralph admits that he does “content [himself] with watching [Isabel] – with deepest interest,” but his literal and emotional investment in Isabel, along with the love and encouragement he offers her, prevent him from being

the distant, self-interested aesthete that Osmond is. For Isabel, Ralph is “a lamp in the darkness” whereas Osmond “almost malignantly... put out the lights one by one” (349). Osmond himself furthers this metaphor, announcing to Isabel: “We’re as united, you know, as the candlestick and the snuffers” (413). Osmond seeks to extinguish the “flame-like” Isabel while Ralph, on the contrary, wishes to “put wind in her sails” (159). Furthermore, Freedman posits that Osmondian aestheticism entails an inviolable distinction between the self (the aesthete) and the other (the object, the observed). This boundary between Ralph and Isabel is significantly blurred. Ralph has “been everything” to Isabel, and her vibrancy enhances his otherwise sickly existence; even in death, as I shall argue, their lives are inextricably intertwined as Isabel’s and Osmond’s never have and never can be. Isabel’s new aestheticism entails the connection between self and other, which is a radical departure from Osmond’s and from the aestheticism with which she begins the novel.

As I stated before, Isabel acquires a profound understanding of what her life has become, but until her last visit with Ralph, she lacks a reason to live, a sense of purpose. We already know that Ralph distinguishes himself by being the one person who “made her feel the good of the world; he made her feel what might have been,” and at no point in her life is she in need of this gift of hope more than when she returns to England in direct defiance of her husband. The following exchange takes place between Henrietta

Stackpole and Isabel and concerns Isabel's promise to Pansy that she will come back after seeing her dying cousin.

"Well," said Miss Stackpole at last. "I've only one criticism to make. I don't see why you promised little Miss Osmond to go back."  
 "I'm not sure I myself see now," Isabel replied. "But I did then."  
 "If you've forgotten your reason perhaps you won't return."  
 Isabel waited a moment. "Perhaps I shall find another." (461)

Although many readers attribute Isabel's return to Osmond solely to her pledge to Pansy, that in and of itself is not enough. It is just this "other reason" Isabel needs that Ralph supplies, for it is Ralph who recalls Isabel to life and convinces her of the possibility of love.

Facing his own mortality, Ralph is convinced his only purpose is to confer the wondrousness of life to others, and to make those he leaves behind fully aware of their vitality and place in the world. He tells Isabel: "There's nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die. That's the sensation of life – the sense that we remain. I've had it – even I. But now I'm of no use but to give it to others" (469). This is a critical lesson for Isabel to absorb, particularly since only hours before seeing Ralph she was intoxicated by the luxurious escape death seemingly offers. Ralph does not suggest that life in and of itself is better than death, but that "life is better; for in life there's love" (470). What may seem a tidy truism to others is a revelation to Isabel, who from her early years as an orphan to her rather disappointing courting years to her loveless, bloodless marriage has never felt that abiding love is a reality for her. Ralph doesn't just promise her that love is an abstract possibility in life, he persuades her that she is lovable, because he loves her: "And

remember this... that if you've been hated you've also been loved. Ah but, Isabel – *adored!*" (471). To his dying words she cries, "Oh my brother!" "with a movement of still deeper prostration" (471). Articulating the immutable bond she and Ralph share, Isabel bows in acceptance of the divine knowledge her cousin has imparted. Just as Isabel declares, Ralph has been her "everything" – he has been the one other soul that calls hers to love.

The scene is more than just a dying man's maudlin final words, words that will pass away as finally and completely as he does. When Isabel expresses utter angst at losing Ralph, and is sure she cannot go on without him, Ralph promises to remain an indelible part of Isabel's life: "You won't lose me – you'll keep me. Keep me in your heart; I shall be nearer to you than I've ever been" (469-470). He goes on to promise her that although she "feels very old," he knows that "[she'll] grow very young again" (471). Ralph confers on Isabel not just the wisdom of a man facing death, but also the youth, the love, and the possibilities that his weak physical condition never permitted him to enjoy. After Ralph's death, his spectral self appears to Isabel, "summoning" her to the responsibility of the legacy of life and love he has passed on to her:

...she started from her pillow as abruptly as if she had received a summons. It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there—a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room. She started a moment; she saw his white face—his kind eyes.... *She was not afraid; she was only sure* (472; italics mine).

Accustomed to shrinking from the "dark corners" of her imagined gilded life, and then from the bleakness of her fully realized life, Isabel now confronts her future with unprecedented determination.

Isabel's new aesthetic perception, which gradually unfolds after Chapter 42 and is fully realized upon Ralph's death, relies on not just the possibility of love, but also the necessary human experiences of empathy and suffering. (Osmond's aesthetic perspective excludes love, empathy and suffering since all demand a relationship between the self and other.) Early in the novel, Isabel declares that the "cup of experience" is a "poisoned drink," and that she only "want[s] to see for [herself]," to which Ralph rightly retorts, "You want to see, but not to feel" (132). Isabel wishes to traverse through the world of experience while retaining her innocence and avoiding contamination, or "poisoning"; therefore, "she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners" (171). In her mind, "the love of knowledge" paradoxically coexisted with "the finest capacity for ignorance" (171). Of course it is the clinging to ignorance that imprisons Isabel, and only knowledge and its consequences – which are not only lucidity but suffering – will release her.

The following is the description of Isabel's solitary afternoon drive through the Roman ruins.

... in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome; it interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people suffered. (423)

Isabel not only submits herself to suffering, she also infuses her new aesthetic sensibility with the appreciation and acceptance of suffering. Rather than view the scene with the detached, cold appreciation of an Osmondian aesthete, Isabel imbues the landscape with human emotion, so that the scene reflects her own sadness and lonesomeness. It is an act of catharsis: she “rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries” and “dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places;” at times her relief is so soothing that “she could almost smile.” Whereas Osmond’s aesthetic vision is based on the aloof appreciation of outward beauty, Isabel’s is symbiotic: “tenderly acquainted with Rome,” she invests her passion in the landscape where it is tempered. Moreover, this sympathetic communion makes Isabel feel her place in the world and in history: her sense of membership in the human race “easily carried her from the less” (the inhuman, secluded society) “to the greater” (the larger human community).

Isabel’s deeply empathetic aesthetic allows her to humanize even the hideously picturesque Madame Merle. While still acknowledging that seeing Serena in the flesh was “like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move,” she also sees her as another human victim of Osmond’s handiwork, and for this Isabel pities her (449). “Poor, poor Madame Merle,” Isabel laments on more than one occasion, acknowledging the sympathetic qualities of the woman who once sought to sabotage her freedom and happiness (425; 444). Isabel also respects Serena as a mother, urging Pansy, “You must never say that – that you don’t like Madame Merle”; Osmond disregards Serena’s

heart, but for her own daughter to do the same would wreak immeasurable devastation on the already emotionally depleted woman.

Although Madame Merle does enable Osmond's collection of Isabel, and that is no small point, James allows her a special dignity that he denies him. This dignity principally arises from the fact that Serena is only a sometime lovely, sometime frightening shadow of her former self; like Isabel, she has been objectified by Osmond; unlike Isabel, she has suffered the dessication of her soul. In his book on Pater, Wolfgang Iser maintains that for Pater and Paterian aesthetes, expression arises from the depths of the soul before finding external articulation (50). I contend that Osmond is a horrifying subversion of this standard in that he is concerned only with façade, he apparently lacks a soul, and appears able to cause this void in others as well. This is the power that facilitates his collection of people. Madame Merle articulates their mutual responsibility in Isabel's near tragedy: "It was precisely my devilry that stupefied her. I couldn't help it; I was full of something bad. Perhaps it was something good; I don't know. You've not only dried up my tears, you've dried up my soul!" (427).<sup>18</sup> Like her soul, Serena's conscience is similarly impaired: she at first holds herself accountable for Isabel's stupefaction, then immediately recants, "I couldn't help it;" she "was full of something bad," or perhaps something good; when it comes to the discernment of right and wrong, good and evil, Serena simply "doesn't know." Osmond denies responsibility for either woman's condition,

to which Serena replies with one truth of which she is sure: "I believe [the soul] can be perfectly destroyed. That's what has happened to mine, which was a very good one to start with; and it's you I have to thank for it. You're *very bad*" (427). Within the context of the novel, where even the most "beastly pure minds" and once "very good souls" are subject to corruption and "stupefaction," Serena's "deviltry" is hardly on par with Osmond's, which is but one of the reasons her redemption is at least possible.

Frequently we must read Isabel in terms of her relationship to Serena, and vice versa: Isabel retains while Serena loses her ability to weep; Isabel avoids the very fate Serena suffers; both are "mothers" to Pansy. It is possible, then, Isabel's victory over Osmond can be a redemptive achievement for the two women whose identities are so intertwined. Serena is tortured by her participation in Osmond's plot to snare Isabel, haunted by her lost goodness and vibrance, and deeply concerned about the welfare and happiness of her daughter, over whom she exerts no influence and with whom she has a thorny relationship. Isabel's emotional and spiritual extrication from Osmond's control, and the promise that she will save Pansy from his toxic influence, means that the two women whose fates weigh most on Serena's heart and conscience will not indeed be sacrificed. Taking into account all of this, including the tragic grandeur with which James endows Serena as well as her dubious accountability given the victimized and dissipated state of her soul, Isabel's (and Pansy's) redemptions help to

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<sup>18</sup> In contrast to Madame Merle, Isabel critically retains her ability to weep, most significantly



redeem Madame Merle for some of her sins. I do not suggest that at the end of the novel she is absolved of her crimes, but James carefully distinguishes between these one-time conspirators.

Within Osmond's realm of influence, the feminine is continuously in jeopardy, whether she be Osmond's lover, wife, daughter. Even the Countess Gemini seems somewhat affected by her brother's attempts to appropriate the female psyche and soul: she "seemed to her to have no soul" but rather resembled an empty, "bright, rare shell, with a polished surface;" her heart is likened to small pieces of frosted wedding cake that she had simply given away (368-369). From where this moral vacuity comes is ambiguous, as is whether or not Isabel's return to Italy as an independent subject will have any good effect on the Countess; Isabel may empathize with her pathetically unprincipled sister-in-law, and represent another way of living, but the Countess is more than likely contentedly entrenched in her decadent lifestyle. What is certain, however, is Isabel's capacity and commitment to rescue Pansy in a more literal and unmistakable way than she aids in Serena's redemption. Pansy has widely been noted as the reason for Isabel's return to Osmond, but simply returning to her marriage assures Pansy of nothing. More crucial is who Isabel returns as – she is uniquely capable of and determined to save Pansy from the fate she herself suffered and emerged from as a more deeply feeling, more compassionate, woman.

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at Ralph's bedside, which is indicative of the retention or rehabilitation of her soul..

Osmond refers to his daughter as his prized possession, literally: she is his "little convent flower," his "sheet of blank paper," the "Dresden-china shepherdess" that constituted his "consummate piece" (216; 233; 296). When under the spell of Osmond's "contagion," even Isabel participates in and approves of Pansy's objectification and aesthetic cultivation: she categorizes Pansy with the rest of Osmond's esteemed belongings, saying that she is visiting him to "see his view, his pictures, his daughter"; later she "hoped that so fair and smooth a page would be covered with an edifying text" (211; 233). It is only after she embraces her more humanitarian aesthetic that she realizes "how far her husband's desire to be effective was capable of going—to the point of playing theoretic tricks on the delicate organism of his daughter" (435). The convent is for Pansy what the "cage" was for Isabel – the controlled environment where Osmond can best manipulate his "organisms." Only Isabel owns the insight necessary to realize that this ostensibly benevolent, sacred setting (full of "good women," "clean and cheerful" rooms and a "well-used garden" with "sun for winter and shade for spring") is for Pansy no more than "a well appointed prison" (448). Even Pansy seems to recognize Isabel as her only hope for freedom – of body and spirit – which is why she rejects the ineffectual Madame Merle and implores Isabel to save her. "Ah, Mrs. Osmond, you won't leave me!" Pansy agonizes, confessing that when Isabel is far away, she is "a little afraid" of her papa and Madame Merle. Isabel promises Pansy, "I won't desert you," and "Yes—I'll come back," and the "very straight path" she embarks on at the novel's end is

to save her exceedingly vulnerable stepdaughter from the fate only she can foresee and prevent.

Isabel's final scene – that in which she rejects Caspar Goodwood's impassioned proposal – is frequently interpreted as evidence of her sexual frigidity and fear. Carren Kaston, for example, argues that her refusal of Caspar is merely "proof of her sexual unresponsiveness" that stems from the feeling of powerlessness women experience when placed in such characteristic sexual scenarios (53-54). Few would disagree that Caspar is the embodiment of masculine sexual virility, but Isabel's rejection of him has less to do with her shrinking from sensuality and more to do with her shirking from the possibility of repossession. Caspar exhorts her, "Ah be mine...!" and his kiss is described explicitly as "an act of possession" (481; 482). Having just wrested herself from Osmond's mental chains, how can she now relinquish herself to Caspar? To do so would mean giving up her regained sense of self-possession and the recuperated aestheticism that requires she return to Pansy, to responsibility, and to reality. Elizabeth Allen posits that Isabel's retention of self is ultimately dependent on this rejection of Caspar, that "surrender to the physical world would be a denial of consciousness, of all she has learned ... of the relation of appearances to reality," that as tempting as submission to him might be, "it would be blacking out the vision she has so lately won" (96-97). We should also remember another simple but pivotal detail: Isabel does not love Caspar. She is at times mildly fascinated

by him and taken with his physical grandness, but she never exhibits any deep interest in, let alone love for, her unrelenting suitor.

In Women and British Aestheticism, Margaret D. Stetz discusses a new populace of women aesthetes who emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and, unlike aestheticism's enemies, were out not to abolish but rather revise the theory of art for art's sake to make it more open to and safe for female participants:

Chief among their concerns was the objectification of women in the act of "appreciation," a form of masculine connoisseurship dependent upon silent and passive female spectacles. Their goal was to rescue the worship of beauty, so prominent in aesthetic doctrine, from its association with the exploitation of women as nothing more than beautiful "occasions" for masculine discovery, theorizing, and reverie. (31)

In The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer is such an advocate for the passive female spectacles on which Osmond's reifying aestheticism depends. Like the New Women aesthetes, Isabel seeks not only to rescue women from their demeaning roles as beautiful but utterly submissive *tableaux vivantes*, but to conceive of a new brand of aestheticism rooted in active, loving sympathy rather than cold, dehumanizing detachment. In contrast to Osmond's lifeless, soulless aesthetic practices, Isabel's aestheticism renews her soul and restores her independent subjectivity; because she is so inextricably involved in the lives of both Pansy and Madame Merle, her triumph is not just her own but theirs as well. The nature of Isabel's new aestheticism is far more intersubjective and empathetic than aestheticism's more common form (which Isabel initially believes in) and Osmond's more lethal form. James said of the

ending of his novel, "The *whole* of anything is never told," and surely no one can purport to determine definitively Isabel's fate. What is certain is that the concluding pages of The Portrait of a Lady contain a heroine liberated from her framework, and affirm her redemptive and heightened pattern of aestheticism.

In this novel, suffering, and the often painful perception of truth, are the conduit to love and compassion: while trapped in "the house of numbness, the house of suffocation," Isabel closes herself off from pain and from reality, and in doing so closes herself off from the full range of human emotion; until she suffers she cannot love; until she seeks truth in dark and frightening corners she cannot recognize more heartening truths, like Ralph's love for her and her own power of loving and sympathy. In the next chapter we will see that in the novels of George Eliot, suffering is similarly valuable for its transformative power and for its indelible presence in the human heart as the roots of sympathy.

## CHAPTER V

### “FEELING’S A SORT O’ KNOWLEDGE:” UNCONVENTIONAL LOVE AND ITS TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

In Middlemarch, Dorothea Brooke inquires of Ladislav, “What is *your* religion? I mean – not what you know about religion, but the belief that helps you most?” (392). It is an especially poignant question given the crisis of faith George Eliot and many of her fellow Victorians were experiencing around the time of the novel’s publication. In the rush to fill empty altars, Eliot consecrated human connection and sympathy. Quite simply, love’s power is one of the beliefs that seems to have helped Eliot most. While she has often been termed a humanist, Eliot has less frequently been recognized for her treatment and advocacy of love’s valuable unorthodox forms and love’s inspirational, life-altering capacity. In the three novels I discuss here, Eliot not only explores unconventional love – later or second love, paternal love, unrequited love – but also privileges its redemptive and transformative possibilities. Connected to this idea is Eliot’s belief that suffering and love are necessarily linked, and that the latter can be born out of the former.

In Eliot’s novels, suffering acts as a catalyst for love. In Love’s Knowledge, Martha Nussbaum argues that suffering is the most subtle and powerful means of grasping truth. Using Stoic philosopher Zeno’s argument that our knowledge of the external world is derived from certain perceptual

impressions, Nussbaum contends that such impressions are ways at getting at truth.

From (or in) assent to such impressions we get the cataleptic condition, a condition of certainty and confidence from which nothing can dislodge us. On the basis of such certainties is built all science, natural and ethical. (Science is defined as a system of *katalepseis*.) The cataleptic impression is said to have the power, just through its own felt quality, to drag us to assent, to convince us that things could not be otherwise. It is defined as a mark of impress in the soul. . . . (265)

I suggest that the cataleptic impressions relevant to Eliot's texts are "emotional impressions – specifically, impressions of anguish" (266), and that these cataleptic impressions of suffering "drag" her characters to the truth, which is most often love and sympathy.

The characters I discuss here – Adam Bede, Silas Marner, and Philip Wakem – all experience a cataleptic impression (anguish, dejection, heart-break) that begets a force which grows silently stronger until it eventually is transformed into sympathy or love, both of which are powerful forms of truth. The initial anguish is also deeply felt truth, but it is just as importantly an impression that changes its form and brings us to a greater understanding of both our hearts and the hearts of others. For Adam Bede, it is a first and unrequited love for the coquettish Hetty Sorrel that delivers him to a profoundly compassionate state of being. Eliot describes this transformation in one of the more beautiful and ethically complex passages in English literature.

For Adam ... had not outlived his sorrow – and not felt it slip from him as a temporary burden, and leave him the same man again. Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of

all our anguish and our wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it – if we could return to the same self-confident blame, the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that Unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy – the one poor word which includes all our best insight and best love. (531)

It is the unique value of anguish Eliot emphasizes here, and the unconventional theory that sorrow never leaves us, that we cannot and should not shrug it off in an effort to “move on;” to do so would be a futile endeavour to deny sorrow’s indestructibility, and to deny ourselves the greater self-knowledge born of it. While it is a deeply-rooted human impulse to throw off suffering and return to the more naïve and comfortable pre-despair state of being, it is that very attempt that precludes the achievement of sympathy that is the source of “our best insight and our best love.”

Initially Adam Bede is smitten by the beautiful but thoughtless and vain Hetty Sorrel, whom he not only cares for but fancies he can somehow rescue. Hetty, however, imagines herself as the wife of the handsome but morally suspect Arthur Donnithorne, who preys on her fantasies, seduces, and then abandons her. In her grief and desperation, Hetty concedes to marry Adam, but before the wedding takes place, she discovers her pregnancy and, unable to find the rakish father Arthur, succumbs to her hopelessness and commits infanticide. Stung by Hetty’s betrayal and anguished over her fate, Adam enters into his “season” of sorrow, certain only of the hard-working and loveless future ahead of him.



The passing of pain into sympathy is not a process of which Adam is cognitively or emotionally aware: "love, he thought, could never be anything to him but a living memory – a limb lopped off, but not gone from consciousness" (532). In the early stages of suffering, Adam only feels the absence of love ("a limb lopped off") and the presence of painful remembrance, because the strength tenderly developing within him is subtle, and to the heartbroken lover, inconceivable and unexpected. But like the love that "gather[ed] force with every new year" in *Silas Marner*, Adam

did not know that the power of loving was all the while gaining new force within him; that the new sensibilities bought by deep experience were so many new fibres by which it was possible, nay, necessary to him, that his nature should inter-twine with another (532).

Adam's first love is not a loss he must endure, but instead the profound acquisition of "new fibres" and a new "power of loving." Every experience, Eliot suggests, takes root in our hearts and enhances our capacity for a more deeply felt life. Adam gradually comprehends this:

Tender and deep as his love for Hetty had been – so deep that the roots of it would never be torn away – his love for Dinah was better and more precious to him; for it was the outgrowth of that fuller life which had come to him from his acquaintance with deep sorrow (574).

Modern and contemporary readers might be appalled at Eliot's conviction that we shouldn't struggle desperately to "get over" ruined relationships, because such relationships become indelible parts of our hearts that nourish and strengthen rather than deplete and exhaust us. I believe Eliot would be appalled at the tendency today to trivialize past, hurtful relationships, to

regret our “foolishness,” and to wonder why we risked our hearts in the first place.

The “new power” that gathers force in Adam facilitates a deeper, later love with the earnest preacher Dinah Morris. At this point in the novel Eliot challenges the time honored notion that first loves are somehow more special, more memorable than subsequent loves:

how is it that the poets have said so many fine things about our first love, so few about our later love? Are their first poems best? or are not those the best which come from their fuller thought, their larger experience, their deeper-rooted affections (547).

Her argument is emotionally and intellectually sound: whether we are writing poetry or falling in love, are we not at our best when we have a greater capacity for feeling, a more expansive store of experience to draw upon? On this point Eliot is wonderfully complex: first loves *are* to be cherished because they are the permanent roots for later affections, but they should not be held in inordinate esteem simply because we experience them when we are innocent.

That Adam does profoundly love Dinah is not a point beyond debate. Some argue that Adam rationalizes his affection for Dinah after he realizes his true passion for Hetty is impossible; often the corollary argument is that Hetty is the misunderstood, highly fascinating central figure of the novel, and that Dinah is a blander, more harmless and thus more appropriate match for the stoic Adam. Deborah Allen Logan is among those who want to privilege Hetty’s tragic heroism and defiant feminism, in part by portraying Dinah as

her irritatingly faultless and much less interesting foil: "Hetty's tainted life and tragic death resonate with far greater 'grandeur' than Dinah's pristine character permits" (96). Further, Logan questions Dinah's motives and even conceives her as Hetty's martyrlike nemesis: "The extreme pressure to confess that Dinah imposes on Hetty's fragile mind and spirit falls little short of Inquisition tactics..." (104).<sup>1</sup>

To grant Hetty a special dignity because she commits a ghastly crime and suffers (albeit inordinately) for it, and then to claim that Dinah's decency and goodness actually diminish her capacity for grandness seems ethically negligent. Contemporary scorn for earnest Victorian characters is hardly a novel phenomenon, but to favor wickedness as more attractive than wholesomeness is morally reprehensible.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Logan implicates Dinah in Hetty's suffering and condemnation when actually the reverse is true. Abandoned by the men who claim to care for her, pitilessly judged and banished by her community, Hetty only finds comfort and compassion in Dinah, the character whose proffer of sisterhood she has consistently rebuffed throughout the novel. Dinah's first priority is to reassure Hetty that she is not alone, and that she can depend on her steadfast loyalty: "I'm come to be with you, Hetty – not to leave you – to stay with you – to be your sister to the last"

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<sup>1</sup> Logan's generous reading of Hetty is based on the premise that Hetty is guilty not of the aggressive act of infanticide, but of the temporary neglect and abandonment that could have resulted in her premature child's natural death; she also explores the possibilities that the child was stillborn, and that Hetty's postpartum trauma accounts for her erratic behavior and inconsistent explanations at the trial and thereafter.

<sup>2</sup> One can hardly fault Dinah (or Eliot) for being an exasperatingly orthodox passive Victorian woman. In *Dinah*, Eliot presents us with a female character who would hardly be commonplace in 1859 (or 1799) – she is a working woman and independent, vocal agent.

(493). And while Dinah does extract Hetty's confession, it is because Dinah fervently believes that an admission of guilt will save Hetty's soul; a public confession will only elicit social censure and eviction, but Dinah acts out of the conviction that divine confession will grant Hetty the pardon and gentle forgiveness that the secular community refuses to grant her. Moreover, Hetty beseeches Dinah, "help me... my heart is hard" and once Hetty commences her cathartic confession, she continues at length, without Dinah's prompting, harassment, or "Inquisition" tactics.

To read Hetty as a tragic heroine whom Eliot fails by too harshly expelling her from both the community and the story requires that one endow Hetty with sympathetic and noble qualities she simply (if frustratingly) lacks. As Eliot biographer Rosemary Ashmond suggests, Eliot seems "to be in two minds about Hetty," at once lovingly and explicitly describing her sensuous beauty and at the same time disapproving of her vanity and her "little trivial soul" (203). Moreover, one would have to be hardhearted indeed not to feel deeply for Hetty as she flees in shame, despairing, friendless and hopeless. Still, to that point in the novel, Eliot has given us very little cause to sympathize with this character who herself thoroughly lacks the capacity for sympathy. Self-absorbed and insensitive to the welfare of others, Hetty's most damning flaw may be her aversion to self-awareness and self-improvement, an aversion directly at odds with Eliot's humanist ethic. I agree with Ellen Argyros that the reader may be "discouraged by Eliot's silence on the subject of imagining Hetty pathetically

wandering aimlessly for those eight years overseas," but for the above reasons, I cannot share her complaint that Hetty is "taken out of the tacit rivalry for Adam that the novel has been staging all along," or her regret that Hetty's chance of "ever dreaming of eventually marrying Adam is extinguished" (148). As much as we may wish that Hetty demonstrate a more compassionate nature, Eliot constantly reminds us that her facility for self-love far outweighs her ability or even willingness to love others, and so Argyros's wish that Hetty be left in the rivalry for Adam and permitted to dream realistically of marriage to him seems a futile longing at odds with Eliot's consistent portrayal of her.<sup>3</sup>

Argyros further suggests that Adam could and should have followed Hetty and married her overseas (148). To do so would not only be at odds with Adam's righteous morality, but would preclude his submission to the suffering that will eventually beget his "later," "deeper" love with Dinah. I will agree with those critics who argue that Adam rationalizes his love for Dinah if that means that he loves her intellectually and cognitively as well as emotionally and soulfully. In contrast, Adam's love for Hetty is idolatrous and paternal, and therefore unsustainable. The narrator describes Hetty in terms of her childlike qualities – her beauty is likened to that of kittens and ducks, "or babies just beginning to toddle" – and Adam accepts this pure and vulnerable pretense as representative of her very nature. He declares to

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<sup>3</sup> I cannot bear to entertain claims that Eliot's own physical "plainness" provoked her to punish her most superficially beautiful characters. Such suggestions smack of sexism, and forget characters like Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brook, and Dinah Morris; more than that,

Arthur, "She's all but a child – as any man with a conscience in him ought to feel bound to take care on," and that his primary reason in marrying her is to "take care of her" is a wish he repeatedly voices (353). Adam wants Hetty not as a partner or lover or friend but as a victim: "he would have rescued her body in the face of all danger!" (367). That Adam would retain control of their relationship is as much as a delusion as Hetty's innocent helplessness. Hetty possesses "a false air of innocence," the kind that draws you in only to lead you "out of bounds" and into "the middle of a bog" (128-129). While cultivating the image of the gentle kitten perpetually in need of rescue, Hetty betrays her strongest need, "to feel that this strong, skilful, keen-eyed man was in *her* power," and her determination was not to permit him to "[slip] from under the yoke of her coquettish tyranny" (143; italics mine).

Adam is equally mistaken in his dreamy certainty that Hetty's external beauty permeates her soul, and that she is beautiful through and through. Our narrator insists that we not blame Adam for being less than "sagacious in his interpretation" of Hetty because "falling in love with a girl who really had nothing more than her beauty to recommend her" inevitably involves "attributing imaginary virtues to her" (399). Even in this kind of love – love of beauty unaccompanied by love of the inward self – Eliot finds value. Just as it is not any weakness to "be wrought on by exquisite music," "neither is it a weakness to be so wrought upon by the exquisite curves of a woman's cheek and neck and arms, by the liquid depths of her beseeching eyes, or the

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such criticism of Eliot illogically assumes that a woman so invested with and in humanistic

sweet childish pout of her lips" (399-400). Like music and the "words of a genius," beauty has expression and meaning beyond its aesthetic quality: it makes us feel the presence of "a far-off mighty love" and a "close kinship with all we have known of tenderness and peace" (400). While this love of beauty "[touches] the spring of all love and tenderness," it is at heart egoistic and idolatrous: Adam enjoys the "faith and courage" he reaps from it, but he is blind to the soul of the woman whose beauty he reveres; just as Isabel Archer's compensatory imagination supplies her husband with the qualities he is most wanting, Adam created in Hetty "the mind he believed in out of his own, which was large, unselfish, tender" (400).

Eliot depicts Adam's love for Dinah in sharp contrast to his love for Hetty. Whereas his feeling for Hetty was founded on otherness (his worship of her beauty and ignorance of her soul) and on a struggle for power (his desire to paint her the victim and rescue her, hers to retain her coquettish tyrannical hold over him), Adam and Dinah are "two human souls approach[ing] each other gradually, like two little quivering rain-streams, before they mingle into one" (537). Their love is not the stuff of ethereal imaginings but instead of this world, like "the first detected signs of coming spring": the "faint, indescribable something in the air and in the song of the birds, and the tiniest perceptible budding on the hedgerow branches," all of which would seem trivial if the two people perceiving the scene were not in love (537). Adam's relationship with Hetty, tender and significant as it was,

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sympathy would create characters graced with beauty only to chastise them for it.

lacked an intimacy of souls and was utterly unable to withstand or even admit the possibility of pain; on the contrary, Dinah and Adam's union, born out of suffering, will serve as the sturdy site of the full range of human emotion: Adam and Dinah are

two human souls... joined for life – to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting (576).

In George Eliot we find a splendid balance of realism and romanticism: she at once acknowledges the trials that love must weather and expresses an utter confidence in its ability to do just that.

In the next two novels I will discuss, the central relationships are even more radical departures from traditional love plots. In Silas Marner, the care between Silas and his adopted daughter Eppie is a particularly mysterious yet very real power that restores the dissipated weaver to life. In her letters Eliot wrote that the theme of the novel is "the remedial influence of pure, natural human relations," referring not only to Eppie, but to the growing neighborliness of the community; however, it is undeniably Eppie whose sudden presence, dependence and affection gradually warms her father's cold soul. Before she tumbles into his cottage, Silas is barely human, and the narrator describes him only in terms of negation: "so withered and shrunken a life as his could hardly be susceptible of a bruise, could hardly endure any subtraction but such would put an end to it altogether;" his life was a "blank," and he filled up the blank with grief" (129). Silas's life was so reduced that a further reduction would mean death, and all the supplements



his otherwise empty existence is sorrow. It is important to recognize that Eppie is not an angel who swoops in to divinely recuperate him, and that she does not miraculously transform him from a mean to a good man. Rather, Silas is an inherently loving, moral man who has been degraded to bitterness and misery by his circumstances, but who still harbors a deep capacity for feeling in his withered heart that only need be tapped:

The fountains of human love and of faith in a divine love had not yet been unlocked, and his soul was still the shrunken rivulet, with only this difference, that its little groove of sand was blocked up, and it wandered confusedly against dark obstruction (140).

It is Eppie who will smooth the groove of sand, and thereby remove the obstacle that stops up Silas's flow of emotion and faith. Silas's untapped "faith in a divine love" is not specifically Christian or religious in any way; what he lacks is a belief in the possibility of human love.

Eppie does not just awaken her father to love and to the human community, she is also a benefactress of his revitalized capacity for feeling. The two share a "perfect love" that is entirely reciprocal and redemptive for both. Both of their lives are imperiled when they find each other; Silas is on the brink of a psychic and emotional death, while Eppie's physical life is endangered first by her dissolute mother and then by her crawl through the wintry night. Silas recognizes Eppie as his "blessing," and admits, "If you hadn't been sent to save me, I should ha' gone to the grave in my misery" (226). Similarly, Eppie acknowledges, "If it hadn't been for you, they'd have taken me to the workhouse, and there'd have been nobody to love me" (226).

Although the narrative emphasizes Eppie as a golden treasure Silas finds in the spot where he used to keep his golden coins, his warm hearth and warm love is a comparable treasure for the small child: he saves her life not just literally, but emotionally, because without him she would face a loveless existence in "the workhouse."

This loving bond between Silas and Eppie extends into the community and into the natural world. Eppie humanizes Silas for others and reconnects him to life outside of his cottage: children were no longer afraid of approaching him, and both young and old ceased to be repelled by his presence (190).

Love begets love, even permeating nature:

There was love between him and the child that blent them into one, and there was love between the child and the world – from men and women with parental looks and tones, to the red lady-birds and the round pebbles (190).

This is Eliot at her most Wordsworthian as she emphasizes that it is through the connection with childhood and with nature that a soul can be restored to life, love, and joy. Eliot prefaces her novel with these lines from

Wordsworth's poem "Michael:" "A child, more than all other gifts / That earth can offer to declining man, / Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts" (148-150). Just as Silas is restored to life through Eppie, the elderly shepherd Michael experiences a rebirth and reconnection to the natural world through caring for his young son: "from the Boy there came / Feelings and emanations—things which were / Light to the sun and music to the wind; / And ... the old Man's heart seemed born again" (200-203).

In Wordsworth it is the “little Child” who has access to the truths “we are toiling all of our lives to find” and can inspire the sudden renewal of feelings from the past (“Ode:” 121; 116). Similarly, Eppie unearths dreams of the soul Silas thought forever dormant:

The thoughts [of Lantern Yard] were strange to him now, like old friendships impossible to revive; and yet he had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from that far-off life: it stirred fibres that had never been moved in Raveloe – old quiverings of tenderness – old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life.... (168)

Silas cannot deduce any “ordinary natural means” by which Eppie was brought into his life, nor can he explain the “Power presiding over his life,” but Eliot is firm that we do not grant Eppie the status of an angel, especially within her crisis-stricken society in which the narrator attests, “We see no white-winged angels now.” Still, redemption is possible, and it is not God, religion, or angels, but rather a child who will save the human soul from aridity: “But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child’s” (191). Eliot blends the realistic and the romantic, the ordinary and the mysterious,<sup>4</sup> suggesting that while both Eppie and her love are of an extraordinary and seemingly miraculous quality, the child is of this world; it is imperative that we recognize Eppie as fully human, otherwise Eliot’s belief in

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<sup>4</sup> In her biography on Eliot, Rosemary Ashton posits that *Silas Marner* is remarkable for its successful marriage of realism and romanticism. One example is how we as readers accept her “plot exploitation of superstition about weavers, ghosts, and the mysterious, seemingly agentless theft of Silas’s gold without giving intellectual assent to such superstition” (248-249).

the redemptive capacity of human love is undermined. That Silas's resurrection is a gradual process – Eppie's influence "gather[ed] force with every new year" – and not sudden and magical, is further proof that it is inspired by a real, earthly child and daughter. I would further contend that since Eppie is the child of an illicit and loveless union, Eliot is suggesting the possibility that moral love and beauty can spring from an ugly and loveless source.

The tale of Silas Marner is counterbalanced by that of Godfrey Cass, a prominent landowner and member of the Ravloë community. At the beginning of the novel, Godfrey is the perfect opposite of Silas, as amiable as Silas is reclusive, Godfrey's future as promising as Silas's is bleak. Gradually but surely, Silas's prospects rise as Godfrey's decline, and their respective reversals of fortune revolve around their mutual daughter Eppie. The child is Godfrey's link to his secret, scandalous past and Silas's connection to his brighter future. For 16 years, Godfrey's guilt festers and his quality of life suffers because ironically he has abandoned the child whose love redeems Silas and could have averted Godfrey's own degeneration. When Godfrey finally seeks to recover his daughter, he finds that his biological claim on her carries no weight: Eppie chooses to remain with the father who loved and raised her. The moral is not as simple as only those of pure and loving heart are deserving or capable of happiness. Godfrey Cass is a flawed man, but no more so than Silas; when we meet Silas he is a brooding and resentful miser, yet good fortune befalls the latter and eludes the former. It is simply the

arbitrariness of life that dictates Silas's fairy tale and Godfrey's harsh reality. Toward the end of the novel, Eliot presents us with the companion picture of two fathers who represent the human soul's capacity to shrink or expand depending on the influence of love – in this case the love of a child.

In Eliot's work, love need not be requited to be redemptive. In The Mill on the Floss, Philip Wakem's abiding affection for Maggie Tulliver disproves many traditional and contemporary myths about unrequited love, namely that it is any or all of the following: pathetic, unfulfilling, self-deceiving, ephemeral, inferior, and unhealthy. Maggie will never return Philip's love, because his physical deformity inhibits physical attraction, because her brother resolutely disapproves, because Stephen Guest intervenes, and finally because Maggie dies; we therefore cannot and must not give value to Philip's love because it may someday be consummated, but should instead find value in the love itself. Eliot relentlessly reminds the reader of Philip's aesthetic unattractiveness – his pale, small features, his misshapen back, his short and bent stature, his "face like a woman's" – and our hyperawareness of his appearance parallels Maggie's constant consciousness of their physical incompatibility; she must always "[stoop] her tall head to kiss the pale face" and reach her hand down to meet his, just as he always must gaze up into her face and wait for her to bend or bow to reach his level. His unavoidable physical deformity ensures that Maggie will always consider him from the perspective of a pitying girl rather than an adult woman: "There was not the slightest promise of love towards him in

her manner; it was nothing more than the sweet girlish tenderness she had shown him when she was twelve" (250).

That Maggie never considers the idea that Philip might become her lover is a refrain throughout the novel, and in Maggie's face Philip read "the absence of this idea clearly enough – saw it with a certain pang" (247). This poignant pain is proof enough of Philip's clarity of perception: aware of his "shortcomings" and Maggie's reaction to him, Philip rarely indulges in self-deluding expectations. This is not to say that he is utterly without hope, nor that he should or could be. He realizes that "perhaps she would never love him – perhaps no woman *could* love him," but "if any woman could love him, surely Maggie was that woman" (250). Philip's realization that he might be unlovable and his acceptance of that real probability is both brave and heart-breaking. Eliot establishes early on Philip's perceptiveness and acceptance of the fact that Maggie is his only yet impossible chance for love. In his later letter to her, Philip even has the strength of character to acknowledge that in the virile Stephen Guest "there was another whose presence had a power over you which mine never possessed;" he goes on to note that Stephen and Maggie do not share a comparable depth of soul, but that does not undercut the valor required of Philip to rise above the excruciating pain of his sexual jealousy, and to both recognize and lament the power of physical desire so glaringly active between Maggie and Stephen and absent between Maggie and himself. Philip's self-restraint and respect for others is a marked contrast with Stephen's disrespect for consequences and for the wellbeing of others;

were it up to Stephen, he would always choose to “indulge [himself] in the present moment” rather than “[obey] the divine voice within us—for the sake of being true to all the motives that sanctify our lives” (387). Stephen privileges impulsive action and the heedless indulgence of desire at all costs, whereas Philip strives to take responsibility and to care for his own happiness as well as the good of others.

One might legitimately ask how a life so seemingly bleak and a love so assuredly unachievable could result in Philip’s happiness and fulfillment. Philip himself asks this very question in his letter to Maggie: “How could I be resigned to the loss of the one thing which had ever come to me on earth?” (407). The answer is that Philip saves his love for Maggie out of the wreckage of their relationship – his ability to love Maggie, regardless of reciprocation, renews his life. Rather than deny or gloss over the pain that he has endured, Philip acknowledges “that no anguish I have had to bear on your account has been too heavy a price to pay for the new life into which I have entered loving you” (407). Philip’s ability and willingness to deeply feel pain and then transform that pain into a force of renewal is the most profound wisdom. He writes Maggie:

You have been to my affections what light, what colour is to my eyes—what music is to the inward ear; you have raised a dim unrest into vivid consciousness.... I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others; for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness. I even think sometimes that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may be a new power to me. (407)

As Eppie does for Silas, Maggie illuminates (like “light” and “colour” and “music”) and raises into “vivid consciousness” affections already present in Philip. Significantly, it is not simply Maggie’s existence or influence that renews Philip – it is not simply a woman’s presence that matters – but rather his ability to love her: the “gift” and “new power” he experiences “has come to [him] in loving [her].” It is the act of love, not its exchange or reception, that enlarges the life of the one brave enough to love. When Philip writes that his life “grows and grows by appropriating the life of others,” he does not speak of seizing or possessing another person, or siphoning another’s life to replace his own; rather, he acknowledges that the reaching out to another person, the attempt to know and love another, pulls him out of self-absorption and out of the kind of self-consciousness so severe that it is “painful.” He does not attempt to control Maggie, but rather to enlarge his own life by loving and experiencing a person outside of himself.

Early in their relationship Philip declares hopefully: “Certain strains of music affect me so strangely – I can never hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last, I might be capable of heroisms” (248). I believe that his later reference to Maggie as “music to [his] inward ear” is a deliberate echo of the earlier phrase, and that therefore we can assume that Maggie’s influence finally does provide the opportunity for Philip to act heroically. Philip transforms pain into sympathy, loves without reciprocation, loves in spite of inevitable loss, declares that he is unchangeably Maggie’s with a devotion that excludes selfish



wishes, and believes and defends Maggie when her community disparages and shuns her. In these ways Philip fills the role of hero far more convincingly than the novel's two other male protagonists: Tom's singleminded devotion to duty neglects his sister's heart and best interests; Stephen feels little responsibility to anything or anyone except himself and his own desire.

In one of the novel's middle scenes, Philip declares that if his life cannot have anything great or beautiful in it, he would rather not have lived (246). Surely we can agree that Philip, through Maggie's inspiration and his love for her, beautifies his life immeasurably. Philip writes that Maggie, again like Eppie for Silas, has been "the blessing of [his] life;" she is not a blessing he squanders. Eliot is remarkable and convincing in this insistence that unrequited love can be a blessing, a source of strength, and even an opportunity for emotional and ethical heroism. Eliot is equally remarkable in her proposal that pain and loss are necessary and inextricable components of joy and love, a fact most poignantly evident in one of the novel's final passages.

Near that brick grave there was a tomb erected, very soon after the flood, for the two bodies that were found in close embrace; and it was visited at different moments by two men who both felt that their keenest joy and keenest sorrow were for ever buried there.

One of them visited the tomb again with a sweet face beside him—but that was years after.

The other was always solitary. His great companionship was among the trees of the Red Deeps, where the buried joy still seemed to hover—like a revisiting spirit. (422-423)

There is a timelessness in Philip's love for Maggie – it is a "revisiting" spirit and memory, always hovering, always evident in the beauty of nature and

the landscape they once shared. In the above passage and elsewhere, the function Maggie serves for Philip recalls Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." For Philip, the "shadowy recollections" of Maggie and the still hovering joy of his love for her are "the fountain-light of all [his] day," "a master-light of all [his] seeing," that "uphold" him;" his love for her is one of the "truths that wake, / To perish never."

In his study of fictional love plots, Joseph Allen Boone argues that The Mill on the Floss has a tragic love-plot that writes the problematic heroine out of existence, leaving behind an intact social order and an unaltered world; the end of the novel, Boone insists, definitively closes the narrative pattern of Maggie Tulliver's life. Boone is not unique in his suggestion that Maggie's death is the only way Eliot can effectually overcome, or eradicate, the problems her heroine poses to the narrative, but in arguing that Maggie's death does not affect the world she leaves behind, and that the chapter of Maggie's life closes with her death, forgets Philip. Philip serves as a living memorial to Maggie: as I have argued, his existence and continuing love for her ensures her legacy; her presence in the world has irrevocably altered it, if only for the improvement of one man's life. Here again Eliot is particularly Wordsworthian in that Philip recalls the poet of "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways." Maggie is the "Maid whom there were none to praise / And very few to love," both when she was an impetuous, headstrong, Medusa-haired, education-craving little girl, or the beautiful, passionate, rebellious young woman. It is Philip who, unlike Tom and Stephen, loves her

unconditionally and for, not in spite of her "faults;" to him alone is Maggie "Fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky," and when "she is in her grave" it is all "the difference to" Philip.

This chapter rises out of a heartfelt need to write about Philip Wakem as someone quite other than the pathetic hunchback who functions only as an asexual love option for Maggie, and a relatively ineffectual foil to Tom and Stephen. I have observed to my dismay a critical tendency to either dismiss Philip in such terms, or to focus on the novel's other love relationships (between Maggie and Tom, and Maggie and Stephen). Polhemus's rendering of "poor Philip, confused... alienated, all mind with a twisted body," and Elaine Showalter's insistence that Philip "leads a girl's life" and functions simply as the commonplace sensitive and therefore necessarily maimed man in feminine fiction, are understandable but unfortunately typical readings (182; 127). Such descriptions fit Philip to varying degrees, but they do not encompass him, and in fact do his character a great disservice. Polhemus also discusses Maggie's noble sacrifice, and I contend that many of his claims can and should be applied to Philip. Rightly arguing that, for Maggie, "loving Philip means sacrifice," Polhemus does not address that Philip's love for Maggie is also based on renunciation: to love Maggie forever, Philip forgoes the opportunity to ever participate in a fully reciprocal relationship. Maggie does indeed "elevate love... into an emphatic belief worth sacrificing for" (193), and Philip does the same, only he does so for the rest of his life.

When courting Dinah, Adam persuades her: "I don't believe your loving me could shut up your heart; it's only adding to what you've been before, not taking away from it..." (553). Adam's words encapsulate his experience as well as those of Silas Marner and Philip Wakem. Eliot repeatedly emphasizes that love, no matter the category or the consequence, enhances our lives by teaching us about our selves and our hearts, and by granting us emotional knowledge we would not have were it not for our experiences of love *and* suffering. As in Wordsworth's poetry, in Eliot's novels there is a sacredness about the past, because the past is indelibly with us, determining who we are, influencing our later choices and feelings. Also Wordsworthian is Eliot's conviction that loss is always recompensed by gain. Adam, Silas, and Philip are men who bravely love others without the benefit of reciprocity, and/or despite a history of heartbreak. In the novels of George Eliot, unreturned and failed love and broken hearts are real, harsh injustices but are beautifully compensated for by a brand of love that endures at all costs and immeasurably improves the human condition.

## CHAPTER VI

### "RECALLED TO LIFE : " SYDNEY CARTON'S LEGACY AND RESURRECTION THROUGH LOVE IN DICKENS' A TALE OF TWO CITIES

"He did not know that the power of loving was all the while gaining new force within him; that the new sensibilities bought by deep experience were so many new fibres by which or was possible, nay, necessary to him, that his nature should intertwine with another."

– George Eliot, Adam Bede

"The growing good of the world is partly dependent upon unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

– George Eliot, Middlemarch

Sydney Carton is a drunken, disreputable, careless man when we meet him at the beginning of A Tale of Two Cities – hardly a man of heroic potential, particularly when compared to his gallant and earnest doppelganger Charles Darnay. But when Carton falls in love with Lucie Manette, she recalls to life the best part of him, a part he presumed burnt up by the great flame of debauchery that has hitherto consumed his life. His love for her compels a gradual renewal of his nearly dissipated soul; ironically, he is reborn so that he may die, and his self-sacrifice is an act of self-redemption. Many critics have cheapened Carton's valor by declaring his death imminent, and thus his gesture rather empty. George Woodcock, in his introduction to Penguin's 1970 edition of the novel, dismisses Carton's heroism in this way:

"When he chooses death, it is not as heroes do in the prime of vibrant life, but when he has already abandoned all hope of meaningful existence. Before he dies physically, he has already died in spirit" (24). Such a reading conceives Carton as a man on an irreversible self-destructive bent who happens upon a noble outlet for his recklessness. Such a reading also falsely assumes that the Carton to whom we are initially introduced is the same man who dies at the end of the novel. On the contrary, the experience of love revives Sydney's soul and transforms his quest for self-devastation into a quest for useful existence and meaningful human connection that necessarily ends in death; when Carton dies by the blade of the guillotine, he dies a morally and spiritually whole man, hardly the hopeless and doomed degenerate too many readers and critics mistake him for. Moreover, Carton's resurrection is not his alone: his life and death powerfully represent the redemptive capacity of human love.

Until he meets Lucie Manette, Carton's life is unremittingly depraved: he depicts himself as "a disappointed drudge," cares for no one, least of all himself, finds solace only in his nightly draughts of wine, and purpose only in his intellectual contributions to Stryver's occupation (115). The "most unpromising of men," the narrator refers to him as the most lowly of animals – a "dissipated cat" and "jackal" (117). But after making Lucie's acquaintance, his wine ceases to bring him its usual "transitory gladness," and "from being irresolute and purposeless, his feet became animated by an intention, and, in the working out of that intention, they took him to [Doctor Manette's]

door" (179). It is here that he makes his singular confession of love to Lucie, and it is this encounter that serves as the turning point when Carton realizes, unconsciously at first, that he need not live in vain.

He begins his confession with the declaration: "I am like one who died young. All my life might have been" (180). At this point, Carton does not envision his love for Lucie as having any redemptive potential whatsoever; in fact, when she first asks him to change, he claims that it is too late, and that if anything, he shall only "sink lower, and be worse" (180). But as he articulates the effect Lucie has had upon him, he gradually realizes stirrings in him he long believed dead. He tells her:

Since I knew you, I have been troubled by a remorse that I thought would never reproach me again, and have heard whispers from old voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent for ever. I have had unformed ideas of striving afresh, beginning anew, shaking off sloth and sensuality, and fighting out the abandoned fight. (181)

Carton does not necessarily welcome these memories of ambition and these new impulses to fight off sloth: these memories and impulses Lucie inspires reproach and trouble Carton, and most importantly, demand that he answer them with action; moreover, these ideas are unformed, and the impelling voices mere whispers. Since at this point he is unwilling to work toward his own renewal and improvement, he claims that his experience in knowing her has been merely "a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay down" (181). The fire she has kindled in him is not a new and vibrant flame, he contends, but instead a "heap of ashes" that will idly burn itself out.

Lucie's blessing and acceptance of Carton affects him profoundly. He asks nothing of her, and she cannot offer her love in response to his, and yet the consolation she offers him – that she will keep his secret and his memory in her heart – and the "God bless you" she bestows upon him compel this final promise to her: "For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything." As wretched as he feels himself to be, he is "ardent and sincere in this one thing," that he is a man who "would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you" (183). The vow "rises out of [his] soul" unexpected and irrepressible – he can no longer deny the better man that his love for Lucie has called him to be. Harry Stone has suggested that Carton's feelings for Lucie resemble an impotent affection at best, a perverse obsession at worst. His calculation misses the mark entirely. Like Philip Wakem's love for Maggie Tulliver, Carton's love for Lucie is unrequited, but that by no mean diminishes its quality or power. She is "the last dream of his soul": her influence and his ability to care for her sustains and empowers him, a fact abundantly clear in the confession scene. During the course of their encounter, Carton experiences a momentous psychic transformation in that he initially rejects his own potential entirely, then admits moments of futile hope, and finally vows that he is capable of and willing to commit the ultimate sacrifice for the good and protection of Lucie and her family. I am not implying that within the brief span of this interview Carton's soul and spirit are entirely renewed, but his exchange with Lucie does serve as the catalyst for change and the



moment in which he realizes some promise for himself and purpose for his existence.

As hard as critics and readers have been on Carton, Lucie often draws a heaping of scathing commentary as well. Claire Tomalin, for example, denounces both Dickens and Lucie:

Far from breaking the mold of his vapid heroines, he makes her almost a blank, a paper princess, an innocent who undergoes a series of ordeals... with perfect passivity; she is required to be only sweet, simple, and enduring, as she is swept along in the wake of great events (125-126).

I would suggest that Tomalin unfairly diminishes the value of sweet, simple, and enduring people/characters, and seems too quick to condemn heroines who are not absolutely indomitable; I would add that "enduring" or "undergoing" the bloodletting and chaos of the French Revolution, as well as the conviction and imprisonment of her husband, are hardly events that one simply "undergoes" or is "passively swept along" by. Like Dinah Morris, another character maligned as uninteresting and vapid because does not evidence a dark side, Lucie may be less compelling than the novel's villains, but Dinah and Lucie are no less realistic or true to life than any other fictional figures.<sup>1</sup> To think that they are is to be terribly cynical about humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> I have found a considerable propensity among undergraduates to feel disgust for simple and/or good characters; when discussing *A Tale of Two Cities* in particular, Lucie and Darnay are often variously described as "dull," "boring," "annoying" "goody-goodies." (Of course some of the same students also write off Carton as a "drunken stalker," so it may often be a case of reductive characterization as much as anything else.) More veteran critics can also be guilty of this kind of contemptuous disregard for such characters: Norrie Epstein, in her highly accessible and comprehensive *The Friendly Dickens* (New York: Viking, 1998), complains that Darnay is "wooden" and "insufferably faultless" (322). It is very much a 20<sup>th</sup> century tendency, I think, to decry earnestness and goodness as "insufferable" rather than desirable characteristics.

Moreover, the novel is about bifurcations and oppositions, about the soul's capacity for depravity and decency, about the human potential for degeneration and improvement, about the heart's tendency toward despair and hope; it "was the best of times and the worst of times." Similarly, Lucie and Madame Defarge fall on either sides of a broad spectrum, neither character more or less representative of the reality of the human condition.

Lucie's worthiness and believability as the object of Carton's affection is also a point frequently debated, and while it is an interesting question, it is also irrelevant. Perhaps it would be more satisfying for readers if Lucie was soaringly strong, intelligent, and lovable, but she could just be a pretty creature and the story would work. As it is, many of us find her rather unremarkable (except for her beauty and purity), or as Tomalin does, insipidly sweet, but we need not find the recipient of Carton's affection "worthy" in order to see his love for her as true, good, and life-altering. First, if we want to debate "worthiness," we cannot rationally argue that Carton is worthy of her regard early on in the novel. Second, the love Lucie inspires is far more important than whether we as readers find her likable or not, or deem her deserving of the extraordinary sacrifice Carton makes for her (and for Darnay and their family).<sup>2</sup> In his book on Dickens and his women characters, Michael Slater contends that Dickens worked exceptionally hard on Lucie Manette because it is critical that the author convince us that her character and beauty

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, some of the critics I referenced in regard to Adam Bede similarly insist that Dinah is too plain, too righteous to be worthy of Adam's love; they suggest that Hetty,

are capable of motivating a man's readiness to relinquish his life for the preservation of hers: "[Dickens] wants us to feel, too, not only that Lucie can inspire such self-sacrifice but also that she is worthy of it" (279). It may be true that Dickens wanted us to appreciate Lucie and identify with Carton's adoration of her, but the authorial intent is of course indeterminable. More than that, whether we think she "can inspire" or "is worthy of" such self-sacrifice is, again, irrelevant, simply because she *does* inspire it. Slater's and Tomalin's assumption that the existence and legitimacy of a person's love is contingent upon a deserving object is commensurate to the myth that love must be reciprocal to exist: in both cases, the object and reciprocity of affection is far less germane than the love itself; it is the awakened life and redemption that Carton's devotion to Lucie incites that is paramount.

Readers often have failed to see Carton's renewal as gradual, but instead insist that it is failed or unbelievable because he moves too quickly from dissipated rogue to divine hero. Dickens scholar Joseph Gold labels Carton's redemption as a hasty and far-fetched "Scrooge-like conversion" that Dickens is forced to "fall back on" (235). I would counter that Carton's commitment to die in the place of Charles Darnay is neither a sudden whim on Carton's part nor a forced or convenient narrative convention on Dickens's part. From the moment he is able to sense the "last dream of his soul," Carton gradually forgoes his old self and adopts a better, nobler, more focused self. When Mr. Lorry laments his own bachelorhood and his fear that

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despite of or even because of her vanity, shallowness, and immoral behavior, is a more fitting

no one will weep for him upon his death, Carton challenges Lorry's notion of what constitutes a valuable life, and in doing so, reveals his own. He passionately interrogates Lorry:

If you could say, with truth, to your own solitary heart, to-night, "I have secured to myself the love and attachment, the gratitude or respect, of no human creature; I have won myself a tender place in no regard; I have done nothing good or serviceable to be remembered by!" your seventy-eight years would be seventy-eight heavy curses, would they not? (339-340)

Unlike the Carton who approached Lucie's door seemingly resolved to waste his life, he now asserts the importance of living a life worth remembering, a life lived in service to others, even if the scope of one's influence is known only to one's "own solitary heart." Significantly, Carton enlightens Lorry that there is no shame in dying alone, but that there is shame in refusing to love; in doing so, he foreshadows his own death which will itself be solitary but will also be for the solidarity of the Manette/Darnay family.

Moments later in his conversation with Lorry, Carton again acknowledges his change of heart: "I am not old, but my young way was never the way to age" (340). Formerly resigned to the fact that he is one "who died young," and thus his future a hopeless prospect, Carton now is no longer content to live out the rest of his days in his customary careless, bleak manner and commits to changing his path forward. Himself invigorated by Carton's example, Lorry admits that his "heart [was] touched... by many remembrances that had long fallen asleep," and Carton, "with a bright flush," exclaims, "I understand the feeling!" This conversation resonates with echoes

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partner.

of Carton's private interview with Lucie, but now he is fortified by a renewed soul, and just as Lucie kindled the heap of ashes that was his soul, he rouses Lorry's heart and memories. Even Carton's physical countenance is rejuvenated: his once pallid and sickly appearance has become flushed and bright, his once listless manner now animated. If any reader was strangely compelled to read Carton's vows to Lucie as self-indulgent, empty attempts to impress her, such a reading does not hold up against this scene. By having Carton express to Lorry rather than Lucie his newfound fervor for and commitment to a good life, Dickens establishes Carton's sincere dedication to change and the steps he has made toward improvement; he has nothing to gain by sharing with Lorry his newfound knowledge of how to render life meaningful, or by expressing his remorse for his past profligacy; it "rises from his soul," unrelated to any desire to earn Lucie's approval or love.

Of course the first character in the novel to be reanimated and "recalled to life" is Dr. Alexander Manette. While unjustly imprisoned in the Bastille for 18 years, Manette's only occupation is, literally, cobbling shoes, and by the time he is rescued he is barely human; the experience has psychologically and physically depleted him so severely that he shrinks from human contact and the light of day. While locked away in the Bastille, his only link to life is a golden lock of his daughter's hair, and after his release Lucie continues to function as the agent who recalls him to life. Just as Eppie is the golden child who revives Silas Marner's dormant soul, recalls to him memories of his far-off life, and reunites him with the present-day, Lucie "was the

golden thread that united [her father] to a Past beyond his misery, and to a Present beyond his misery: and the sound of her voice, the light of her face, the touch of her hand, had a strong beneficial influence with him almost always" (110). Both women and daughters also inspire and facilitate their fathers' reassimilation into society; their good influence reaches beyond their individual families and into the greater community.

Once Carton decides to forfeit his own life for the preservation of Darnay's – which, not incidentally, is a plan he gradually develops, not a convenient opportunity to salvage an ignoble life with a grand death – he has many chances to parlay his sacrifice into a ploy for Lucie's affection and attention; this, however, he never does. Except for the one occasion on which he pours forth his heart to Lucie, Carton loves her silently and from afar, and moreover anticipates the horror he will confront for Darnay without anyone's sympathy or support. Were Carton a self-interested manipulator, certainly he would have approached Lucie at her most vulnerable, in hopes of improving his standing with her. Instead, he exhorts Lorry:

Don't speak of me to her. As I said to you when I first came, I had better not see her. I can put my hand out, to do any little helpful work for her that my hand can do, without that. You are going to her, I hope? She must be very desolate to-night (338).

Committed primarily to her well-being, he will help inconspicuously, invisibly, sending Lorry to comfort her even though it is a task he would relish and draw strength from. When Lorry later ensures Carton of her welfare, Carton emits a "long, grieving sound, like a sigh – almost like a sob"

(338). His "Ah!" is a verbal manifestation of his love for her which affects him to the core; Dickens makes it clear that his self-denial is hardly easy for him, and often Carton seems to grieve for himself as well as for Lucie and for the future of those dear to her.

Edgar Johnson has written that "Carton is a suffering but heroic soul," and as such, in his vision of himself there is "none of the sentimentality and deception of dramatizing oneself as an innocent victim" (981). Indeed, Carton is reticent about the unfathomable act of heroism he is about to actuate, and never plays the role of or conceives of himself as the victim; Lucie inspires in him the kind of virtue that does not parade itself, and Carton knows that to reveal himself would be to jeopardize the success of his enterprise. Carton actually saves Darnay twice, and in neither case is he accredited any recognition or gratitude. At the trial when Carton stands up as Darnay's twin, the narrator specifies, "Nobody had made any acknowledgment of Mr. Carton's part in the day's proceedings; nobody had known of it" (112). When Darnay, believing his death imminent, writes his farewell missives in which he sends last words of love and remembrance to his family and friends, "He never thought of Carton" (377). Carton, by contrast, although he has both opportunity and occasion, does not leave behind any record of his valor, love, or even life. The only foreshadowing gesture Carton makes is to kiss little Lucie and murmur, "A life you love;" this tenderness is only noted afterward, by a child standing nearby. Even Carton's famous speech before dying is not issued from his lips, but a swan song uttered by the narrator on behalf of an

imagined victim of the guillotine. The dignity and serenity with which Carton moves toward his death is stunning, and appropriate in that it demonstrates the sincerity and profundity of his sacrifice and redemption.

In the novel's concluding chapters, Dickens bestows upon his hero an unambiguous Christ-like status. As he walks the Parisian streets the night before he is to die, he is so resolute in his purpose that he claims an inability to sleep, much as sleep eludes Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before the crucifixion. The narrator makes explicit Carton's resolution and that is spiritual destination is within sight, within reach:

It was not a reckless manner, the manner in which he said [that he could not sleep] aloud under the fast-sailing clouds, nor was it more expressive of negligence rather than defiance. It was the settled manner of a tired man, who had wandered and struggled, and got lost, but who at length struck into his road and saw its end (342).

This Carton is powerfully contrasted with the Carton of Book One, who wanders the nocturnal streets aimlessly, weeping "wasted tears," a "man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness..." (122). It is vital that Dickens establishes that Carton has transcended his waywardness and retrieved his lost soul, particularly since Carton must echo the following refrain earnestly and believably rather than absurdly: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die." This passage, which Carton utters before and at the hour of his death, affirms the Christ-like scope of his sacrifice and assures us that he, by dying, will be



reborn. Before Lucie, Sydney Carton *was* dead, was enduring a living moral death until love recuperated him; now, by dying as his best self, he saves not just Darnay but himself as well. Carton dies on the cross (on the guillotine that during the French Revolution replaced the Christian cross as a sign of salvation) with Christ's words in his mouth and unconquerable love in his heart. His redemption is complete.

Even readers who acknowledge Carton's transformation and selfless heroism nonetheless claim that his death has little enduring effect and even serves as a spurious conclusion to an otherwise successful and moving novel. Edgar Johnson, who affirms Carton's individual salvation, nevertheless argues that Dickens fails to fuse successfully the two themes of love and revolution: he insists that the "haloed radiance" and "personal grandeur" of Carton's martyrdom "for all of its power, destroys [the novel's] revolutionary meaning" (982). In the same vein, Harry Stone suggests that Carton's death in no way redeems or purifies the world he leaves behind, and is therefore an insufficient narrative conclusion (363).

Generally speaking, the heroic death of one man may seem an inadequate resolution to such a bloody and horrific Revolutionary tale, but within the context of A Tale of Two Cities, it is in keeping with the trajectory and spirit of the novel. Dickens consistently demonstrates the gulf between the Revolutionaries' ideals and their methods, and thus a more tidy or uncategorically triumphant ending would have been at odds with all he has worked to establish. More importantly, Stone and Johnson both neglect the subtle but

powerful ramifications of Carton's sacrifice. Not only does he enduringly effect the Manette/Darnay family, but Dickens also intimates that Carton's influence is much more pervasive and far-reaching than one family. The child who overhears Carton whisper "A life you love" to Lucie's daughter lives to recount the story to her grandchildren. Carton's immortality is born almost immediately: "They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peaceablest man's face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic" (403). Among those thoughts given utterance by one of Carton's imagined fellow victims is that Lucie's future son would bear Sydney's name, that Lucie would tell his story "with a tender and faltering voice," and that he would hold "a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence" (404). Carton's "unhistoric act" upon which "the growing good of the world is partly dependent" will outlive him; his love story will pass on for the benefit of countless generations to come.

Sydney Carton experiences two rebirths, both actualized by "the power of loving [that] was all the while gaining new force within him."<sup>3</sup> First, his worst self dies and his best self is reborn; second, he dies at the guillotine/cross and is reborn into eternal life, both in the Christian sense and in terms of his living legacy. Perhaps most importantly, his death emphatically represents the "vigorous tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate" (Dickens 397). Such love does not eradicate the bloodletting of the

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<sup>3</sup> From George Eliot's Adam Bede.

Revolution, but it does shine as the manifestation of the most beautiful side of the human spirit in the face of its darkest, and it does not cease shining with Sydney's death. W. Walter Crotch stirringly articulates Carton's legacy:

We feel that Sydney Carton lives and stands alone in all prose fiction; for he represents the universal truth that in every darkened mind there may be some inlet, through which a shaft of sunshine ultimately floods the soul with self-recognition and love; and that thus is generated such force of moral strength and purpose as many tend to the sublimest self-surrender (205-206).

This act of "self-surrender" is less a giving up or loss of the self than a restoration of the self and redemption of the soul, both made possible by the power of human, moral love.

## CHAPTER VII

### AFTERWORD

It is too often and erroneously assumed that the fear of strong feeling and repression of passion are the basic impulses at the heart of Victorian culture and literature. I hope this study has disproved that assumption by revealing a strain of Victorian novels and novelists deeply invested in the notion that deep feeling and desire can coincide with moral earnestness, and that love plots can and should transcend the parameters of marital, requited, and erotic love. The novels I examine are canonical, but their love stories are unconventional in that they rely upon unrequited, paternal, filial, aesthetic, perpetually deferred, and life altering love. While sexual repression or restraint is often a component of these stories, from Lambert Strether's intractable celibacy to Isabel Archer's passionless marriage to Philip Wakem's physical deformity, it does not preclude or impede the expression or experience of deep love. Another common misconception is that prevalent in Victorian narratives is an inviolable opposition between passion and repression, and that to choose the former over the latter is to imperil one's reputation if not one's soul. For the writers included in this study, however, the highest forms of human desire and love enhance or sustain rather than violate the integrity of the self; Sydney Carton is perhaps the best example of love's moral and redemptive capacity. Quite frequently, the most abiding

forms of love do develop from suffering and sacrifice, but is precisely these instances of suffering and sacrifice that are the roots of sympathy and salvation.

That “things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing” to the Sydney Cartons of the world – those who embody the invincibility of human love, and the tireless capacity of the human heart to renew itself out of even the most dissipated conditions – and to the Dorothea Brookes of the world – those whose “effect ... on those around [them] was incalculably diffusive” and upon whom “the growing good of the world is partly dependent” (Middlemarch 838). As we have seen earlier, in the works of Anne Bronte and Henry James the consequences of good and loving acts are specific and circumscribed. Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon are able to create warm, loving domiciles, but these are sanctuaries set utterly apart from the larger community that is still steeped in patriarchal and duplicitous tradition. At the end of The Ambassadors, we are supposed to believe that Strether’s vague mission has been somewhat successful, and that perhaps he is “dreadfully right” (even if some of us remain unconvinced). Isabel Archer is less ambiguously successful, and we are confident that her emotional and aesthetic development will greatly benefit Pansy at least. Comparatively, Eliot and Dickens are far more optimistic in their conviction that the influence of goodness and love is inestimable: the actions and examples of Sydney Carton, Dorothea Brooke, Eppie Marner, Philip Wakem and Dinah Morris

diffusively enhance the common good of their surrounding communities and even of the world.

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