

The Spoils of Poynton

H. James

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The plot is artificial, not to say hardly believable, but having the potentials of a farce. This might not have been the way James meant it, he certainly milks it for all its worth, yet it is hard not to see it as a wasted effort.

In short, a middle-aged woman Mrs G. is in love with her house and all its priceless possessions she has amassed during a life time and composed to their outmost potential. If you want, you can see it as a piece of art, which has taken a whole (idle) life to assemble. Such an endeavour must surely be properly taken care of, future generations to be expected to act as the custodians. As it is, the house has after the death of her husband been bequeathed to their only child, a son, who has fallen in love with a most unsuitable young woman, judging at least from the tastelessness of the home of her upbringing. She finds instead a more suitable match for her son, a young penniless woman of outmost taste, or at least a taste congruent with that of her own, with whom she strikes up an almost passionate friendship. This young woman, a certain Miss V. then finds herself in a slightly awkward position of being a go-between between her elderly friend and her son, whose relationship has ruptured as a consequence of the son's engagement to the unsuitable woman, Miss B. Mrs G. the mother, then takes the bold step of removing all the priceless possessions out of Poynton and putting them into a more modest abode, left to her by some aunt. The young woman is aghast at her audacity, surely she was only meant to bring a few mementoes with her, and the unsuitable young Miss B. is incensed, feeling rightly that her future possession has been taken away from her. (She may very well not be able to appreciate them for their intrinsic worth, but she has the ability of not seeing with her eyes, at least seeing with her ears, as James, in typical artfulness, allows his hapless heroine Miss V. to pronounce) She puts an ultimatum to her future husband, Mr G. to retrieve the spoils, otherwise the marriage is off. The poor weak man, handsome and attractive as he may be, is caught in a trap, and appeals to the companion of her mother to bring her around. At the same time, rather incongruously one would say, he hints at a potential romantic interest in the young lady herself. An interest one surmises developed less out of calculation, of which he is assumed incapable, but of pure simplicity of impulse. She is then put in a very delicate situation. By simply revealing to the mother, the true state of affairs, she can count on her obstinacy to bring about a rupture, win the heart of the young weak man, whose very faults she is more than willing to oversee (for the material wares which come with them), and hence get all the spoils herself. Out of a sense of propriety, she refuses to do the obvious, although the mother gradually intuits the true state of affairs, as the promised marriage refuses to materialize. Then the plot thickens, the young man expresses his distaste for his future bride, and after a fortuitous encounter of the two with his future mother-in-law, the consequences of which is for the latter to accuse him of playing up to the young woman, the young man is sure that the marriage is off, and that he thereby is returned his freedom., without having to lift a finger to bring it about. But the young

woman is holding off, however gratified she is by his sentimental attention, and demands that he gains his freedom on his own, confronts miss B. and only thereafter proposes to her. And he takes off, and of course nothing happens but an extended silence. His mother meanwhile is so sure of the outcome, that she triumphantly returns all the possessions she has so wilfully appropriated, sure that the match she so fervently desires will come about. The young woman though, aware of the prolonged silence of her lover, is aghast, finding the action rather rash. And indeed, when the future bride picks up the news that the place is restored, she decides to get married after all, and easily wins over the indecisive young man, who marries her without demurring. Then, as to add insult to injury, the couple travels abroad for extended times, leaving Poynton and its staff and beautiful set-up to their own devices. Eventually the young man writes his jilted lover a letter in which he graciously offers her the pock of the pack at Poynton, urging her to freely choose what she finds most desirable, as he owes her so much. What does he owe her? Her passivity in not obstructing his marriage, which obviously gives him pleasure, as it does so to his bride?. For some reason the young woman treasures this offer, and takes a long time in acting on it, in order to be able to savour it the more. When she finally on a stormy winter day goes down to claim her prize, she is met with the news that the whole thing is on fire, everything gone, and empty-handed she has to return.

Of course plot is subsidiary, if supportive, of a novel. It is what the skeleton is for a vertebrate, providing a structure on which one may draft the meat of the story. The meat in this case is the subtle interchanges that go on between the protagonists. Now of this I would say there is precious little, although James does his best to squeeze out as much as possible of the material. The problem is that the whole thing is too farcial really to engage on a serious level. Mrs G. has some character, definitely she has, while the young woman, is too insipid really to engage the sympathies of the reader. The young man, the son, is of course interesting as a study of weak character, but once again, the interest is mainly of a farcial kind,

James is weak on sense of time and place, but in this book those deficiencies, are not as disturbing, as the novel fits into a tradition, namely the depiction of easy upper class British life around the turn of the past century. Hence we have a feeling of the country houses, and their silent armies of unobtrusive servants, making the whole thing tick along beautifully. You think of Aldous Huxley, and also Virginia Woolf, and countless other descriptions, to whom in all fairness, James may have been an inspiration, at least as far as Woolf goes, with her delicate ironies, and the ambition of trying to wrench as much as possible out of the seemingly inconsequential incidents of life. Focusing on the farcial elements, a less gratifying development may be that of P.G.Woodehous, in whose novels the weak ondecisive young man, would have fitted beautifully.

August 16, 2007 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se