

Washington Square

H. James

August 6-9, 2007

This is in many ways an exquisite book. I certainly would not have been mature enough to appreciate it back when I bought it, which must have been in the early 70's at Harvard, In fact I started reading it at the time, the bookmark still remains, some old faded receipt, which I have tried in vain to decipher, laid buried after one of the first few chapters,

What is it about? The question, like most of the questions you can ask about a novel of Henry James is easy to answer. The situation is the following. A clever and successful doctor, a certain Austin Sloper living at Washington Square, has had two major misfortunes in his life, which otherwise would have been perfect. Namely suffering the loss of an infant son on which he had pinned such hopes and entertained such grand ambitions for, and shortly thereafter the loss in child birth of his rich and beautiful and clever wife, whom he had deeply adored. To add insult to injury, the girl, who is the source of his misfortune grows up under the tutelage of his sister, a rather silly widow, and turns out to be rather simple-minded woman with no obvious charms, save that of a fresh complexion and a ruddy health. The doctor wants her to be clever nevertheless, while his sister wants her to be good. 'Good for what?' the doctor asks, pointing out that being clever makes it easier to be good. He is disappointed in his daughter, but cannot help but feel a certain fondness for her. She is kindhearted and devoted to him. He fears though that her aunt will put romantic ideas into her impressionable mind, persuade her that some young man is in love with her, just to be able to live vicariously in what otherwise is denied her. The danger is great, because his daughter is the heiress of a substantial fortune, and indeed a young handsome man pays her, and her aunt, exaggarated attention, completely unwarranted by her social charms. The doctor with his extended experience of people quickly identifies him as a lowly fortune hunter, and is opposed to the match, while the aunt is very much fanning its flames. The daughter, so simple and vulnerable to the charms of a young handsome man falls for him. The father wants to protect her, and after all his position is a sound one. The man is obviously going to make her miserable, out only after her money. And the poor girl is torned between her affection, admiration as well as fear of her father, and the charms of the young man, and the concomitant stirrings of an aroused sensuality¹. Her father is quite aware of this struggle, and it somehow amuses him, or at least this is as far as he is willing to concede to himself. The conflict only makes her more attached to the latter, and after a struggle she decides to throw her lot with him. Once decided, her simple nature becomes rather obstinate. Somehow the father manages to arrange for her to join him on a six month tour to Europe, a tour extended into a year, as the doctor

¹ Of course there is little sex, at least of the explicit kind, in the novels of James, which clearly is at variance with modern sensibilities and exepctations, and give to his novels a spurious chastity many modern readers may find frustrating and exasperating.

easily finds so much to attract him. Yet, the daughter carries on a regular correspondence with her loover, without telling her father, thereby slowly and timidly widening the rift between them, and after the end of the year, which naturally has made no impression on her, as her mind has been otherwise engaged, her commitment is stronger than ever. The young man is getting cold feet though, as the father has made it known that in the case of a marriage none of his money would go to her, which makes her less desirable as a match of calculation. A simple quarrel gives him an excuse to withdraw. The girl is heart-broken. She will never marry, her affections once having been awoken and attached, cannot be reattached nor revived. The father eventually dies, and she is left without his inheritance, because as a matter of pride she has refused to honor his whim of promising never to marry the young man after his death. After many years she meets him again, the young man no longer young, his erstwhile charms faded, the meeting naturally finagled by the ever meddling aunt. To the daughter the encounter is painful, she would rather not ever have anything more to do with him. He pleads, but his heart is not pure, to him the meeting is one of calculation on his part, encouraged by the tantalizing hints phantasized by the aunt. His life has not been too successful, so even the match of only a moderately wealthy woman, may be of some interest. He is rejected, and that is more or less the end of the story.

Now this is clearly a moral tale. The father is right of course. He is guided by consideration of his daughter and her happiness. He knows her limitations, how she would be unable to protect herself from being used. His assessment of the prospective son-in-law is entirely correct. He is indeed a good for nothing, perfectly acceptable as a lively dinner-companion, but not one to entrust the happiness of his daughter. He is right, but clearly he does wrong. Where does he go wrong? By taking a pride in his daughters affection for him, thereby entering into the competition with the young man, confident of besting him, because after all he is the referee of the game. And by besting him he will triumph over youth. But his triumph is denied him, the daughter has chosen, and that he cannot accept.

Still what could have been done, short of giving the tacit assent to a match which no doubt would have made his daughter unhappy? Maybe there are different kinds of unhappiness. A failed marriage may be more satisfying than no marriage at all. Everyone should be free to do their own mistakes and suffer through them. Still he did not have the power to prevent the marriage, he only had the power to make his daughter somewhat less acceptable to a fortune hunter. Can he be blamed for this? Can he really be blamed for not encouraging something he so firmly disapproved of? Or should he have with open yes led his daughter to the wolf?

One may argue that the problem the author discusses would never have arisen in our age. That our age is far more enlightened, with, at least up to recently, less distinction in individual wealth, and with a somewhat more egalitarian society, especially as to the sexes. True, this story could not have been played out in 2000, or even 1950, at least not in the Western world, we feel that quite convincingly, but what is it about Society which would have prevented it? The reasons tentatively presented above are simply not convincing. Is it really about Society? Of course it is about society in the sense that the notion of a fortune hunter is a product of particular society and would not exist in another. But

basically it is about the psychological make-up of the daughter. Is she believable? Not in our Society. Why? Is it because our society teaches the supreme virtue of selfishness, of seeing to your own interests, of getting ahead. A young woman of such simplistic nature would simply not arise (but maybe in another contemporary culture, in the Arabic world perhaps, or in Iran or India? Many oldfashioned Victorian novels acquire a new vitality and immediacy if transformed into contemporary but alien cultures.). Still this does not appear convincing either. Could it be that the whole story is psychologically flawed, that it would have been as improbable in 1850 as in 1950? (Or as improbable in the Middle East as in contemporary Manhattan?)

Yet, what makes the story so entertaining is the psychological acuity of its dialogue. It is at time exquisite, and it makes so much sense. James is often compared with Jane Austin. A male embodiment of the feminine sensibility. Could a story be locally psychologically accurate, but globally all wrong? is Henry James a genius of the small detail, of the subtle nuances of etiquette and social innouendo. A painter of miniatures. A most sharp-eyed observer of social mores and a sarcastic commentator. An unparalleled painter of the surface of human relations, but never really probing into the real depths. Artful yes, extremely so, but not truthful. Art but not life, meant to be transparent and artificial, eminently amenable to analysis². His compositions are to be likened to geometrical proofs, neat and logical, but somehow irrelevant. So much precision, but leading where? No wonder I found him bloodless in my youth. He simply did not touch.

One thing that strikes the reader of his novels is the almost complete lack of evocation of either time or place, especially the latter. The action takes place in New York, a New York which is rapidly growing spreading uptown. But of this one is given almost no sense. In fact the only sense of New York as a city of this earth, is a brief reference to sand on the floor in the oyster restaurant. Similarly the Europe painted during the grand tour is likewise shadowy. It all reminds you of a play in which the stage is almost empty of props. There are almost no props in the novels of James, at least none of which I have read so far. It is all a matter of dialogue. The natural question is why does not James write plays instead? Would not the novel be an ideal play, after all there is all dialogue? Yet, I do not think it would work as a play either, there is not enough dramatic tension. And in fact, the plays James tried to write failed. The proper setting is after all the novel. It is a matter of time, leisurely flowing time, which cannot be compressed, but needs the intimacy of a book to flourish. The intimacy that can only be provided by a book and its reader. On the other hand filmatizations of James stories are very popular. As David Lodge has remarked, the novels of James are ideal for setting into a visual media, as the books themselves are so avisual. And also that the few number of characters makes it possible to make it all coherent on the screen. And finally that they can be edited, the somewhat pedantic pace of a James, makes it possible to cut out much of the text, without compromising the plot. But of course not all films are enjoyed in cinemas, but in the privacy provided by the small screen. Watching TV has for many become a substitute for reading, in a way going to the movies or the theatre obviously are not, namely a solitary pursuit.

² And James did famously provide his books with prefaces, which are considered to be the ultimate critical assessments of his works. In other words the true metier of James was that of a critic, but in order to find worthy subjects of his discerning eye, he needed to write them himself.

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