

HENRY JAMES

“Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that, what have you had?”

The Ambassadors, 1903

BY ANNA NORTH

“DO NOT MIND ANYTHING THAT ANYONE TELLS YOU about anyone else,” wrote Henry James. “Judge everyone and everything for yourself.” James, the American-born author of 20 novels and more than 100 stories, plays, and pieces of literary criticism, investigated the intricacies of human consciousness while recognizing the high potential of the novel as an art form. Many critics consider James, along with Mark Twain, as the greatest American novelist of the latter half of the 19th century. But if Twain satirized hypocrisy by contrasting appearance and reality, James perceived and internalized the evolving sensibilities of the Gilded Age. James’s exceptional psychological realism influenced later writers and served as a bridge to modern fiction. His works—some of the best ever published in America—have captivated inquiring minds on both sides of the Atlantic for more than a hundred years.

An American living in Europe and an unmarried man of enigmatic sexuality, James transformed his personal views, relationships, and experiences into fiction. Many of his best-known novels, from *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) to *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), reflect his trans-Atlantic experience and his rejection of America in favor of the Old World. In these

works, James confirmed stereotypes about class, family, politics, sexuality, and society. He juxtaposed what he saw as the brash, innocent, and provincial values of the New World with those of the rich, aristocratic, and subtle Old World. His works explored the singular—and often uncomfortable—interactions between Americans and Europeans as they struggled to understand each others’ differences.

This clash between cultures often plays out in James’s female characters, some of the richest in all of literature. From Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* to Daisy Miller, his women explored independence and the price it exacted. Says Isabel Archer, “I am very fond of my liberty.” James perhaps based these women on his idealized love for his younger cousin Minny Temple, a precocious, spirited, and independent girl who died young. At the same time, James,

who remained a cool spectator of his characters’ lives, imbued them with a sense of his own discomfort with sex, sexuality, and female unconventionality, views possibly influenced by his own father’s traditional beliefs about women and by his own celibacy. “To be led to the marriage bed is to be dead,” James stated. A shy man with many acquaintances but only a few close friends, James, especially toward the end of his life, expe-

WHERE TO START

For a representative novel on James’s classic theme, the clash between 19th-century European and American cultures, try **DAISY MILLER**, **THE WINGS OF THE DOVE**, or **THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY**, perhaps James’s most famous, if difficult, character study. **THE GOLDEN BOWL** distills these themes and offers a surprisingly satisfying ending. “**THE TURN OF THE SCREW**,” which ventures into ghost-story territory, is equally rewarding—and unsettling.

rienced some intense relationships with younger men. These friendships have led many to read homoerotic undertones in James's life and work, though any references to homosexuality in his writing are thickly veiled. Perhaps to mask his sexuality, James stuck to tradition. He created gullible American "ladies" threatened by sophisticated European men, while limning affecting, passionate relationships between the sexes. By focusing on contemporary women—and in some cases, the suffrage movement—James also criticized what he saw as the deleterious effects of American democratic culture on the individual.

With his richly drawn characters, sharp descriptive power, and deep psychological insight, James, a master craftsman, painted a broad canvas of 19th-century life and experience. His technique of narrating a novel from a character's point of view also set a stylistic foundation for modern stream-of-consciousness writing, though his elegant prose seems quaint in contrast with the styles of near contemporaries James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence.

Born in New York City in 1843, James was the second child in a large, wealthy, close-knit family. His father, Henry James Sr., was a recognized liberal intellectual well acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne; his older brother became one of American psychology's founding fathers. James, whose father prized worldly experience, spent part of his childhood and adolescence in London, Geneva, and Paris before his family settled in Newport in 1860 and then in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A minor injury exempted James from service during the Civil War; instead, he attended Harvard Law School in 1862, but dropped out to write. He started to publish in the *Atlantic Monthly* at the encouragement of William Dean Howells and soon experienced visions of grandeur. "If I keep along here patiently," he wrote to his mother, "I rather think I shall become a (sufficiently) great man." The intellectual, social, and moral climate of Europe made

such an enduring impact on his writing that he soon left America once again. He published his first novel, *Watch and Ward* (1871), while traveling through Paris and Venice, and later became acquainted with authors Ivan Turgenev, Emile Zola, and Gustave Flaubert and supported younger writers like Edith Wharton. James, who settled permanently in London and became a British subject in 1915, didn't return to America until 1905.

James's first successful novels, including *The American*, *Daisy Miller*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, considered the greatest work of his early period, secured his international reputation and forever identified him as an "international" realist writer. During this time, James also perfected his moral dramas and detached observations of the peculiar American character. While sophisticated readers praised his work, many also criticized his novels' distance from "common" life. Fortunately, royalties and inheritance kept James out of the poorhouse.

After the success of his early novels, James relinquished his international contrasts and focused more on social reformers, feminists, and revolutionaries in his middle period. Both *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) received mixed reviews, and throughout the decade, sales of his novels declined. "I shall have been a failure," James mourned, "unless I do something great!" He pinned new hopes on writing for the stage, only to suffer a series of defeats. At the opening night of his play *Guy Domville* in 1895, James took the London stage expecting applause. He received a thundering chorus of sneers instead.

In 1895, recovering from his disappointments, James wrote in his notebook, "I take up my old pen again—the pen of all my old unforgettable efforts and sacred struggles. ... It is now indeed that I may do the work of my life. And I will." In less than a decade James published three of his greatest novels: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), which reig-

SELECTED OTHER WORKS

WATCH AND WARD (1871)

Young Nora must deal with the revelation that her guardian and father figure intends to marry her.

RODERICK HUDSON (1875)

Roderick, an attractive and gifted sculptor, travels to Rome and starts an intense friendship with his patron Rowland Mallet.

THE AMERICAN (1877)

Brash American Christopher Newman wants to marry the rich French widow Claire de Cintre, and he's

not above using blackmail to do so.

THE EUROPEANS (1878)

American siblings Eugenia and Robert, raised in European high society, return to New England and clash with their relatives' puritanical society.

THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA (1886)

A poor young man becomes involved in working-class revolutions in 1880s London and in a relationship with a politically-minded princess.

THE TRAGIC MUSE (1890)

Painter Nick Dormer is torn between his art and a career in Parliament;

"tragic Muse" Miriam Root complicates his decision.

WHAT MAISIE KNEW (1897)

Six-year-old Maisie is torn between her divorced parents, who care for her in alternate six-month periods.

THE AMBASSADORS (1903)

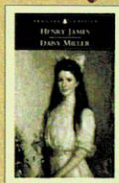
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American Lambert Strether is sent to Paris to bring young Chad Newsome home; there he becomes embroiled in a marriage drama that affects both Chad's future and his own. ■

nited his international theme. He also reached his highest development as a writer. But suffering from arthritis, James switched to dictation. Many critics claim this transition marked a stylistic change from the relative clarity of his earlier work to psychological subtleties and ambiguities penned in a complex, labyrinthine style. As a result, James's later works failed to find a wide audience. Still, intellectual elites in Europe and America recognized him as a preeminent literary light.

James spent the last years of his life writing his memoirs and revising his novels for the 24-volume New York Edition of his works. After his death in 1916, James achieved some of the acclaim that had eluded him in life. His works, especially *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Daisy Miller*, and "The Turn of the Screw," are safely ensconced in university curricula all over the world, and critics hail him worldwide for his complex rendering of his subjects' inner lives. "In the body of Mr. Henry James's work," wrote contemporary Joseph Conrad, "there is no suggestion of finality, nowhere a hint of surrender, or even of probability of surrender, to his own victorious achievement in that field where he is a master" ("Henry James, An Appreciation, 1905," from *Notes on Life and Letters*, 1921).

MAJOR WORKS

Daisy Miller (1878)



Published in the British magazine *The Cornhill*, the short novel *Daisy Miller* was a surprise hit. James had already gained some praise for his work but little money, and he was pleasantly surprised when *Daisy Miller* earned him both popular renown and a book deal. Public reaction to Daisy's tale centered on the question of her sexual transgression; today some feminist readers find inspiration in Daisy. Others see the story as an examination of the conflict between European and American morals and between experience and innocence.

THE STORY: Daisy Miller, a spirited, rich, young American girl, visits Rome but cannot adapt herself to the strict social mores of Europe. An assignation with a young, unknown Italian, Mr. Giovanelli, threatens her reputation and her relationship with her American expatriate suitor Winterbourne, and emotional and social complexities follow. When Winterbourne encounters Daisy and Mr. Giovanelli at the Colosseum by moonlight, he concludes that Daisy lacks self-respect—but it's too late.

"Daisy Miller (1879) enraged the United States, where it was thought an aspersion upon American girlhood. ... Henry James had done nothing more reprehensible than to make international comedy out of the situation chosen by Milton for his *Comus*." CARL VAN DOREN, "HENRY JAMES," *THE AMERICAN NOVEL*, 1921.

"Daisy remains the most uncompromising and uninhibited of James's many freedom-seeking heroines." JUDITH FRYER, *THE FACES OF EVE*, 1976.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *Daisy Miller* succeeded in jump-starting James's career—and, by illustrating the tragic effects of class distinction, in providing a subject of debate for generations to come.

THE MOVIE: 1974, starring Cybil Shepherd, Barry Brown, and Cloris Leachman, and directed by Peter Bogdanovich.

Washington Square (1880)



James named *Washington Square* after his New York birthplace. Written on the heels of an unsuccessful biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne, it was James's first work to fulfill the promise of *Daisy Miller*. Some have called the novel autobiographical, centering as it does on an overbearing father and the decision to forgo sexual and romantic attachment. James in fact was not particularly fond of it, calling it "a poorish thing ... a tale purely American." Serialized in *The Cornhill*, *Washington Square* helped cement James's reputation as the finest American novelist of the day.

THE STORY: The rather disappointing Catherine Sloper, neither pretty nor intelligent, lives with her wealthy father, a respectable doctor and widower, in Manhattan's Washington Square. Her father forbids her marriage to the smooth-talking charmer Morris Townsend, who has been traveling the world. But will the opportunistic Townsend, after learning that Dr. Sloper will withhold most of Catherine's inheritance if he marries her, betray Catherine?

"[The novel is] a dainty masterpiece, lucid and quiet and cool, ironical yet tender. ... The fashion in which James here constantly explains America to his readers, as if they were of course to be Europeans, hints that he had traveled a long way from his native shores in a half-dozen years, as indeed he had." CARL VAN DOREN, "HENRY JAMES," *THE AMERICAN NOVEL*, 1921.

"With rare explicitness, James marks each stage of Catherine's expanding consciousness, almost obtrusively cataloguing her 'new' emotions as she experiences them." JAMES GARGANO, *STUDIES IN SHORT FICTION*, 1994.

"[Washington Square] stands for the stifling provincial life of America, the stifling emotional life of the family—everything James was leaving behind him." BETTE HOWLAND, *RARITAN*, 1996.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *Washington Square* remains relevant even in an age less bound by propriety—a painful tale of a woman who, beset by external pressures, chooses to live a reduced life.

THE MOVIE: 1997, starring Jennifer Jason Leigh, Albert Finney, and Ben Chaplin, and directed by Agnieszka Holland.

The Portrait of a Lady (1881)



McMillan's Magazine and the *Atlantic Monthly* serialized this capstone of James's early period in 1880 and 1881. James started the novel in Florence, continued it in Paris and Venice, and finished it in London. This psychologically profound book bears the mark of this globe-trotting; it examines culture clash and expatriate isolation in much greater depth than *Daisy Miller*. *The Portrait of a Lady*, a nuanced work of psychological realism that, through stream of consciousness, captures Isabel's state of mind, has gained wide praise both in its time and ours.

THE STORY: Isabel Archer, the "lady" of the title, is a young American woman of means, self-educated and independent. She is pursued on the Continent by three suitors: strapping Caspar Goodwood, heir to a Boston mill; noble Lord Warburton, whom she meets in England; and mysterious Gilbert Osmond, a man of no social standing in Florence. When Isabel chooses the wrong man, she encounters a corrupt family which strips her of her youthful illusions.

"[I]t is as if the novel's failure to close contributes to the fantasy we spin around this portrait: that the lady is greater than any story told about her." LEE CLARK MITCHELL, RARITAN, 1985.

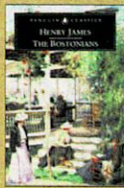
"[This is] as nearly perfect a work as a novel could be." GORE VIDAL, "INTRODUCTION TO THE GOLDEN BOWL," 1985.

"What impressed above all was the rounded imperfection of James's characters, their very lack of clear definition. ... This, in short, is the novel's triumph: it lies in the complexity of James's portraits, in their ragged truths." CLAIRE MESSUD, GUARDIAN UNLIMITED, 1/17/2004.

THE BOTTOM LINE: With its nuanced treatment of its heroine's inner life, *The Portrait of a Lady* shines as an example of James's psychological realism and affinity for female characters.

THE MOVIE: 1996, starring Nicole Kidman, John Malkovich, and Barbara Hershey, and directed by Jane Campion.

The Bostonians (1886)



The Bostonians, a "very American tale," represented a departure for James. His experimentation with the technique of naturalism, involving precise and realistic description, resulted in a work much longer than he had initially intended. The novel deals more explicitly than James's previous work with the question of a woman's place in society, of her ability to achieve and maintain independence. *The Bostonians* was the first of James's major novels to suffer mixed, even hostile, reviews for its ending and its depiction of the close relationship between the two female principals, which verges on the homoerotic. However, the novel has garnered more praise in recent years.

THE STORY: Verena Tarrant is a gifted public speaker pulled by two opposing forces: the feminist Olive Chancellor and the reactionary southerner Basil Ransom. Olive wants Verena to use her gift on the feminist lecture circuit, while Basil wants her to give up public life and marry him. The bulk of the novel concerns the battle between these two for mastery over Verena.

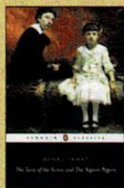
"[The Bostonians is] the most considerable product of the social historian in James." F. W. DUPEE, HENRY JAMES, 1956.

"It is written, paradoxically, with a ferocious, precise, detailed—and wildly comic—realism that derives from Dickens and Balzac. In that paradox lie both its greatness and the edged tone that arouses instinctive dislike in many readers." A. S. BYATT, GUARDIAN UNLIMITED, 9/6/2003.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Perhaps the most problematic of James's novels, it showcases his attention to detail and his interest in the politics of his time.

THE MOVIES: 1984, starring Christopher Reeve, Vanessa Redgrave, Jessica Tandy, and Madeleine Potter, and directed by James Ivory.

The Turn of the Screw (1898)



James published this profitable story when he was living in a rambling mansion in Sussex after a long, unsuccessful period of playwrighting. Some call the story a reaction to James's complex relationships with his siblings or to the sometimes dogmatic nature of his upbringing. Critics have consistently praised the story from its publication to the present day, though it continues to defy interpretation. Of central concern is the reliability of the narrator: is she crazy, or are the ghosts she sees real?

THE STORY: A ghost story retold by an anonymous narrator, "The Turn of the Screw" finds a young governess at a remote country house employed by a shadowy man to teach his children, Miles and Flora. Then the governess starts seeing the ghosts of a former valet and her own predecessor, who had a clandestine affair when they were alive and perhaps even perverse relations with the children. Believing the ghosts are haunting the children, the governess must protect them if they are to survive.

"[This is] the finest work ... [James] has ever done—for the foul breath of the bottomless pit itself, which strikes the reader full in the face as he follows the plot, puts to shame by its penetrating force and quiet ghastliness the commonplace, unreal 'horrors' of the ordinary ghost-story." THE AMERICAN MONTHLY REVIEW OF REVIEWS, 12/1898.

"['The Turn of the Screw' provides] the strongest and most affecting argument against sin we have lately encountered in literature." THE NEW YORK TIMES, 10/15/1898.

“Crucial to the story’s effect is the fact that this is all narrated in a highly ambiguous style which makes it impossible to tell whether or not the ghosts are real or the governess is crazy: Like the governess, the reader is put in a position of having to read into an unclear text.” JONATHAN FLATLEY, “READING INTO HENRY JAMES,” CRITICISM, WINTER 2004.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Since its publication, “The Turn of the Screw” has retained its reputation as one of the finest ghost stories ever written.

The Wings of the Dove (1902)

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The Wings of the Dove is James’s great, late masterpiece. He started it after a number of changes in his life: he had recently reordered his business affairs to maximize the profit from his writing, hired a typist to replace his expensive stenographer, and shaved the beard he had worn since the 1860s. Older, more jaded, and now securely European, he portrayed the conflict between European and American values more darkly than ever before. Though initially disliked by E. M. Forster and Edith Wharton, *The Wings of the Dove* is considered a masterful, if difficult, work.

THE STORY: *The Wings of the Dove* opens with a clandestine English couple, Kate Croy and Merton Densher, poor and in love. When they encounter the innocent American heiress Milly Theale, who may be terminally ill, Kate sees an opportunity for Merton to seduce Milly and thereby win her fortune. This seduction, however, has its own unforeseen results.

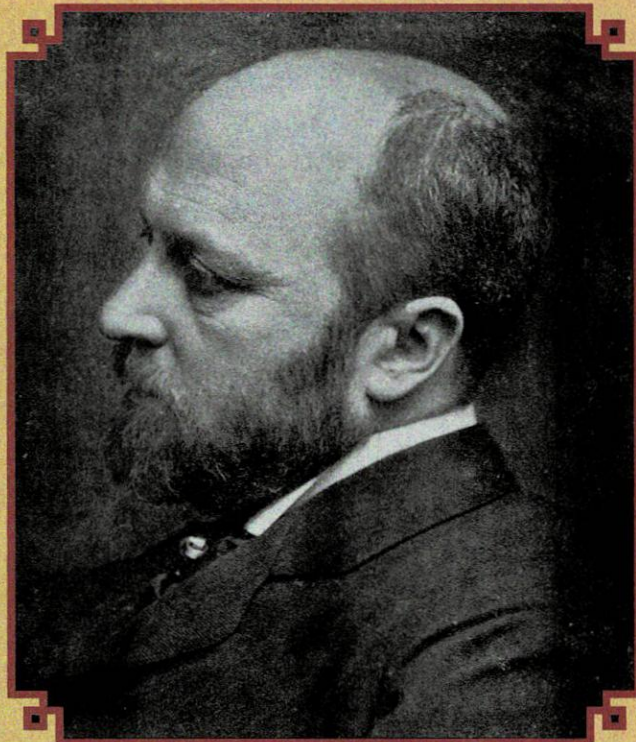
“As Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* has risen magnificently to meet life, so here Milly Theale magnificently rises to meet death. The book is the drama of her ‘inspired resistance.’ ... *The Wings of the Dove* is most elevated, most tender, most noble.” CARL VAN DOREN, “HENRY JAMES,” THE AMERICAN NOVEL, 1921.

“[*The Wings of the Dove* marks] the pinnacle of James’s prose.” LOUIS AUCHINCLOSS, READING HENRY JAMES, 1975.

“Panther-like, pacing to and fro within her urban jungle, her muscles tense with unspent energy, Kate might justifiably prompt curious visitors to come up short before her cage and feel the shiver of strong emotion—she is, after all, one of the most redoubtable creatures in the Master’s menagerie.” MICHAEL MARTIN, HENRY JAMES REVIEW, 2003.

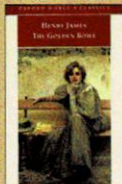
THE BOTTOM LINE: As an examination of the complexities of love and money, the novel has no equal in James’s oeuvre.

THE MOVIE: film 1997, starring Helena Bonham Carter, Linus Roache, and Alison Elliott, and directed by Jain Softley.



The Golden Bowl (1904)

♦ #32, MODERN LIBRARY’S 100 BEST NOVELS



The Golden Bowl was James’s last completed masterpiece. Finished in England just before his final trip to America, it distilled all of the themes that had defined his creative life: marriage, Europe and America, the problematic relationships within families. Many modern critics have lauded the novel as a masterpiece, but some find it cold, amoral, and stylistically baroque.

THE STORY: The novel renders the events from three different points of view—Amerigo, an Italian prince; his American wife Maggie Verver; and his adulterous lover Charlotte Stant, a poor American. Charlotte’s marriage to Maggie’s father Adam, a tycoon and art collector, complicates matters. The destruction of this double triangle culminates in what some critics call the most satisfying resolution in all of James’s work.

“[*The Golden Bowl* is] a work unique among all [James’s] novels: it is [his] only novel in which things come out right for his characters. ... He had finally resolved the questions, curious and passionate, that had kept him at his desk on his inquiries into the process of living. He could now make his peace with America—and he could now collect and unify the work of a lifetime.” LEON EDEL, THE LIFE OF HENRY JAMES, 1953.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *The Golden Bowl* is undeniably difficult, but it rewards the dedicated reader with a portrait of human consciousness in all its fascinating imperfections.

THE MOVIE: 2000, starring Nick Nolte, Kate Beckinsale, James Fox, Anjelica Huston, and Uma Thurman, and directed by James Ivory. ■