

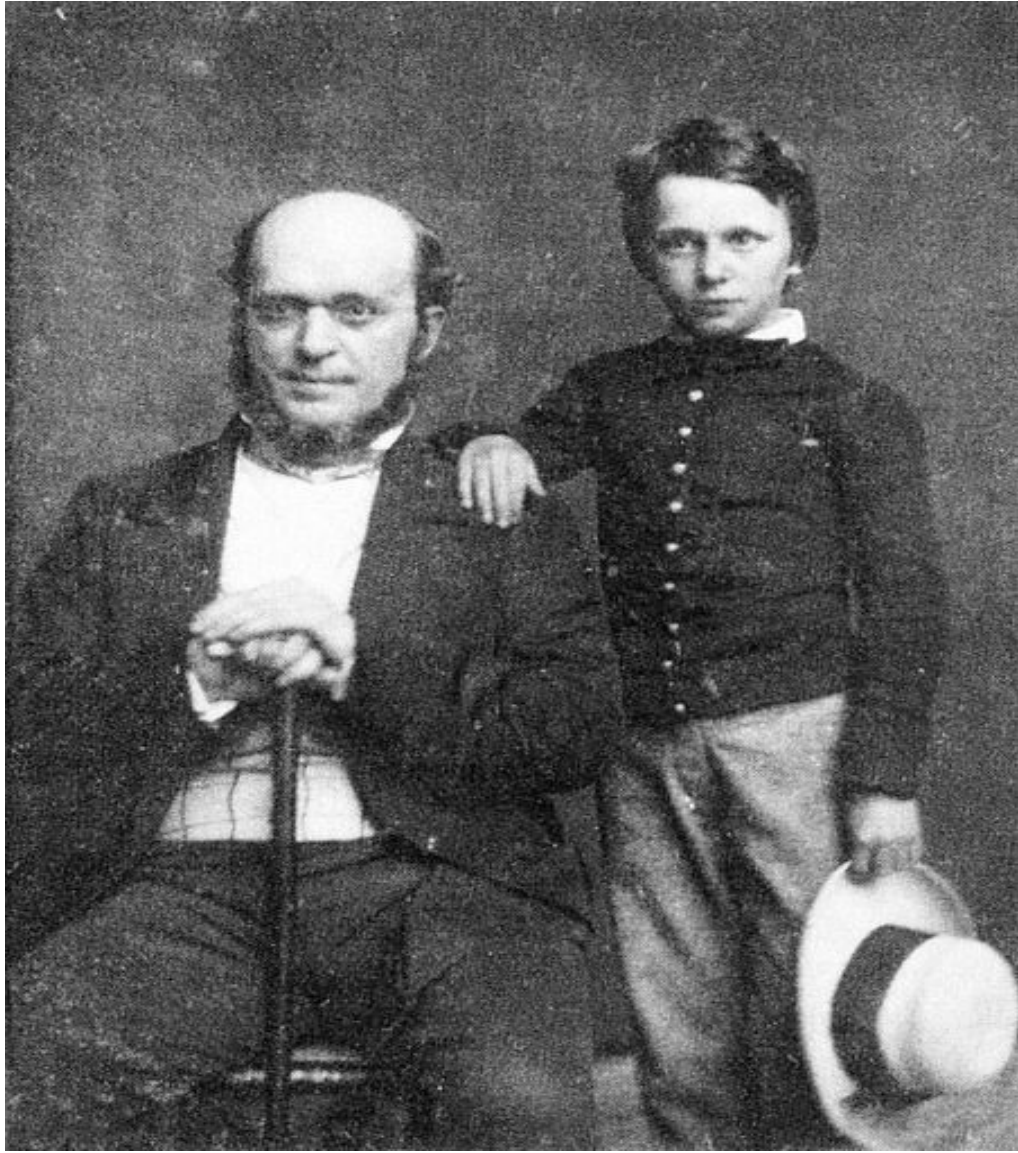


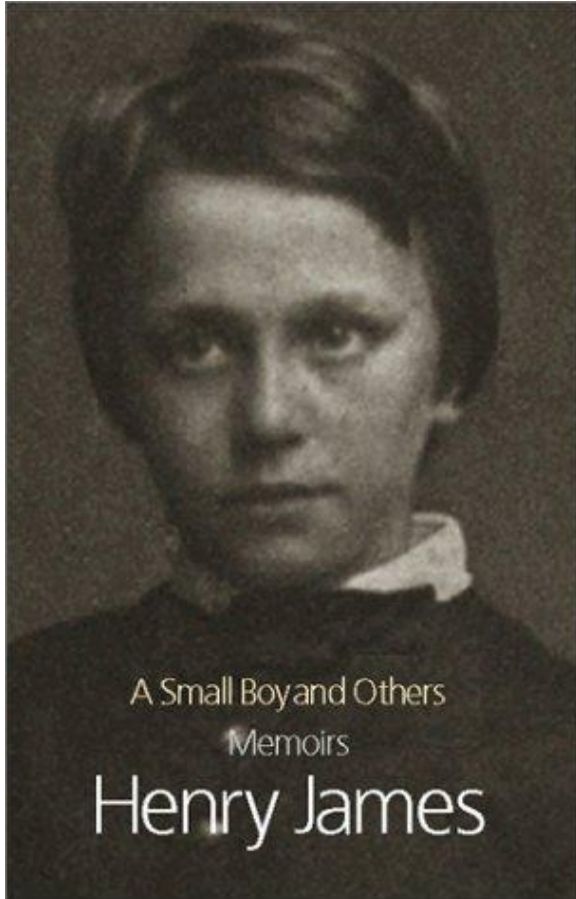
Henry James
(1843-1916)

The Biographical background

- Well-to-do family that stressed education and personal freedom:
- “I want my children to enjoy as much beauty and freedom as they can get” (Henry’s father, a well-known intellectual in mid-19th century America)

- Brother William James would become a professor of psycho-pathology at Harvard, the first translator of Freud into English; and his sister Alice would become an invalid (“in our family group girls scarcely seem to have had a chance”) and a diarist





Henry James traveled extensively to Europe

His love for European travel was instilled in him at a very young age

- Extended visits to European cities such as London, Geneva, London, Paris, Bologna, and Bonn occurred throughout most of his childhood
- As a result, he had an unusual education: he attended a variety of schools and was taught by private tutors in a range of cosmopolitan settings.

- In 1875 he expatriated to Europe (later to be followed by Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, Fitzgerald...)
- After both Henry James' parents died in 1882, Henry James didn't see America again for more than 20 years.

- Lived in London and later in Rye (Sussex)
- London: “The most complete compendium of the world”
- Became a major literary figure, a friend of Edith Wharton, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Bernard Berenson...

- “My choice is the Old World –my choice, my need, my life; on the whole the most possible form of life. I take London as an artist and as a bachelor; as one who has the passion of observation and whose business is the study of human life.” (Letter to William James)

- James spent the last 53 years of his life in England, becoming a British subject in 1915, one year before his death



- James's cosmopolitan heritage as key to his fiction:
- First volume: *The Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales* (1875) anticipates “the international theme”
- *The American* (1877), *Daisy Miller* (1878), *The Europeans* (1878), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904)

- “I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to the outsider to say whether I am an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as a do with both countries)...”

Honorary degrees from

Harvard University in 1911

Oxford University in 1912



- Themes:

- A) The international theme

- The clashes between two different cultures
 - The emotional and moral problems of Americans in Europe and Europeans in America

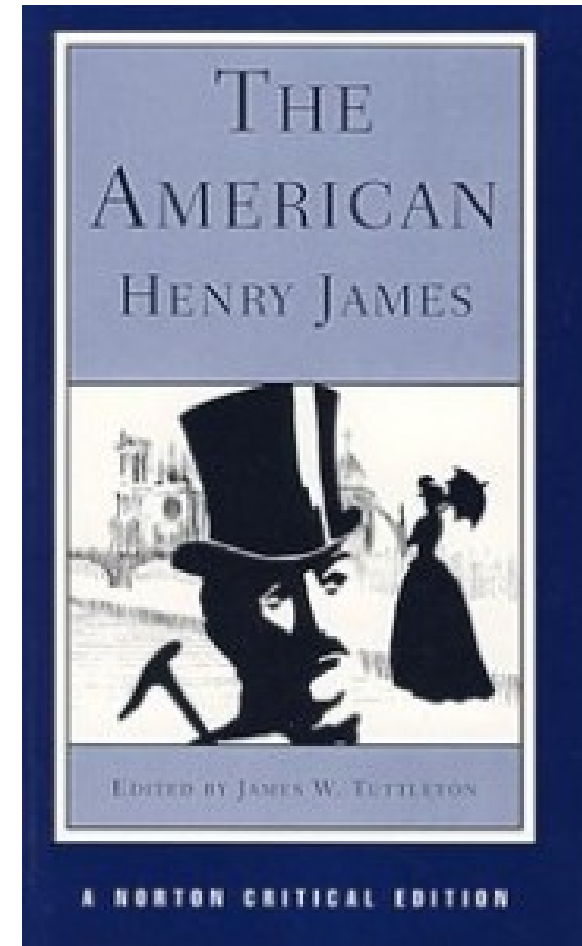
- *The American*
 - *The Europeans*
 - *Daisy Miller*
 - *The Portrait of a Lady*

The Europeans
• Henry James •



- The Europeans in James' novels are
 - more sophisticated
 - more concerned with art
 - more aware of the subtleties of social situations

- The Americans usually have an independence, a morality and an idealism which the Europeans lack
- James seemed to value both
 - the sophistication of Europe
 - the idealism of America



- America often stands for equality, morality and innocence
 - Europe stands for culture and experience
- But in his works America and Europe have a two-fold meaning:
- America → provincialism and cultural impoverishment
 - Europe → Prejudices, rigidity and categorical thinking

- “One might enumerate the items of high civilization which are absent from American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no country gentlemen, no palaces, nor castles, no cathedrals, nor abbeys, no great universities nor public schools –no Oxford, no Eton, no Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures...” Henry James, *Hawthorne* (1879)

- “The American girl” as Henry James’s most celebrated creation:
They are... lovable, brave, spontaneous, kind, naïve, over-independent and fragile
- A related theme: wealth and love
His heroines are usually endowed with wealth, but their money comes with a baggage



Other themes

- The quest for knowledge and truth in a world so complex and ambiguous that demands intense self-awareness from its observers

Stages in James's career

- 1) The International theme: Creation of "The American Girl"
- *Daisy Miller, The American, The Europeans, The Portrait of a Lady*

Stages in James's career

2) Novels and stories that deal with social and political issues, and also with children:

- *The Bostonians, What Maisie Knew, The Turn of the Screw*

Stages in James's career

3) Return to the international theme

This stage is characterized by the depiction of intricate subtleties of character and feelings and by the use of a complex, convoluted style to express delicate nuances of thought

Examples: The Ambassadors (1903), The Wings of the Dove (1902)

The aesthetics of Henry James

“The province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision ... it is all experience.”



- Innovatory use of the narrative voice:
- Rejection of the omniscient narrator in favor of spectator-narrators
- Situations and characters are presented through the eyes of his characters (“centers of consciousness”)

- His work anticipates the modern psychological novel, grounded on subjectivity
- His realism focuses on the inside, on a mind dealing with life.

- William James's influence on his brother Henry:

In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James drew attention to the workings of the mind: what deserves primary attention is not reality itself, but the subject's perception or impression of it

- “The action of the drama is simply the girl’s subjective adventure”... (Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*)
- “Place the center of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness and you get as interesting a difficulty as you could wish” (Ibid.)

- “I have inevitably come to concentrate on the feminine. Correspondingly, most of my male characters seem to be concentrating on women too” (Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*)

- Increasingly, James experimented with the point of view and the narrative voice
- In his works we find unreliable narrators that negate definite interpretations: *The Turn of the Screw*

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THE
TURN
OF THE
SCREW



HENRY JAMES



On *The Turn of the Screw*

Controversial story:

- Do the ghosts really exist?
- Or are the ghosts a product of the governess's imagination?
- Harold Goddard and Edmund Wilson: "The hallucination theory" → They called attention to the fact that we "see" the ghosts through the governess's eyes

Criticism

- Van Wyck Brooks expressed hostility towards James's long expatriation and eventual naturalization as a British citizen
- E.M. Forster complained about what he saw as James's squeamishness in the treatment of sex and dismissed his style as difficult, relying heavily on extremely long sentences and latinate language.

- Today Henry James is considered one of the most important and influential writers
- ... and because of the emphasis he placed on psychology and human consciousness, he is regarded as the forerunner of the 20th century “stream of consciousness” novels and the founder of psychological realism

Legacy

Testifying to his importance, a character named "Henry James" appears in at least a half-dozen novels, the best-known of which is *The Master*, by Colm Toibin.

