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THE AMBASSADORS

The novel appeared for the first time in *The North American Review* during 1903 in twelve installments. It had been written between September 1900 and June 1901. It was published in book form in 1903.

In his *Notebooks*, Henry James tells us about the 'germ' from which his novel grew. William Dean Howells had been to Paris in 1894 for a short period of time, and been called away because of the illness - or death - of his father. During his stay in Paris, Howells had met Jonathan Sturges, to whom he confided that he had not really lived, and advised the young man to live all he could. The entry is dated October 31st, 1895.

The narrative of the novel has a perspective outside the main character's consciousness, but totally focused upon it, so that we can say that it takes place in Strether's mind. It is our intention here to show the development of the main character in the novel as he deepens his own sense of the possibilities of life, trying to point out the devices used by James in order to make such change clear.

Strether's character changes according to the successions of experiences he goes through, experiences which modify his understanding of truth. The novel externalizes the response in Strether's mind to the impressions bombarding him from the outside: reality is pluralistic; we know only our own experience.

Springing up from the fact told by Sturges, the idea of the novel formed itself almost automatically. In the same entry in the *Notebooks*, the character of Strether is practically outlined. James imagines him as an elderly man who has abstained from life, and who becomes aware of the fact "in the presence of some great human spectacle."¹ As to his great human spectacle, James shows some doubts about making it take place in Paris, which he considers as banal, obvious.

Reluctant about making the main character an Englishman or an American, James must have realised the opportunity to reopen the international theme from

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his earlier works, and, by deciding to make Strether an American, the choice of the place for the drama could only be brought to Paris, despite his initial doubt. He decides to make Paris the great setting on account of the great economy it would bring to his novel, as he mentions in the Preface: "The likely place had the great merit of sparing me preparations. There would have been too many involved - not at all impossibilities, only rather worrying and delaying difficulties - in positing elsewhere Chad Newsome's interesting relation, his so interesting complexity of relations."² If it were not Paris, any other large cosmopolitan city in Europe would do the same, but the differences between the two views of life Strether finds is really stressed by this choice. And we shall see that everything, all the places have their special reason for being there, functioning as active elements in Strether's growing awareness.

In the scenario, when still referring to the genesis of the novel, James mentions the garden where the real fact had produced the germ, in the Faubourg Saint Germain, showing us that the historical element had been fully taken into account for the effect he wanted the place to produce upon the character. This is reinforced by the impression of freedom that people would show, and, of course, by the presence of charming women. Here we have James's preoccupation in making his novel center in the effects produced upon the main character's mind by the places that surround him. Everything seems to be carefully built, the decor in which people move on a Sunday afternoon, the historical and aesthetic elements fused together, giving an impression of movement that would certainly work upon the consciousness of a man that had abstained from any kind of enjoyment of life.

The choice of Chester as the setting of the beginning of the novel already stresses the point that Strether is going to find something that he had lost earlier in his life. It already expresses an attempt to recover the past.

Having settled that Strether should be a man who had dedicated his life to duty, forgetting, or better, never having the idea of enjoyment, James tried to give him the occupation that would best fit such a character: "I want him 'intellectual,' I want him fine, clever, literary almost: it deepens the irony, the tragedy."³ He wanted to find someone who could really be believable as a person who had not had a close contact with the reality of life, and the figure of the editor of a literary magazine appears as the perfect solution, as someone really devoted to his work, almost totally devoid of human contact.

The fact of Strether's early marriage and the effects of the New England conscience upon it only add to the character's alienation from life. This can also be found in the Notebooks, which already show the seed of the great novel that *The Ambassadors* was to become, that is, James's determination to give little illustrative action and centralize the development of his work in the mind of the main character, building the theme from the structure, the story not having so much importance. And, in fact, we stay with Strether all the time, for as long as it is possible:

What I seem to see is the possibility of some little illustrative action. The idea of the tale being the revolution that takes place in the poor man, the impression made on him by the particular experience, the incident in which this revolution and this impression embody themselves, is the point à trouver. They are determined by certain circumstances, and they produce a situation, his issue from which is the little drama.⁴

The figures of the two ficelles that are to become Maria Gostrey and Waymarsh are already mentioned as such in the scenario: "My first Part or two are expository, presentative (on these lines of present picture and movement); and are primarily concerned with his encounter and relation with two persons his portrayed intercourse with whom throws up to the surface what it concerns us to learn."⁵ James makes it clear that his intention in building up such characters is to externalize Strether's consciousness. Waymarsh, or Waymark, as it appears in the scenario, is also presented as a kind of counterpoint to the central character, showing the same background and sharing some characteristics, a contrast being presented between the reactions that each one presents in relation to Europe:

This, in fine, is but part of a slight and comparatively subordinate feature of my business; a minor current, I may call it. The exhibition of the two men as affected in wholly different ways by an experience considerably identical.⁶

The novel is divided into twelve books, a fact that, although being attributed to the serialization in *The North American Review*, reminds us of the gradual passage of time and also of the several steps taken by Strether's consciousness in developing his knowledge. Such growing of knowledge is not done abruptly, but takes time and demands preparation, the people and places that Strether gets in contact with being of capital importance for the achievement. According to F.O. Matthiessen, James:

... laid out his novel organically in twelve books, each of which could serve for a month's installment. His subject was well fitted to such a treatment, since it consisted in Strether's gradual initiation into a world of new values, and a series of small climaxes could therefore best articulate this hero's successive discoveries.⁷

In fact, the novel is composed of a series of scenes that go adding to the awareness of the main character as he sees them. James himself points out in his Preface: "The business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision."⁸

Besides each having a climax, the twelve books can be perfectly divided into two major parts of approximately the same length, and with an equal number of books in each of them. In the middle of the novel, such division produces a total reversal from the initial situation and a second reversal by the end of the novel. If in the beginning Strether has come out in order to bring Chad back home, book sixth ends with his promise to Madame de Vionnet to help her if he can. The second part

begins with Strether and Madame de Vionnet at Notre Dame already as allies, and finishes with his decision to return to Woollett, after realising that she and Chad had lied to him.

The symmetry does not stop there, though. The two great climaxes take place in the two halves of the novel, exactly in the last but one book in each part, respectively, in the fifth and in the eleventh. The two parts are practically linked by the golden nail that Madame de Vionnet drives in when Strether first meets her after his promise to her, in book sixth, and, a little further, during the lunch by the Seine, when they settle their alliance in book seventh.

The first part of the novel presents Strether's developing knowledge in a very linear way, each of the books adding to the previous one, as he goes on meeting people and seeing places with his "uncontrollable perceptions," the way books and chapters are organized naturally to convey their meaning.

Strether leaves Woollett and crosses the Atlantic Ocean to Liverpool. Then he goes to Chester, later to London and, finally, he reaches Paris. As his trip progresses, he becomes, not only physically, but also spiritually, farther and farther away from the rigid principles of Woollett. In Paris, he also moves, going to the Tuileries, to the Boulevard Malesherbes, to Gloriani's garden and, as a final step, to the Rue de Bellechasse. As such steps are taken, Strether is more involved through his senses in the elements of history, art and civilization that he sees. At Gloriani's garden we have the turning point in the novel, and it is important to notice that Strether's advice to Little Bilham only happens after he has met Madame de Vionnet for the first time. He realises that he has not lived at all, and,

... in contact with that element as he had never yet so intimately been, had the consciousness of opening to it, for the happy instant, all the windows of his mind, of letting this rather grey interior drink in for once the sun of a clime not marked in his old geography.⁹

There is an opposition between the two parts even in the way progression is expressed. If Strether's movement toward his realization of the possibilities of life is linear in the first part, in the second half of the novel we notice a somewhat hesitating movement, with his initial inclination toward the way of life that he finds in Paris, once in a while turning a little toward Woollett, as when he meets Mamie on the balcony at her hotel, and when he is informed of Chad and Madame de Vionnet's intention to marry Jeanne. Strether's feelings oscillate in this second part, and the use of the boat imagery reinforces that idea, leading to the crucial scene by the river, when he realises the whole truth. After that there is a new reversal in the main character's consciousness, but this time it is not complete, for he still sides with Madame de Vionnet when he realises that Chad will end by abandoning her. He returns to Woollett, which will be the same that he had left, but now he is a different Strether, able to see what he did not see before, and, although renouncing the life he had found in Europe, he cannot accept the rigid principles of New

England any more.

The author may have felt the influence of the works of his brother, William James, when he decided to write *The Ambassadors*, for there seems to be an application of the distinction made by William, in his psychological studies, between two kinds of mental processes to acquire knowledge: the saltatory and the ambulatory. The saltatory process would refer to our acquiring knowledge syllogistically, referring to a priori principles. The ambulatory process, though, refers to the succession of experiences which change our understanding of truth.¹⁰ It seems to us that there are examples of both mental processes to be found in characters present in the novel: those who are affected by the new people they visit, and every new fact that comes their way, and therefore they change, as opposed to those who seem to remain apart from life, dedicated to rigid principles of conduct, refusing to see the reality of new facts. The great examples of characters opposed by two processes are Strether and Mrs. Newsome, respectively the one who gets involved in the facts and tries to see them clearly, which results in a complete change in his view of life, and the one who ignores the facts and remains completely apart from them, because of a vision of life long ago established, magnificently expressed in the novel by the way she never takes part in the action, although being always "present."

In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James says: "Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date."¹¹ The change that takes place in Strether's mind seems, definitely, to be an application of such a thought, according to the facts that he witnesses and the experiences in which he is involved. An impression of movement pervades the whole novel, till the end, when he is finally able to see things clearly. Strether says to Maria Gostrey: "I came out to find myself in presence of new facts - facts that have kept striking me as less and less met by our old reasons. The matter is perfectly simple."¹²

The novel thus presents a constant presence of elements that change but remain altogether the same, the extensive use of imagery relating to water working as a reinforcement of such idea, for, what better than water can express movement and change without really ceasing to be what it was before? The water imagery also reinforces the idea of the flux of life, continuously renewed, besides the intermingling of past, present and future, to which we hardly find a dividing line in Strether's consciousness, full of memories and anticipations as he is, and, at the same time, alert to the facts that cross his way. It is the movement of life itself that is expressed throughout the novel. Richard Hocks draws our attention to two facts:

... first, that a full pragmatistic approach to the novel would be literally endless in its singularity and "roundness," revolving without halting, like the world of process it explicates, or like the "old clock of Berne" that Strether imagines at the end . . . ; second, that . . . his relationship of same and different, his conjunction of Strether's aesthetic and moral sensibility, his rendering of surface and depth, innocence and art, and any number of such

"contraries" permeating the novel - ultimately bespeak the inner presence of polarity as its ultimate unifying principle.¹³

After such considerations, there can be no doubt that the setting for this novel could only be Paris, as James recognized when he decided that Strether would be an American. It was necessary to have a very cosmopolitan city, full of artistic and historical elements, where prejudices were no longer considered as they fatally would in a small New England town. The feeling of life, expressed through such an environment, could only be complete in a great metropolis, where the movement of people with different opinions and origins would express its liveliness: "They were occasions of discussion, none the less, and Strether had never in his life heard so many opinions on so many subjects. There were opinions at Woollett, but only on three or four."¹⁴

In one of his letters, James gives us a description of Paris which makes it clear that it is the perfect décor for his book, letting us perceive what his intentions were when he chose it for the setting of the novel: "Paris . . . is a sort of painted background which keeps shifting and changing, and which is always there, to be looked at when you please, and to be most easily and comfortably ignored when you don't."¹⁵ The pictorial element, the constant movement of life, the historical aspect, the freedom that people encounter there, all these details are present in James's remark, and he takes great advantage of them in order to produce the desired effects in the novel. It is in Paris that all Strether's senses are awakened. He notices people's capacity to enjoy the moment in a world of colours, odours, and noises. When he goes to the Boulevard Maeshherbes for the first time, we are given an example of how such invasion of his senses is expressed, the change in his view of Paris, in the way he expected to find Chad, and, consequently, the change in his view of life taking place: "I saw, in fine; and - I don't know what to call it - I sniffed. It's a detail, but it's as if there were something - something very good - to sniff."¹⁶

In his second visit to Chad's place, while sitting between Little Bilham and Miss Barrace, Waymarsh being "stupendously opposite," Strether felt "the great hum of Paris coming up in softness, vagueness - for Strether himself indeed already positive sweetness . . ."¹⁷ James thus informs us of the gradual changes that are taking place in the main character, who is thus brought to life through his contact with the city. Simultaneously, by positioning him opposite Waymarsh, James represents in a concrete way Strether's already distanced condition from his initial state.

The water imagery conveys not only the constant flux of life, but also the movement of Strether toward awareness. His great first moment of enjoyment, when he has lunch with Madame de Vionnet, takes place by the Seine, the waterside life being seen through the open window, and there, "for an hour, in the matter of letting himself go, of diving deep, Strether was to feel that he had touched bottom."¹⁸ At this moment the situation is a complete reversal from the beginning. It is the middle of the novel, and the water imagery has accompanied the protagonist's adventure. He has plunged and "touched bottom," he has done what he could not allow himself

to before, he has completely forgotten his preoccupation with the hour, he has just permitted himself to acquire seventy volumes of Victor Hugo's works, and he has had lunch with a woman for the mere pleasure of it. James puts the things in such concrete terms that we can easily feel the difference that Strether establishes between the several women with whom he has been in contact: He had had dinner and gone to the theatre with Maria Gostrey before, but, although having gone to the theatre with Mrs. Newsome, on such occasions there had been no dinner at all.

There are several references to Strether's taking boats, especially in the second part of the book, the most important being, perhaps, when he witnesses the visit that Madame de Vionnet pays to Sarah Pocock. After practically acting as a spectator during the great confrontation, when the urbanity and vivacity of the French lady opposes, and, finally, offuscates the new ambassador from Woollett, who embodies all its blindness and prejudices, never so well stated as when she says that she "knows" Paris. When Madame de Vionnet tells Sarah of the affection people in Paris feel for Strether, he draws himself definitely to her side, and the imagery James uses is once again related to water:

During the rest of the time her visit lasted he felt himself to each of the proper offices, successively, for helping to keep the adventurous skiff afloat. It rocked beneath him, but he settled himself in his place. He took up an oar and, since he was to have the credit of pulling, pulled.¹⁹

The use of the boat imagery serves not only to express Strether's definite siding with Madame de Vionnet and Europe, but also to express the hesitating movement that his adventure shows in the second part. And it also leads to the remarkable river scene, the moment of insight for Strether.

The water and boat imageries are also used by James to express his idea of polarity, that could be interpreted as a source and principle of life. The movement of a boat implies hesitations that make a perfect equilibrium appear as something very difficult to achieve. In life we always find the existence of opposites, one of which dominating at certain moments, but always dependent on the existence of the other. Due to this view, we will always find the presence of a notion of same and different in the novel, or of opposites such as innocence and experience, morals and aesthetics, America and Europe. And Strether is the element that is caught between such opposites and will be taken in the flux of life to hesitate between such opposed poles. There is a hint to a trace in his character, which is given in the beginning of the book and prepares us for the movements of his adventure: "He was burdened, poor Strether - it had better be confessed at the outset - with the oddity of a double consciousness. There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference."²⁰

A rapid examination of the second part of the novel will show how James expresses such situation. It begins with Strether's feeling of freedom, after the important recognition at Gloriani's garden and his subsequent meeting with Madame

de Vionnet, now meeting her by chance at Notre Dame, a situation that will increase his feeling that the attachment is really virtuous. This scene is perfectly opposed to their other chance meeting by the river, at the Cheval Blanc, when the full revelation comes to him.

The hesitating movement of the boat is also expressed by some incidents that make his opinions move either toward Woollett or Paris. The arrival of the Pococks somewhat forces Strether to consider a re-evaluation, which makes his feelings move a little toward Woollett, influenced by the announcement made by Madame de Vionnet that is her and Chad's intention to marry Jeanne. The Pococks' ignorance, their blindness to recognize Chad's change, moves him again back to Paris, when he definitely decides to "pull the oar" in the scene already referred to above. Strether's final renunciation would add one more example of such oppositions: while perceiving life in the first part, and the subsequent enjoyment of it that he finds for the first time, his final decision to return to Woollett may be interpreted as expressing his satisfaction in merely seeing how life is, that is, acquiring knowledge, but not letting himself get involved in it: "That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself."²¹

In several passages, the relationship of same and different is presented to Strether's eyes as a reinforcement of the shifting and changing aspect of life, the impossibility of clear distinctions. When Chad first appears, at the theatre, the young man appears as completely different from the one Strether had known and expected to find. He is older and refined, instead of corrupted as Strether had supposed he would appear. Here, the clear moral distinctions of Woollett receive one of their first great shocks: "Here already there were abounding results; he had on the spot and without the least trouble of intention taught Strether that even in so small a thing as that there were different ways."²² In the scene at which he meets Mamie at the balcony, she also strikes him as being different from the girl he had so well known at Woollett, but what is implied is that the girl is the only one of the Pococks to have recognized Chad's change, and that, paradoxically, is conveyed "... by means of their talking of everything but Chad..."²³ Sarah also produces an impression of the same kind, which confirms that the device used by James is to show that the difference is in the eyes of the one who is able to see, thus step by step building up Strether's preparation for his total recognition: "...the penetration of her voice to a distance, the general encouragement and approval of her manner, were all elements with which intercourse had made him familiar, but which he noted to-day almost as if she had been a new acquaintance."²⁴ These new impressions, fused with the old images Strether had of people, the same returning as different, express his growing awareness of the impossibility of making such a clear distinction between good and evil in the style of Woollett. They are components of a whole and cannot be isolated.

The main relationship in the novel is that established between Strether and Chad. Strether's vision of the young man also presenting a parallel development to the whole.

When Strether arrives in Europe, he is preoccupied with the effects that Chad's behaviour has upon Mrs. Newsome, not having any special feeling for the young man: "I'm thinking of his mother,' . . . 'He has darkened her admirable life.' He spoke with austerity. 'He has worried her half to death.'²⁵ In order to reinforce the feeling that the change takes place mainly in Strether's mind, James does not present the direct contact between the two men but after the protagonist has already accumulated several impressions that prepare him for the first meeting at the theatre, in which occasion Strether suffers a first shock in his preconceptions. He is prepared through his visit to the Boulevard Maiesherbes, his getting acquainted with Chad's friends, specially Little Bilham, Paris, and, therefore, Europe. Strether is more and more taken by appearances, but it must be noticed that he does not lose his moral sense. In fact, it increases in the same measure as he is more and more capable of seeing things, including Mrs. Newsome:

It would have been hard for a young man's face and air to disconnect themselves more completely than Chad's at this juncture from any discerned, from any imaginable aspect of a New England female parent. That of course was no more than had been on the cards; but it produced in Strether none the less one of those frequent phenomena of mental reference with which all judgement in him was actually beset.²⁶

Here we already have a hint of Strether's growing separation from Mrs. Newsome. But his sense of duty makes him want to inform Woollett about the new facts immediately, and he finds that his "burden of conscience is perhaps exactly the reason why his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered."²⁷ Accused by Chad of having a low mind, Strether comes to the conclusion "... that he had to take full in the face a fresh attribution of ignorance."²⁸ His willingness to take things "full in the face" corresponds to his moral sensibility. To the young man's declaration of being free to return to Woollett if he wants, and the opposed declarations by Little Bilham and Maria Gostrey that he is not, Strether only finds a safe explanation when Little Bilham tells him that the attachment is virtuous. Only then does he find a certain equilibrium between his sense of duty and his aesthetic tendencies as defined by his moral code. There is a new Chad at this point, but Strether will only experience the complete reversal at Dioriani's garden, when he achieves the fullest development of his consciousness:

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? This place and these impressions - mild as you may find them to wind up a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at his place - well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped that into my mind. I see it now. I haven't done so enough before and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh, I do see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express. It's too late.²⁹

Now Strether has put together all the meaning of his recent and completely new

experiences, and, if it does not matter what one does as long as he lives, Strether can no longer accept those clear distinctions. The place is filled with everything that he realises having missed in life. Gloriani appears to him as embodying all such things in himself. Strether comes to the point of envying the sculptor and, by 'seeing,' he questions himself if he were not included in their circle of 'life.' 'Were they, this pair, of the 'great world'? - and was he himself, for the moment and thus related to them by his observation in it?'³⁰ What he envies in the artist can only be his capacity to accumulate impressions and see deeply into other people's characters.

At this point, Strether sees Chad and Jeanne together, and he has no more doubts that his attachment is really virtuous. Chad interposes in the way of his vision at the exact moment when he watches Gloriani, and Strether, while seeing the sculptor as the one who knows how to live, feels the same toward Chad, in whom he sees the recovery of his own youth by identifying him with his lost son.

What Strether understands is that to see, to perceive, means to live, which the narrowmindedness of Woollett has forbidden him. In the absence of prejudices that surrounds him, in the visual sense developed, he sees the way through which the artist succeeds: "You've all of you here so much visual sense that you've somehow all 'run' to it. There are moments when it strikes one that you haven't any other,"³¹ he says to Little Bilham, as if to state that his moral sensibility has also been developed by experience.

This sequence must be linked to a later passage, when Little Bilham reminds Strether of his own advice to him: "Didn't you adjure me, in accents I shall never forget, to see while I've a chance, everything I can? - and really to see, for it must have been that only you meant."³² 'To live,' as Little Bilham has understood, signifies 'to see,' that is, the whole process of developing consciousness to its utmost, the process in which Strether is involved: we acquire knowledge according to the succession of experiences which change our understanding of truth.

In the second great scene in the novel, when the whole truth is revealed to Strether and he is again forced to change his view of Chad, James also makes use of visual effects upon Strether's consciousness, several other devices being also presented in the whole sequence.

Going to the countryside, Strether finds the Lambinet he could not afford to buy in his youth, in Boston, and thus has the meaning of all the things he had missed in his life revived in his mind. Structure also functions perfectly here, when James places the sequence in which Strether finds the Lambinet in one chapter and the intrusion of the boat taking place only in the following one.

Viola Hopkins calls our attention to two facts: "... when Strether enters the village where he plans to have his dinner, what is described is no longer a Lambinet but is instead an Impressionist canvas,"³³ and also - "A comparison of key

descriptive phrases in the first part of the chapter with those of the later part and of the opening of the next one reveals a significant change in Strether's vision."³⁴ Following such thoughts, we can notice that in the Lambinet the colour is described through the use of adjectives, and the light, not diffused, is concentrated in the sky. Strether sees the picture he has lost, with "the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon."³⁵ And "the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short - it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet."³⁶

As Hopkins points out, the description of the village where the Cheval Blanc is located strikes us by the use of nouns, instead of adjectives, emphasis thus changing from the object to the visual experience: "... a village that affected him as a thing of whiteness, blueness and crookedness, set in a coppery green ..."³⁷ The description of a Lambinet has given place to that of an impressionistic painting, and now there is a boat with a couple in a pleasure-trip, and the colours are described with greater precision, with Madame de Vionnet's parasol, which "made so fine a pink point in the shining scene,"³⁸ the stream is "greyblue,"³⁹ and "... the walley on the further side was all coppergreen level and glazed pearly sky, a sky hatched across with screens of trimmed trees ..."⁴⁰

James Tuttleton calls our attention to another aspect of which James makes use in order to give Strether a complete understanding of the whole situation, and that is manners, which function as conventions that determine morals. Strether realises the existence of a great degree of intimacy between the couple, which conveys that the attachment is not virtuous, as he had been led to think:

Manners still continue to be highly important in the later James (it tells much that Chad has removed his coat in the canoe with Mme. de Vionnet), but James's interest is henceforth the impact of manners on those who are imaginative enough to guess what deeper significance they express.⁴¹

Strether is imaginative enough and, the following day he makes a recollection of the whole change at Madame de Vionnet's house: "... he was moving in these days, as in a gallery, from clever canvas to clever canvas ..."⁴² All is revealed, each clever canvas accounting for a different experience in a long succession that seems endless, truth appearing more clearly after the observation of each one of them, but subject to change by the view of the next one.

Another device that James uses in the novel is suspense, which also reinforces the gradual aspect of Strether's consciousness growing. We are only informed of his mission in book two, when Chad is mentioned for the first time. Chad, though, will make his appearance only at the end of book three, in a very dramatic way. While Chad remains in the back of the box, they do not speak, a fact which increases the suspense, while Strether watches him. The scene also reminds us of the remarkable way that James presents the character of Mrs. Newsome, not taking part in the action, but letting her presence be strongly felt all the time.

Mistakes also help to increase the suspense. Strether thinks that he has seen Chad on the balcony of his house when he is actually looking at Little Bilham. At Gloriani's garden, Strether comes to the conclusion that is the daughter, and not Madame de Vionnet, the woman with whom Chad is involved. When he discovers that the attachment is with the mother, he is led to think that it is virtuous.

Madame de Vionnet, the supposed wicked woman, only appears in book fifth. It is important to notice that Strether's advice to Little Bilham takes place right after he has seen her for the first time. Her introduction is followed by his first visit to her, which ends with his promise to help her. As he is more and more involved in his senses, her presence is more and more felt from them on.

The Pococks's arrival, in book eighth, which serves to reopen the action, is prepared throughout book seventh by the presence of the blue telegram, ironically placed on the window-sill under Strether's wath, as though reminding him that it is too late. The irony is taken a little bit further in book twelfth, when Strether receives another petit bleu, this time from Madame de Vionnet.

Mrs. Newsome is also a remarkable realization. She never appears on the scene, but she has an immense importance in the novel, James making her presence felt all the time. She is thus projected in Strether's mind. The first reference to her character, in the Notebooks, is already very strong, full of importance also to delineate Strether's character, as James states in the entry, where he mentions his intention to use her in order to establish the contrast between Strether's situation in the beginning of the novel, and the effects of the revolution that takes place in his mind: "She is of the strenuous pattern - she is the reflection of his old self."⁴³ In the scenario, she is intended not only to express the main character's initial state, but also to have a presence which will loom throughout the novel, without a direct participation in the action. The effect is such that we can say that James achieved one of his best creations with her. As a person who refuses experience, tied to unmovable and long established principles, a person who abstains from any contact with life, she could not, literally, get involved in the facts, and, therefore, she remains out of the action, sending out her ambassadors to do the job for her. It is her absence from the action, and, consequently, from life, that makes her such a great achievement:

. . . it struck him really that he had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence; the silence was a sacred hush, a finer clearer medium, in which her idiosyncrasies showed.⁴⁴

The more she is absent, the more her presence is felt. A perfect combination to express what she stands for.

The identification between Mrs. Newsome and Sarah, the ideal ambassador of Woollett, also serves to reinforce the lady's presence. When Chad says that Sarah hates him, and, later, he mentions his mother as feeling the same for him he tells

Strether: "Yes - Mother. We called it Sarah, but it comes to the same thing."⁴⁵ When Maria Gostrey tells him that Chad should at least pay a visit to his mother, Strether says: ". . . my dear lady, his mother has paid him a visit. Mrs. Newman has been with him, this month, with an intensity that I'm sure he has thorough^{ly} felt; he has lavishly entertained her, and she has let him have her thanks."⁴⁶

A parallel is drawn between Mrs. Newsome, the woman who is present without really being there and the "unnameable object" which is produced at Woollett and is the factor of her fortune. It is described as "a small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use," but "wanting dignity, or the least approach to distinction."⁴⁷ The little object remains unnamed all through the novel, which reinforces its presence, just as Mrs. Newsome's absence reinforces her role. It clearly reminds us of Christopher Newman's wash-tubs, but, by deciding not to mention it, James produces a better effect, for the object remains with us all the time, which not only establishes a parallel with her, but also reinforces the idea of her materialistic basis.

Mrs. Newsome's materialistic nature is also reinforced by the way in which Strether's mission is settled: if he succeeds, she will marry him; if he does not succeed, she will not. There is a price to be paid, and something extremely valuable to be taken as a retribution. She has money and power, and Strether is connected with her in a business enterprise, as James makes it clear in the scenario: "He is known by that pale, costly cover - it has become his principal identity."⁴⁸ The mission does not only express the commercial mentality of Woollett, but also its moral narrowness, the clear and unchangeable distinctions between good and evil, success and failure being the only alternatives, as James also remarks in the scenario: "Perdition on one side, salvation on the other . . ."⁴⁹

In opposition to Mrs. Newsome, we have the fascinating character of Madame de Vionnet, and these two characters embody the great differences between, respectively, America and Europe. While Mrs. Newsome remains apart, protected by her New England mentality, not getting involved, she runs no risks and is determined to stop life. On the opposite side, Madame de Vionnet is totally involved in the action, therefore in life, and takes all the risks. She is responsible for Chad's transformation, but in the end, notwithstanding her being the one who gives, she is also the one who pays. Europe gives and America takes: the situation is completely different from that found in The American. The importance of Madame de Vionnet for the whole novel is acknowledged by F. O. Matthiessen:

What gives this novel the stamina to survive the dated flavor of Strether's liberation is the quality that James admired most in Turgeneff, the ability to endow some of his characters with such vitality that they seem to take the plot into their own hands, or rather, to continue to live beyond its exigencies. The center of that vitality her is the character not reckoned with in James' initial outline.⁵⁰

It is such vitality, as the word itself expresses, that opposes Madame de Vionnet to Mrs. Newsome. She embodies the "life" that Strether finds in Europe. Her house is the expression of everything life in Europe may signify, and she is portrayed as being inseparable not only from her house and belongings, but also from Paris, and, therefore, from life.

Strether's final renunciation is due to his having kept his moral sensibility. He cannot agree with a system that goes against it, and this is revealed still in the river scene, by a simple but remarkable device. For the first time, the lady speaks to him in her native language, as though taking out the last veil through which he saw her:

... the wonderful woman's overflow of surprise and amusement was wholly in French, which she struck him as speaking with an unprecedented command of idiomatic turns, but in which she got, as he might have said, somewhat away from him, taking all at once little brilliant jumps that he could but lamely match.⁵¹

Although finally seeing her as she really is, Strether still supports her when he realises that Chad will leave her. This is also implied in the river scene, when Chad leaves all the explanations to her, a parallel being established between him and his mother through his refusal to get involved: "Chad was always letting people have their way when he felt that it would somehow turn his wheel for him; it somehow always did turn his wheel."⁵² Therefore, by siding with Madame de Vionnet, Strether states that, although deceived, not finding it possible to accept the "life" that Europe offers him because of his moral sense, he cannot accept the sterility of Woollett either. Now his eyes are open, but he remains in the middle, life really having come too late for him. He will go back to Woollett, but it will be a different place from the one that he had left because he is the one who has changed, and will probably continue to change according to every new experience. The end of the novel implies this idea of change, of the flux of life, of the development of knowledge according to the facts one experiences, as suggested by Strether's final words, an expression that is several times repeated in the novel: "Then there we are!" What next?

NOTES

¹ Henry James, "James's Original Note for *The Ambassadors*," *The Ambassadors*, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 370.

² Henry James, "Preface to *The Ambassadors*," in *The Ambassadors*, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p.8.

³ James, "Note", p. 370.

⁴ James, "Note", p. 371.

⁵ Henry James, "Passages from James's 'Project of a Novel,'" in *The Ambassadors*, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 377-378.

⁶ James, "Project of a Novel," p. 379.

⁷ F.O. Matthiessen, "The Ambassadors," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Ambassadors*, ed. Albert E. Stone, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 44.

⁸ James, "Preface," p. 2.

⁹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 125.

¹⁰ William James. *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), pp. 138-139.

¹¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1890), I, 234.

¹² James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 202.

¹³ Richard Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatic Thought: A Study in the Relationship between the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1974), pp. 173-174

¹⁴ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 113.

¹⁵ Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner's, 1920), I, p. 48.

¹⁶ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 73.

¹⁷ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 78.

¹⁸ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 184.

¹⁹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 231.

²⁰ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 18.

²¹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 365.

²² James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 94.

- ²³ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 264.
- ²⁴ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 218.
- ²⁵ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 46.
- ²⁶ James, *The Ambassadors*, pp. 94-95.
- ²⁷ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 95.
- ²⁸ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 105.
- ²⁹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 137.
- ³⁰ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 139.
- ³¹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 131.
- ³² James, *The Ambassadors*, pp. 172-173.
- ³³ Viola Hopkins, "The Art of Seeing : Art, Themes and Techniques in the World of Henry James," Diss. New York University 1960, p. 235.
- ³⁴ Hopkins, p. 236.
- ³⁵ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 319.
- ³⁶ James, *The Ambassadors*, pp. 319-320.
- ³⁷ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 322.
- ³⁸ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 326.
- ³⁹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 324.
- ⁴⁰ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 325.
- ⁴¹ James W. Tuttleton, *The Novel of Manners in America* (New York : W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 84.
- ⁴² James, *The Ambassadors*, pp. 334-335.
- ⁴³ James, "Note," p. 371.
- ⁴⁴ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 204.

- ⁴⁵ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 306.
- ⁴⁶ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 313.
- ⁴⁷ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 49.
- ⁴⁸ James, "Project of a Novel," p. 383.
- ⁴⁹ James, "Project of a Novel," p. 385.
- ⁵⁰ Mathiessen, p. 47.
- ⁵¹ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 328.
- ⁵² James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 337.
- ⁵³ James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 365.

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