

A THEMATIC AND CHARACTER APPROACH TO HENRY JAMES

To Professor A.D. Van Nostrand,
in grateful acknowledgement of
valuable and disinterested help.

a) The cult of tradition.

It is my contention that Henry James's supposed richness and variety is a myth. He is not rich, but merely cumulative. And he is not varied, except at a very superficial level. Basically, his characters belong, all through his large body of fiction, to the same, limited gallery. The situations they have to go through are always rather similar as well. Such repetitiveness and such accumulation are, indeed, very cleverly presented to the reader, very skilfully disguised. And he has been astonishingly successful. To expose his limitations in subject matter and in characterization is the purpose of this article.

James's characters are mainly of two types: the first one is, generally speaking, an individual; the second type can be an individual or a group of people, functioning as a collective entity. The individual assumes, when belonging to the first type, the role of the victim; and the second type of individual, more frequently a collectivity, becomes his executioner. The situation will appropriately be one in which the victim, through some misunderstanding or other on his part, becomes guilty of a transgression against the rules which govern the collectivity. He is never guilty in a moral sense: his transgression is never ethical but rather aesthetic; it is not based on morals but mainly on manners. Thus, he is an innocent as far as ethical values are concerned. An enormous

proportion of James's fiction can be reduced to these terms. If I can convincingly show this I shall, I believe, have proved my initial statement.

There are four aspects of the life and culture of Europe which James looked upon in reverence and which he believed were lacking in his own country. They were shades of the same idea: four facets of tradition. In the first place, the family tradition present in the old aristocratic European families which he unreservedly admired. Noble characters of the old world who would not tolerate interference in their communities or in their family units by persons unable to exhibit similar traditions. In second place, and closely linked to the first aspect, James recognized a maturity on the part of European society, as opposed to the newness, the youth, the immaturity of American life. A symbol of this opposition appears clearly illustrated in his fiction through his stories of children, victims of the adult world which quickly discards them as soon as they begin to get in its way. Thirdly, this tradition was of an artistic or cultural nature: for James only Europe (mainly France, England or Italy) could be the centre of the authentic artistic traditions of the civilized world. And finally there was historic tradition, which James, however, saw as a historic picturesqueness, as popular legend, from which his ghost stories sprang, although the deeper, human motivations which led him to actually write them will be seen in due time. James used this medium, as he used others which have just been observed, as a symbolic vehicle to express his ideas about life as well as his concept of man and man's destiny.

From these four aspects of tradition spring the main variations to be found in James's characters and situations. But those variations are external and accidental: their casual nature is what determines the very limited thematic diversity that we find in Henry James as soon as we delve into his work. In fact, as has already been said, there is only one theme which is dealt with in a series of different ways: his

characters are always the same and their circumstances similar; the former in different guise, and the latter superficially variegated. These variations, these guises, are of four principal types. James begins of course with the novels and stories that have an international setting. In them there is always an individual, the foreigner, faced with a group of native residents; and the situation is generally one of contrast, in which the innocence of the foreigner stands out. Then a second treatment follows: a child whose circumstances place him in a position of tension with the adult world. Thirdly, the artist who has to cope with the uncomprehending society which surrounds him, and which, except on rare occasions, either exploits him or ignores him without in any case understanding his work. And finally, the normal, intelligent and healthy person who through no fault of his own finds himself entangled with the supernatural world, the world of ghosts.

b) A definition of innocence.

All these characters have a common denominator: their profound natural goodness, and their great intelligence. Both these attributes are paralleled by their unfamiliarity with the world with which they come into contact for the first time, by their ignorance in questions of social behaviour (« manners »), or of the mechanism which governs the adult of the ghostly worlds. This aspect of their characters is what has been called *innocence*, which since it corresponds to a double conditioning has a double effect: on the one hand, there is a positive factor which is a result of their natural goodness and is their inability to do harm. The only possible refuge for these characters, who are faced with a situation in which they are at a distinct disadvantage with regard to their antagonists is self-destruction. And because of this, one understands the fatal accident of Roderick Hudson (where there should logically have been a suicide); the death

of Daisy Miller the victim of the malaria that she contracts as a punishment for her blind disobedience; or the masochistic acceptance by Isabel Archer of a commitment that she was deceived into accepting; or the death of the young protagonist of «The Pupil» or that of Miles in «The Turn of the Screw».

The other facet of this innocence is the limitation of the characters' intellectual qualities: their inability to understand the peculiarities of the mode of life with which they come into contact, which is naturally one of the causes that lead them to failure. This is, therefore, a characteristic with its aspects of virtue and of defectiveness, like a coin with its two inseparable sides. This innocence, with its positive values and its negative limitations, is in short a spiritual quality which rejects from the characters' minds the possibility of learning through their experiences. An innocent person can learn with time, but not without losing something of his innocence. Thus, if he learns by experience, he does so only at the expense of his blamelessness; he becomes capable of consciously causing harm to his fellow human beings, and begins to see in his actions the possibility of an ethical choice. Such is the case of the protagonist of one of the novels in James' last period, *The Ambassadors* (1903), Lambert Strether, who «has exhibitional conditions to meet... that forbid the terrible fluidity of self-revelation»¹ and although James used these words to justify and explain his handling of the character, they are doubtless applicable in this other sense, because whatever Strether is, in the end, he is as a whole character. This incapacity for self-knowledge on Strether's part was overcome after his experiences in Europa, because he learned from them that the criteria which govern behaviour in Woollet, his small town in the state of Massachusetts, were not necessarily the only ones, nor even the most adequate ones and on rejecting them in favour of those which he had

1. HENRY JAMES, *The Art of the Novel*, ed. by RICHARD P. BLACKMUR, Scribner's, New York and London, 1948 p. 321.

discovered and absorbed in Europe, he realized that he had to cause pain to his old American friends who were unable to lose their innocence, their original ignorance.

c) *A conspicuous absence.*

This presentation of themes and characters implies *per se* a striking absence: that of the problem of evil in James's works. Not that he was ignorant of or rejected the existence of evil, but rather that he did not recognize it, did not see it as a problem, as the result of freedom of choice on the part of his characters². They never hesitate between good and evil; there are no indications of moral guilt in them, rather they behave according to other modes of conducts, as the case may be, which are neither moral nor ethical. James indeed fully participated in this Manichean tendency to identify evil outside his good characters, outside his protagonistis; to such a point that a clear dividing line can be established in his stories and novels between the « good » and the « bad »: in both cases, in one as much as in the other, they appear as they are without any element of the opposite. Christopher Newman is an example of absolute and innate goodness, while the Bellegarde family, or at least the members of it at whose hands he receives the great wound of his life, are irremediably wicked. Even in the case of Hyacinth Robinson, the leading character in one of his intermediate novels of an exclusively English nature, it is pointless to search for a psychological conflict between good and evil.

This novel, *The Princess Casamassima* (1885), aspires to be a dramatized account of the anarchist movements in England at the end of the last century. Robinson is the bastard son of a mysterious member of the British aristocracy

2. The absence in James's characters of what could be called a consciousness of good and evil (or perhaps, just ethical conscience) might be the result of the direct and pervasive influence which his father's religious and moral ideas had on him. Vid. QUENTIN ANDERSON, « Henry James and the New Jerusalem », *Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1946, pp. 516-566.

and a woman of doubtful life and infamous social extraction, of French birth³, who stabs her lover when he refuses to recognize his duties towards his son. The child is charitably taken in by a modest London family and grows up in the slums of the English capital, while his mother serves her prison sentence. He joins the bookbinding trade and by a series of circumstances finds himself in league with a group of anarchists. When at the end of the novel he is given his first mission of importance, the assassination of a prominent aristocrat, Robinson hesitates, not for reasons of a moral nature, but for something much more superficial and of course artificially justified. He suffers at the thought that by his action he would be flatly rejecting and attacking a social class to which at heart he feels himself partially tied and which he respects with a romantic and childlike admiration. His ideas about the nobility, which are attacked from within by the princess herself and from without by his companions at work and by those of the conspiracy — can be seen in his own words: « it couldn't be true that they were all a bad lot »⁴ and he thinks furthermore that it is already sufficient for him « to give my life to the beastly cause, without giving [it] my sympathy »⁵.

This sympathy which in the beginning struggles with his sense of duty (a duty, which, seen from another point of view, is arbitrarily imposed and only partially accepted, without any clear ideological justification) takes root in him through the reflections which always lead him to the same kind of conclusion: « Everywhere, everywhere he saw the ulcer of envy, the greed of a party hanging together only that it might de-

3. This character, as those of the Bellegarde family in *The American*, just mentioned, corresponds to the simplistic and childish idea that James had of the French, as he expressed it when acknowledging that « the conception of Paris as the consecrated scene of rash infatuations and bold bad treacheries belongs, in the Anglo-Saxon imagination, to the infancy of art ». Vid.: HENRY JAMES, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 24.

4. HENRY JAMES, *The Princess Casamassima*, Harper Torchbooks, New York 1959, p. 206.

5. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 282.

spoil another to its advantage »⁶. Finally, the only possible solution for him is suicide.

Robinson, albeit in a different sense from Newman or young Miles, is also an innocent person. He is a man sitting on the fence between two worlds, neither of which fully recognizes him as an integral part and to neither of which he feels completely tied. He recognizes in himself affinities towards the world of the workers, in the middle of which he has spent all his life and of which he is a member, be it only in an external and material way; but he also feels affiliated to the London aristocracy, since he thinks that its members « recognizing a mysterious affinity (with that fineness of *flair* for which they were remarkable) were coming to him to save him the trouble of coming to them »⁷.

At the same time, he has connections with both classes: his worker and revolutionary friends appreciate him without fully understanding him, and he produces the same feeling of confusion among the acquaintances he has in the nobility. For some, Robinson is a « duke in disguise »⁸ or « he's a bloated little aristocrat »⁹; for others he is a commoner of whom, however, it can be said: « you've nothing of the people about you »¹⁰. James intended that Robinson, as the son of an aristocrat, should be determined by this simple fact to the point that, finding himself suddenly moved from his own environment, without any kind of advice and with minimal preparation, to the most exclusive salons of high society, he should be capable of behaving with the same ease as that which he exhibits in the low quarters and the humble homes of his working-class friends.

And so it is remarked with amazement; as the princess says to him: « I've watched you constantly since you came — in every detail of our behaviour — and I'm more and more in-

6. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 342.

7. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 215.

8. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 379.

9. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 395.

10. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 395.

triguée. You haven't a vulgar intonation, you haven't a common gesture, you never make a mistake, you do and say everything exactly in the right way. You come out of the poor cramped hole you've described to me, and yet you might have stayed in country-houses all your life. You're much better than if you had! »¹¹. And all of this is a result of his paternal heritage, an inescapable consequence of part of the blood which flows in his veins. The fact that his life has been spent in poverty and need, the fact that the whole of his social experience has been reduced to that of the medium in which he has grown up and has been educated, means nothing to James, once Robinson's noble heritage, hidden for the first twenty years of his life, has the opportunity to react under a suitable stimulus. And once he is put in a situation of having to choose and to decide clearly in favour of one or another of these antagonistic groups, of these conflicting worlds, his only honourable choice, at least as the author presents it, is self-destruction. So, one can also see in Robinson the double factor to which I alluded before: he is without doubt an honourable man, a man in whom goodness and a sense of justice unite to constitute the most profound characteristic of his temperament. And at the same time, with a determinism very like that of Balzac, the blood of aristocracy which forms part of his biological inheritance, separates him unavoidably from his companions at work and from those of political intrigue; it places him on a level superior to all of them, even though they never cease to appreciate him. That the motivations which the novelist uses to justify the facts are not very convincing, has already been hinted at, and is, in any case, an entirely different problem. The fact is that Robinson, a good person and an intelligent one as well, is unable to understand their temperaments, their illusions and their ideals; neither is he able to understand their wretchedness, their vileness, their misery. This radical inability to understand, together with his profound goodness is, in the end,

11. *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 283.

what makes up that innocence which continually repeats itself in James's characters with certain circumstantial variations and with extrinsic modifications.

d) *Foreigners.*

Until 1878, the year in which James achieved his great success with « Daisy Miller », his theme had been that of the American in Europe in these internationally flavoured stories.

Thus *Roderick Hudson* and *The American*, among his novels, and « A Passionate Pilgrim », « Madame de Mauves », « Four Meetings » and « Daisy Miller » were all published between 1871 and 1878. In each case there is an independent character who has been « transplanted » and finds himself in contact with a new way of life, a new cultural environment which he is incapable of understanding. Later in his life when James conceived more articulate characters, he presented them in such a way that in similar situations they were able to come to terms with this environment, although in the process their innocence suffers or is lost. The first of these cases would be that of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (although the truth in her case is that this happens only partially because, even if her final decision is clearly a conscious one, its nature nevertheless is on a footing with those which involve the « innocents » of the first stage, those characters who are absolutely unable to understand the new environment in which they find themselves) and later, during his « major phase », Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* or Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. The situation, similar also in all these cases, is, of course, more than a static one: it produces a shock, a spark between two groups of characters (one party being American, the other European) when a member of the first group whom the Europeans respect as an external observer, tries to convert himself into an integral part of this new world. In some cases he does not succeed, and finishes by returning to his own

country (*The American*, « Four Meetings ») and although in others they do succeed, as in the case of Isabel Archer or Lambert Strether, or as already has happened to Madame de Mauves, in each case the characters have a high price to pay for their boldness.

There is, then, the *Innocent American* in contact with the sometimes wicked *Guilty European*. From 1879 onwards, with his story « An International Episode », James began a variation within this structure: in this case the guiltless are two young Englishmen and the new medium they discover consists of the city of New York and the beaches of Newport; and this time it is the Americans who hinder their attempt to be anything more than simple tourists. Naturally, the motivations which impel the one and the other are different to those of an earlier date but in any case the theme, the characters, and the situation remain the same, almost unchanged.

In this first presentation there are three stages about which the development of the characters revolves. Firstly, they are unconscious slaves to certain customs, to a particular morality and even to certain prejudices, the existence of which they never even superficially suspect. This is the stage of *The American*, « Four Meetings » and « Madame de Mauves ». In these stories the main characters have absolutely no understanding of why they are rejected or made to suffer, because they are not sufficiently intelligent or flexible to realize that other motivations exist or that they even can exist. In the second stage the innocents are of a wider variety and of a richer intelligence: Daisy Miller and Bessie Alden (from « An International Episode »). They realize, in fact, that there are different ways of life and different possible attitudes to be adopted towards them, and their conflict with this previously unknown society is produced by their rebellion, their refusal to accept principles and forms of conduct prevalent in the midst of an environment whose privileges are denied them. As Bessie Alden asks: « why should I suffer the restrictions of a society of which I enjoy none

of the privileges? »¹². Daisy Miller does not express herself quite so explicitly, but her actions are equally challenging and rebellious. Her price, as has been mentioned before, is none other than her own life. On the third level, Lambert Strether far from rebelling, fully accepts European modes of conduct as superior to his own. His mind is opened to new possibilities and his suffering has a positive outlook. He is a man with enriching experiences, although these and the conclusions which he derives from them, separate him from his old American friends.

e) *Children.*

James deals with his theme in a second way, perhaps the most obvious of those he uses: it is the one which we find in his story of 1891 « The Pupil » and in his novel *What Maisie Knew*, 1897. In these two works the innocent person is a child, the surroundings in which he is at a loss are constituted by the world of the adults and these will occasion the strife that the young protagonists have to suffer. As is natural, James adapts the conditioning factors of the shock produced in these cases to the circumstances from which it is derived. If in the stories of an international type the spark takes place when a foreigner attempts to forget his position as such and causes the native residents to react against this presumption, in these cases the immediate reason is of another kind: in « The Pupil », the problem is one of economy, in *What Maisie Knew* it is sexual. In either case there is a constant: James chose a motive which the child could not properly understand. Money, or rather (and James wanted to make this quite clear) the lack of it, is what makes the adults, among whom the child moves, flee from a villa in Cannes or Nice to a hotel in Genoa, and from there to a boarding house

12. HENRY JAMES, « An International Episode », in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. by LEON EDEL, Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1962-64. vol. 4, p. 290.

in an ordinary Italian town. At last when the final blow seems inevitable, the parents think of getting rid of the child by giving him unconditionally to a tutor. With all the comings and goings, as well as this final decision due to the financial impasse, it is impossible for the child to bear up to the situation. It is true that he deduces a series of facts; he instinctively feels ashamed of his parents' attitude towards him and his tutor (whom, logically enough, they do not pay and who only remains with them because of his devotion and affection towards the child, for whom he cannot help feeling sorry); he suffers because of this estrangement from his parents, but of course he is incapable of understanding the reasons why they reject him. And this is the exact situation which James is looking for. The fatal and unavoidable end can be no other than that of his death, his almost violent destruction attributable to his own parents. This is also a part of the previously mentioned thematic structure.

The change from an economic to a sexual factor, as is the case in *What Maisie Knew*, produces a no less similar situation. During one of the dinner parties, of which James was particularly fond during the first part of his stay in London, he heard of the pathetic situation of a child, the son of a divorced couple who hated one another intensely and whose particularly unfortunate circumstances were due to the amazing verdict pronounced by the judge with regard to his parents' divorce. The conditions to which the three persons were to submit were the following: as the judge was unable to find in either parent the moral solvency needed to guarantee an adequate education for the child, he ruled that he should spend six months with his father and six with his mother. At first all seemed to run smoothly, except that the child served unconsciously as a messenger of hate. The parents used him as a means of expressing their mutual contempt and both of them tried, during the period in which he remained with each one, to instil in him the feeling of hate and distrust towards the other member of the triangle. The child's situation became even more disagreeably oppressing on the remarriage of his

father; the system of vengeance then underwent a variation. The father refused to take care of the child and did not send for him when it was his duty to do so. The mother naturally presented this attitude and also began to put it into practice, with an end to hurt and annoy her ex-husband. In this way, the child found himself, in the novelist's words, « practically disowned, rebounding from raquet to raquet like a tennis ball or a shuttle-cock »¹³.

This is the anecdote just as Henry James heard it. However, his imagination, always in search of the novel or the unfamiliar, did not delay in discovering new possibilities for the predicament of the boy, who soon became a girl in the mind of the writer, since it seemed to him that « [it] couldn't be with verisimilitude a rude little boy; since, beyond the fact that little boys are never so 'present', the sensibility of the female young is indubitably, for early youth, the greater, and my plan would call, on the part of my protagonist, for 'no end' of sensibility »¹⁴. With the idea of giving the situation another turn (« the magic twist ») which it needed, in his opinion, to be converted into a dramatizable theme, he only needed to present the other partner in his novel *What Maisie Knew*, as being married and in this way give the above mentioned situation « a proper symmetry »¹⁵. A new dramatic touch is achieved when the parents of the child become bored with their respective second partners and flee again from the bosom of the family, each, as is natural, with a new mate. So the child falls into the hands of his step-parents who in their turn see themselves joined by this wretched fruit of the previous union of their respective partners, so « it became rather quaintly clear that, not less than the chance of misery and of a degraded state, the chance of happiness and of an improved state might be here involved for the child, roundabout whom

13. HENRY JAMES, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 140.

14. *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 143-144.

15. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 140.

the complexity of life would thus turn to fineness, to richness »¹⁶.

In this way the possibility of a happy ending remains, or at least, is insinuated, at the same time that the thematic content of which I have spoken is fulfilled: an innocent child, Maisie; a world which to her is incomprehensible, the adult world of her parents who seem to be solely governed by their passion or by their sexual whims; a blow for the child every time these adults allow themselves to be ruled by the flames of their desires; and an inevitable consequence, which is the child's suffering and her death, metaphorically in this case, since the part of her which dies is her innocence, her childhood. Here then, there is room for hope, when in that hurtful moment life is given to the woman who is to be Maisie, although in the process of arriving at this new beginning, the path has been painful and bitter.

f) *Artists.*

A third presentation is the one which we find in the stories which revolve around an intellectual and artistic setting. Although James used it in only one of his novels, the first one published, it served him as inspiration for innumerable short stories, abundant throughout his creative life. At first it appeared as a detail of marginal character in his international stories, almost as if by chance. Such is the case of his first novel, *Roderick Hudson*, in which the situation of Roderick, an American in Europe, has more importance and relevance than his artist's condition or character. And similarly in the story of two years before. « The Madonna of the Future » (1873), the artist in question projects by his words his national attributes rather than his quality as an artist immersed in a vulgar and prosaic society which rejects or uses him with no attempt at appraisal: « we are the disinherited of art!... We are condemned to be superficial! We are excluded from the

16. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 141.

magic circle. The soil of American perception is a poor little barren, artificial deposit. Yes! we are wedded to imperfection. An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European. We lack the deeper sense. We have neither taste, nor tact, nor force... We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile »¹⁷.

Later the novelist gives full importance to the contrast between, or confrontation of, the artist as an innocent person and a vulgar society, insufficiently sensitive to understand him and which at times accepts and uses him, as in the case of the protagonist of « The Death of the Lion », 1894. In this story a pseudo-intellectual, whom James calls with a certain irony « a literary lad », relentlessly pursues the artist in order to exhibit him in her salons as a curiosity and to impress her friends with her relationship with the artistic world and its celebrities. The outcome, as in the case of so many other innocent characters, is the death of the artist: a death which stems from the weariness, the sadness and the frustration caused by his inability to escape the persecution to which he is subjected. On other occasions the artist is unmercifully rejected and has to seek refuge in his own work or in the consolidation of the understanding of one of his disciples who is capable of appraising him intelligently, as happens in « The Author of *Beltraffio* », of 1884, or in « The Lesson of the Master », which is of particular importance because it constitutes a kind of parable of James's life as creator, as he saw himself. This story, which was written in 1888, seems at first sight to deal with the pernicious effects, as James saw them, which are caused by love and marriage in the life of the artist and reveals, on a less superficial level, the latent fear present in the life and work of the novelist with regard to sexuality and women. On the other hand it is a diatribe against the fortunate and triumphant artist, the one who is accepted and wealthy, which James dreamed of being all his

17. HENRY JAMES, « The Madonna of the Future », in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 3, p. 15.

life, and with which, at this time, perhaps as a consolation for his failure as a popular artist, he deals in a satirical and contemptuous way. It could, in fact, be seen as an attitude of sour grapes were it not for a certain sense of humour which suggests a mild mockery of the *Religion of Art*, which James professed all his life.

f) *The ghosts.*

From 1890 onwards, James began a fourth and last treatment in his experiments with the theme of innocence. Throughout the decade of the eighties he had suffered, a victim of misfortune and failure. In 1882 his mother died, and a few months later so did his father. The following year one of his younger brothers died, his health gravely affected by his participation in the Civil War, from which he had never recovered. Towards the end of 1885 the publishing of *The Princess Casamassima* was begun, the failure of which wounded James even more profoundly as his hopes for the success of this novel were exceptionally high. If we add to this the failure of *The Bostonians* only a few months previously and that of *The Tragic Muse* of 1889, we have sufficient motives in conjunction to understand that the spirit of the novelist reached a saturation point, a disillusionment with respect to the novel as literary form and as an expression of life, which drove him in the nineties to write entirely for the theatre. And here again it was failure, complete and utter, which he suffered as the fruit of his labour. Therefore it is not surprising that it is at this time that James began to express his sorrow, his disenchantment and his bitterness by means of this fourth theme to which I referred above: his ghost stories. The contrast between the natural world and the supernatural provided an adequate outlet for all his anxieties and frustrations. In this case there is a crash as disproportionate as the others, with the difference that, here, a confrontation is introduced between perfectly normal beings, intelligent, flexible and cultured adults, and the supernatural world (where before

they were foreigners of limited education, or children, faced respectively with the sophisticated society of another country, or with the adult world) against which they are completely powerless.

Of his eighteen ghost stories only two belong to James's first period of creative work: « The Romance of Certain Old Clothes » and « De Grey: A Romance », both of 1868. Another two appeared half way through the seventies: « The Last of the Valerii » and « The Ghostly Rental », of 1874 and 1876 respectively. These four stories are really conventional attempts, written in the traditional style and with no other implications or intentions than those of a financial nature. A long empty period then followed until 1891 when he wrote « Sir Edmund Orme », one of the most significant and interesting of this genre. In 1894 he wrote another four and from 1895 to 1900 he follows with seven more in rapid succession. The remaining two « The Beast in the Jungle » and « The Jolly Corner » were written in 1902 and 1908, respectively. In « The Turn of the Screw », 1893, perhaps the best known of all these stories, we have a double level of confrontation: on one hand the healthy and intelligent adult with the supernatural world and on the other, that of the children with the unintelligible world of adults. These confrontations are developed on three levels rather than four: on the lower plane the children's world, on the higher, that of the ghosts, and in the middle, as a unifying factor between the two, the world of the normal adults. The children react against the aggression of their governess, who, without their being able to understand why, attempts to preserve the tranquillity which is threatened by these *presences*, as James calls these dangerous spiritual beings: and in the process of trying to avoid any harm being done to these young children for whom she feels responsible, she acts in such a way that she herself inflicts a large part of the pain that the children have to undergo. The governess herself is also a victim: her anxious attempts to protect the children from the harm that the ghosts represent only partially

succeed, and the death of one of them together with her own terror are the elements which form her own suffering¹⁸.

However one looks at it, it is evident that what James was attempting by using this supernatural world as a contrasting vehicle was to stress the impotence and the inability of the victim to defend himself. It is true that in the earlier situations there could be no blame attributed to his innocent character: their suffering was not a punishment for their weakness and even less so for their wickedness, but rather an unforeseeable consequence of their blissful ignorance. It is also true that this ignorance is naturally involuntary and, in some cases, insurmountable. There is, however, and this is significant, an element of guilt which can in some ways be ascribed to these blameless people: there would have been a certain possibility of self-defence had they been able to understand and comprehend the antagonistic situations in which they found themselves; in such an instance, their destruction or suffering would not have taken place, and their incapacity to learn would not have led them to their sad situations, if they had stayed in their own natural surroundings instead of rebelling against an environment which was unfamiliar to them. This can be applied, with a certain flexibility, to the cases of the foreigner, the child and artist. On the other hand, in the case of this fourth and last instance, James presents a situation in which there is no possibility of laying the blame on the innocent. The person is a mere toy, a completely blameless and defenceless victim. And it is to this situation that the writer wants to arrive in his sad years at the end of the century: to present the case of a defenceless person, completely innocent and of great intellectual capacity, who is faced with a situation which he has not provoked and out of

18. A discussion of the reasons why I accept this rather straightforward interpretation of the story instead of any other possible one (for instance Edna Kenton's theory, more fully developed by Edmund Wilson in his essay «The Ambiguity of Henry James») would take the present article too far away from its stated purpose and must therefore remain unattempted for the moment.

which he is destined to come broken and wounded, if not utterly destroyed.

This, then, is the theme of innocence in the work of Henry James. A theme which he arrived at as if by chance, drawn to it perhaps by his circumstances and experiences. In its beginnings it was the story of the uneducated American, the healthy and good-natured provincial American, who James despised and ridiculed, faced with people or situations rooted in old traditions which had been corrupted by the same civilization that had given them superiority to such an extent that they had become slaves to selfishness, ambition and finally evil. Later, and through a series of gradual developments, he will introduce those extrinsic variations which provide the limited differences to be found among his novels and short stories: differences which, as has been repeatedly said, are superficial and circumstantial. James's fiction is therefore cumulative, it keeps expanding, while the only real development would be achieved through an « in depth » penetration which would give individuality to his situations and independent personality to his characters.

JAVIER COY