

Relation in the aspern papers



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In actual life, Henry James was said to be a solitary man, even though he had many friends. He was reserved and kept distance from people, which must be the reason why the theme of “ relation” is so present in James’ work. When it comes to defining “ relation” one can say that it nearly always involves a connection between two people (or groups of people), two things, two concepts, etc. “ Relation” could easily be the one single most important theme of The Aspern Papers, that is, if we consider a comprehensive definition of the word. Henry James deliberately uses “ relation” at virtually every level.

When reading the word “ relation”, what possibly first comes up to one’s mind is the relation two people can have with each other. But delving deeper, one notices it can also mean the act of relating, telling a story. This is actually what I will try to develop. How does Henry James manage to use the simple theme of relation throughout his novella all the while meaning many different things? This is not an extensive explanation of all the different meanings the author uses but rather a sample. In The Aspern Papers, it seems as though “ relation” revolves around the narrator himself.

He is in relation to several things or people, such as the readers, Jeffrey Aspern and Tina. The relation a narrator makes of a story has to be made so as to grasp its audience in its claws in order for the actual audience not to get away. In the story of The Aspern Papers, Henry James creates an interesting main protagonist (whose name we are never given). The latter is a post-diegetic narrator as well as a protagonist belonging to the diegesis. This duplicity accounts for the ambiguity of the “ I’s” found in the story. But let us first concentrate on the post-diegetic narrator.

As we have said earlier on, a narrator will always try to tell his story in a way to draw the readers' attention and make them relate (no pun intended) to the main character. It is exactly what the main protagonist does. Thanks to a series of device, the narrator is able to manipulate the reader's mind. To illustrate this idea, let us take the example of voyeurism. The narrator is clearly shown as a voyeur in the story. He wants to see something which is on a forbidden field – his scopic drive indicates his desires through looking. And by some means, we readers become voyeurs and transgressors as well.

We are manipulated and the narrator has us convinced of the presumably high standards which guide the protagonist's own actions. For instance, the narrator justifies the fact that he manipulated the Bordereaus by saying (page 73): “ They had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I doing? That element was in everything that Jeffrey Aspern had written, and I was only bringing it to light. ” His excuse is that he is doing this for the sake of poetry. He tries to get the papers from Juliana, who is presented as a greedy, domineering and unappealing character.

Not to be confused with the relation of a narrator (the fact of telling a story) is the relation the author of the text has with its readers. During the Victorian period, the typical novel was the “ bourgeois novel”. It contributed to the structure of a certain ideology. The average reader had specific expectations when it came to the story – the main character had to be virtuous, respectable and inspiring and the end had to be a happy one. Precisely, Henry James mocks the typical Victorian-era reader and says a book is meant for social entertainment.

Once the book is closed, nothing remains. This kind of novel is the readily novel. It is easily consumed and its reader remains passive (there is no intellectual activity). As opposed to the readily novel, the writely novel has the ability to resist interpretation (1); in other words, the text is so obscure and equivocal that it encourages the reader to see several possibilities because of its several layers of interpretation. According to James, a good story will not tell: “ In Art, economy is always beauty”. (1) James’ stories are readily as well as writely.