

The artist's quest: real truth beyond real life



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The Real Thing was written by Henry James in 1891. According to his notebook entry on February 22, 1891, the idea for the story came in the form of an actual incident divulged by his friend George du Maurier. James juxtaposes an upper-class couple, who have no imagination, with a poor, unrefined girl who has an understanding of the artist's purpose. The narrator is an artist who draws in black and white for magazines that print short stories. He employs these people as models. For the artist, illustrating stories is a way to make money, not a form of art. This is explained when he says "My 'illustrations' were my pot-boilers; I looked to a different branch of art — far and away the most interesting it had always seemed to me — to perpetuate my fame." In fact, he would prefer to be known as an artist as opposed to an illustrator of stories. James writes "The Real Thing" to validate his theory that art is not an exact copy of life, but a reproduction that goes beyond to reveal the 'truth' in reality. The narrator of the story expresses "an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation." When painting his upper-class models, the Major and Mrs. Monarch, he feels forced to make the pictures exact replications of their appearances. The artist describes the paradox of Miss Churm, his regular model: "She was only a freckled cockney, but she could represent everything, from a fine lady to a shepherdess". Since he draws gentlemen and ladies in his illustrations, the artist initially believes the Monarchs would be good models, as they truly are of the genteel class. In contrast, James characterizes Miss Churm as the archetypal cockney Londoner of his era. As such, she can only imitate the characters she models for. Trouble soon comes in the narrator's effort to use the Monarchs in more than one story. Drawing Mrs. Monarch, he states, "

She was the real thing, but always the same thing.” Mrs. Monarch can only represent a woman of her own class. The artist is unable to divine qualities in the woman that reverberate with those in women of any station other than her own. She contains no truth that surpasses her own limited self. Critic Adam Sonstegard asserts that Henry James did not desire a great deal of information on a subject he proposed to write about, since it would limit the range of his imagination (11). Miss Churm has few distinguishing attributes, which lends her figure to expanded development. The artist is free to expound upon her original form. James acknowledges that not everyone understands an artist’s need for such intellectual freedom. Mrs. Monarch notices that although she and her husband are recognizable in the drawings they modeled for, Miss Churm was hidden. Instead of an inspirational model, idea, or subject being hidden because it is ugly or offensive, it is hidden because it undergoes a metamorphosis that ends with something better. “ If [Miss Churm] was lost it was only as the dead who go to heaven are lost-in the gain of an angel the more.” James includes editors and publishers among those who do not understand the meaning of art. They may work with great artists, and even hold sway over the success of an artist’s work, but they do not comprehend what the art is meant to convey. The narrator’s fellow artist and friend, Jack Hawley, describes this sentiment by explaining that the narrator must aspire to the approval of “ *coloro che sanno*.” James reasons that those people who cannot understand the desire of an artist — to find meaning in the mundane — should not be involved in the creative process. The narrator exposes James’ theory in an encounter between his upper-class models, Major and Mrs. Monarch, and his friend Jack Hawley:” He looked at them [...] as if they were miles away: they were a compendium of everything

he most objected to in the social system of his country. Such people as that, all convention and patent-leather, with ejaculations that stopped conversation, had no business in a studio. A studio was a place to learn to see, and how could you see through a pair of featherbeds?" By attempting to participate in the world of artistry, these types of people inhibit the creative process. The suggestion of something, rather than the thing itself, is preferred for inspiration. This illogicality is unsettling, and in the case of the Monarchs, insulting. That Miss Churm and her colleague, Oronte, should be better esteemed in any situation — even considering the " oddity" of artists — is incomprehensible and unacceptable to them. Artistic standards are " perverse and cruel" to the Monarchs." The Real Thing" accurately portrays the artistic creative process according to Henry James, a process which is clearly applicable to other areas of artistry as well. Even in photography, which captures a clear, truthful picture, the artist tries to make the audience see something beyond the representation. A writer tells a story that may be about a familiar, everyday event, but endeavors to show meaning and truth about the human condition within the incident. To merely make an exact copy of the person, place, or event would be relatively straightforward. But this is for dabblers and amateurs. A true artist creates something that represents the subject, but that is not necessarily an image of proportions exactly the same as those of the model. The Monarchs do not understand art as Henry James defines it: a transcendent portrayal of an aspect of life that brings the obvious, the mundane, to a higher plane. Works Cited Bradbury, Nicola. " Henry James and the Real Thing: A Modern Reader's Guide." The Review of English Studies. August 1996: 47. 187. Rpt. in Literature Resource Center. Gale Research, 2001. Hocks, Richard A. " Psychology-The Real and <https://assignbuster.com/the-artists-quest-real-truth-beyond-real-life/>

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