

The aesthetics of
pleasure and
psychological
repression in Henry
James' *The Ambassadors*...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

'My genius', Henry James wrote to William Dean Howells in 1900, 'I may... say, absolutely thrive [in 'The Ambassadors'] – it is 'exquisitely pure', exquisitely everything'. 'The Ambassadors' (1903) was considered by Henry James to be his crowning work, embodying his ideal of the novel as 'art'. Much of the artistic nature of the novel arises from the way in which 'language deflects and serves' the 'insistent desires' of its focaliser, Lambert Strether, and as a result creates 'sensual pleasure'. Strether is a character who is trapped by the memory of his wasted youth, and who desires to achieve 'the common unattainable art of taking things as they [come]'. It is this desire, to 'live in the moment', that pervades the novel and inhibits his secondary desires for Mrs Newsome and, most importantly, Madame de Vionnet. Henry James' language works to create aesthetic pleasure by exploring these 'insistent desires' the repression thereof on a psychological level.

A common psychoanalytical theme, present in the work of both Freud and Erikson, is that of originology. That is, the idea that all psychologically issues that manifest in adult life have their roots in childhood. For Strether, the cause of his adulthood repression could be said to be a misspent youth. Because he 'had married...so young', and experienced bereavement also, Strether did not live his younger years to their full intensity. The anxiety of having lost precious years mutates into an obsession with age tangible throughout the novel: '[Miss Gostrey] affected him as almost insolently young'; 'There was youth in that, there was youth in the surrender to the balcony, there was youth, for Strether at this moment in everything but his own business'. In a notebook entry of 1895, James wrote that the original

conception for the 'The Ambassadors' was the idea of 'an elderly man who hasn't lived, hasn't at all, in the sense of sensations, passions, impulses, pleasures...'. This vision clearly resonated with James, who himself incurred a back injury in his youth which stopped him from participating in the civil war, and is present also, though in an inverted form, in 'The Wings of the Dove' (1902), in which 'a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, [is] condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world' (Preface to 'The Wings of the Dove'). The desire in Strether, then, is to have his youth again, and to live life to its fullest 'intensity'. This is apparent in his speech to Bilham: '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.'

Intrinsic repression of desires is clear in Strether before he reaches Paris. Strether addresses Bilham that all he would have had to do in order to overcome his anxieties would be 'to let myself go' yet, he admits, he has 'never fully done it'. His life and desires are ruled by a 'terror', and this terror is 'the obsession of the other thing', that is, something other to 'the thing of the moment'. James makes sure not to make this anxiety crudely age-bound. Miss Gostrey, it is noted, 'was always paying for something in advance' and therefore herself not living for the present. 'The Ambassadors' exhibits the continuous repression of Strether's desires from the start of the novel, in line with the wider theme of repression in James' works (cf. 'The Turn of the Screw'). Indeed, E. M. Forster wrote that James' characters 'are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism' and, in terms of sexual repression, that their 'clothes will not take off'.

Strether also carries the burden of an extrinsic form of repression, which is less important than his intrinsic psychological repression but still worth noting. Mrs Newsome, the reader is told, 'desires that [Strether] should be worried with nothing that was not of the essence of his task [to find Chad and bring him home]'. As a result of this strict mandate, Strether is seen repeatedly to check himself, and reflect on whether his actions are most conducive to completing his ambassadorial task. Mrs Newsome looms over the novel and over Strether's conscious, like a 'particularly large iceberg in a cool blue northern sea' so that even in her absence, her presence is felt 'with an intensity'.

Paris, 'the vast bright Babylon', serves a crucial psychological function. For James, Paris assumes the position of 'the center of an ethical drama.' (F. O. Matthiessen, 1944) and thus eschews the 'dreadful little old tradition' of making the city the site of lewd seduction. Generic nouns in the novel assume the proper noun epithet 'Paris': Paris spring' 'Paris morning' 'Paris clock', and so 'Paris' as a concept is shown to be all-pervasive. The effect the Paris spirit has on Strether is of key psychological note: it is almost cathartic. He '[finds] himself young again', has a clear 'consciousness of personal freedom' and develops 'an extraordinary sense of escape'. In 'under forty-eight hours of Paris' the 'few germs' of aspiration left over from his youth blossom. Although 'It is too late, too late now for him to live' he reaches a 'supersensual hour in the vicarious freedom of another'. That 'other' is Miss Gostrey, for whom 'there was never a moment of her life when she wasn't 'due' somewhere' – she is the symbolic rectification of the mistake Strether made in his own youth.

Once Strether's 'insistent desires' have been piqued by Paris, James must contain them in a language which both 'deflects' and 'serves' them in order to create an ambiguous 'sensual pleasure' for the reader. The first way in which desires are deflected through the narration is through the process of overdetermination by the focalisor. Strether seems ignorant of other characters' relationships and emotions throughout the novel. Nussbaum referred to this as 'his inability to see... the sexual love of Chad and Marie de Vionnet... Maria Gostrey's deepening feeling for him... his own complicated feelings for Marie de Vionnet, and his jealousy of Chad.' Whilst it is accurate that all of these events are not explicitly considered by Strether, this is not so much an 'inability to see' rather a willing not to see. Such overdetermination litters the narrative with Strether's unrealistic perceptions of events: his interpretation of Sarah's 'smile' on her landing in France; his '[wincing]' when Chad and Madame de Vionnet are 'bracketed together' and his surprise that the two will 'probably go off together', leaving him alone in the city (according to Miss Gostrey). This theme culminates in the final passages of the novel, where Strether's unacknowledged love for Madame de Vionnet is tangible, pointedly, and left unresolved. As Bersani noted, the use of this 'center-of-consciousness method' (character focalisation) by James is a 'technique for the continuous deflection of dangerously energetic desires' because 'passion is filtered through mental appreciations'.

Maria Gostrey's position as 'a confidante for Strether...as a means of letting him comment on his experience' (F. O. Matthiessen, 1944) also has a function in '[deflecting and serving] insistent desires'. Strether immediately seeks dialogue with Gostrey after all the dramatic episodes in the novel, and

so his experiences are filtered and digested by their interviews. In this way, Strether's passions and desires entirely overcome him – they cannot- for they are constrained by the apparatus of Gostrey's interrogative dialogues.

James (and by extension, Strether) use language to create false moral scenarios, which serve to 'deflect' and to some extent repress Strether's true desires. By constructing moral functions for himself, Strether creates a scenario in which he must 'save' [Madame de Vionnet], just as she saved Chad. By enacting this scenario, Strether is protected from acknowledging his true feelings towards Madame de Vionnet, and by extension from accepting the sexual relationship between herself and Chad. Strether turns the situation into a sort of project: he instructs Bilham to 'marry Mamie Pocock' so that she is 'quite out of the way for Chad'. This 'plan for [Chad]' involves the union of Chad and Madame de Vionnet, and the sanctification of their relationship, and yet Strether cannot consciously accept their relationship. This apparent contradiction in terms creates a unique and engaging artistic effect, as Strether's unconscious desires enact themselves in increasingly odd ways.

'Sensual pleasure' is created by James in 'The Ambassadors' through his intelligent use of language in relation to Strether's desires. The best example of this aesthetic skill is in the famous scene, 'Strether by the River', in Book XI. Throughout James' novels there are a number of similar recognition scenes (for example, the two 'recognitions' in 'What Maisie Knew'; when 'mamma' is witnessed by Maisie with the 'Captain' 'at the end of the glade', and when Beale is seen with his new lover at the Exhibition), and another is employed in this later novel. Prior to the 'visual shock' of recognition, <https://assignbuster.com/the-aesthetics-of-pleasure-and-psychological-repression-in-henry-james-the-ambassadors/>

Strether has been enjoying a day of High Art. He leisurely strolls around scenery that reminds him of a Lambinet painting, and has 'not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame' of the day (he remains, quite firmly, in the realm of the disinterested observer). This is a clear example of effectively repressed desires, as 'before a work of art we are detached perceivers, free to explore all fine perceptions, but liberated (or cut off) from the tumultuous perceptions of personal passion' (Nussbaum). Therefore, in the moment before the 'jolt' of recognition, Strether, and the reader, can see the couple in the boat as merely part of a 'picture', and does not have to engage with the events emotionally- his unconsciousness remain repressed. Once 'the deep, deep truth of intimacy [is] revealed' this moment of withheld emotions and repressed desires is shattered, and the 'oblong gilt frame' is overstepped.

In 'The Ambassadors' James creates 'sensual pleasure' through his vision of Strether's repressed desires. It is Strether's 'double consciousness' as a focaliser that allows the language of the novel to simultaneously 'serve' and 'deflect' his 'insistent desires'.