Reading the Unknown/Speaking the Unspoken—An Analogy between Henry James' What Maisie Knew and the Oscar Wilde Trial: Did James Really Know What Maisie Knew?

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ABSTRACT

The explicit and implicit language in Henry James' novel, What Maisie Knew, reveals that the act of censoring was not exclusive to writers, since moral attitudes affected every aspect of society; consequently, people developed a means of communication via looks, gestures, and intonation that gave significant meaning to ordinary words and phrases, if one was part of the group "in the know." This coded means of communication resulted from the anxiety of being accused of immoral activity by the political and religious regulating mechanisms, especially in a volatile society where many feared the outcome of a nation that was changing so rapidly. It was a means of protection. When writers could not provide graphically specific language and details, they would manipulate words to create a desired effect that relied on the readers to draw on their personal knowledge and experiences to supply meaning to the text; therefore, the interpretation was affected by the relationship between the reader and the subject matter.

Keywords: explicit and implicit communication, immoral activity, language manipulation

By the end of the nineteenth century, European and North American individuals were greatly influenced by their contemporaries, social issues, and extraordinary events because of improved communication and transportation systems. These advancements enabled writers to exchange ideas and develop correspondences that would directly influence their writing and indirectly influence society. When events occurred that reflected topics of new exploration, especially those that affected the rights of individuals, nations watched carefully to learn how best to deal with the situation in the event the issues arose in their own society. When one considers that Henry James was an American living abroad in London, England, it is understandable that he would communicate newsworthy events occurring in Britain via letters to family members and friends living in the States. And there was much to talk about.

Queen Victoria's reign saw the establishment of political reforms and industrial growth that would set the standard for many countries, but it also saw a changing attitude towards traditional moral values which had a direct effect on the literary community, since many works that did not reflect socially acceptable values were not tolerated. For example, a work containing a positive expression of homosexual orientation or sentiments would have one of two outcomes: either the work remained unpublished or it was published with the homosexual content removed or altered to disguise its meaning. For some writers, this presented a difficult challenge, while for others it presented an opportunity to further develop their literary skills. Although there is still much debate about James' sexual orientation, there are critics such as Robert K. Martin who argue that "James's sexual orientation imbued his fiction" (Summers 399). Similarly, the same may said of the works of Oscar Wilde and many others. It is important to remember, nevertheless, that censorship laws forced writers to be discreet when presenting what could be perceived as morally objectionable themes; however, to a "knowing eye," the works provided a sub-text of information that was significantly different from the superficial text presented to the public at large.

The act of censoring was not exclusive to writers, since moral attitudes affected every aspect of society; consequently, people developed a means of communication via looks, gestures, and intonation that gave significant meaning to ordinary words and phrases, if one was part of the group "in the know." This coded means of communication resulted from the anxiety of being accused of immoral activity, especially in a volatile society where many feared the outcome of a nation that was changing so rapidly. It was a means of protection. When

writers could not provide graphically specific language and details, they would manipulate words to create a desired effect that relied on the readers to draw on their personal knowledge and experience to supply meaning to the text; therefore, the interpretation was affected by the relationship between the reader and the subject matter. This idea of being "in the know" is exactly what the prosecutors at the trial of Oscar Wilde depended on to establish Wilde's guilt. They intended to produce evidence of immoral intent and activity as expressed by Wilde in his personal correspondence as well as his literary works. By isolating key words and phrases out of context or by reading them with certain gestures or intonation, they hoped to prove that a hidden, immoral message existed.

Realizing that it would be possible to assign a different significance to these words, Alfred Douglas using the pseudonym HELVELLYN sent a letter to *The Times* (of London) in which he "compared Wilde's alleged criminal exploitation of young men to the widespread and culturally accepted exploitation of young women by men, and in this way alluded to the deeply ingrained hypocrisy of the entire society, especially on matters of sex" (Foldy 63). The significance of Douglas' letter is revealing in that a surface level interpretation suggests a defense of Oscar Wilde while the encoded message suggests that Douglas is a victim of his youth who was exploited by an older, respected member of society. The letter serves to deflect attention from his association with Wilde, for he realizes that:

in sexual errors, as in everything else, the real offence lies, and must always lie, in the sacrificing of another person in any way, for the sake of one's own pleasure or profit; and judged by this standard—which though not always the legal standard is certainly the only true moral standard—the accused is possibly no worse than those in society who condemn him. Certainly it is strange that a society which is continually and habitually sacrificing women to the pleasure of men, should be so eager to cast the first stone—except that it seems to be assumed that women are always man's lawful prey, and any appropriation or sacrifice of them for sex purposes quite pardonable and "natural." (Foldy 63)

Although Douglas, as well as other supporters of Wilde, attempted to express their views in the newspapers (many of which were not printed), it is clear that the journalists were more eager to amuse and entertain their readers with accounts of the trial; they were not as concerned with reporting the facts of the case as much as in sensationalizing the story to ensure their readers' continued interest. With so much emphasis on the importance of a single word or phrase or on an implied meaning, it is not surprising that an author like Henry James would write a novel that almost totally depends on the reader to give significance to the words as part of the development of the story, perhaps to demonstrate the impossibility of ascertaining with certainty the true meaning of something as unstable as words.

Henry James' novel, *What Maisie Knew*, is a captivating story that reveals aspects of a child's life as seen through the eyes of the child, Maisie, even though she herself is not the narrator of the story. The language is sophisticated yet unpretentious, insinuating yet not implicit; therefore, most readers would not imagine nor expect a child, whose academic and worldly education (as we learn) is incomplete, to be capable of the language manipulation necessary to relate such immoral (and, as we perceive, unscrupulous) experiences. Readers observe the events in Maisie's life from the time of her parents' divorce when she is only three years old to the end of the story when she is little more than a young adult. When readers evaluate what Maisie says and claims to know and analyze what is not said but is implied, they quickly realize that Maisie does not fully comprehend what is happening in her life. This difficulty to believe that Maisie is developing the story leaves readers with the impression that James is speaking through the character of Maisie; however, upon further contemplation, it becomes clear that there is another possibility—the reader is developing the story.

By utilizing a reader response approach to the story, the concept that the reader develops the story, readers understand how it is possible for individuals to draw conclusions from evidence they believe exists, realizing they have supplied the missing details. This abstract reasoning reflects how society interprets and pronounces judgment not only on a work of fiction, but also on real-life events. The process is similar to how individuals create a story when they do not know all the facts. Many people believe that writers simply create an idea from their imagination, and, in actuality, this is true; however, like readers, authors are influenced by life events and infiltrate their experiences with their own perspective on a subject. For example, when considering that Oscar Wilde's trials were highly controversial, readers need not stretch their imaginations to realize that information provided in the courtroom became somewhat distorted, especially by journalists, in the retelling of the story. This distortion reflects how knowledge and experience affects perception. By utilizing what can be called

"inspiration motivation theory," the concept that events in life influence the writer, readers understand how it is possible for individuals to retell an experience from evidence they perceive exists, realizing they provide a focus that reflects their perceptions of the information. It is "art imitating life;" however, since it is fiction, the medium provides a safe haven for authors to express their interpretation honestly, an act they dare not speak as members of society for fear of ostracism. James began the actual writing of his novel, *What Maisie Knew*, in 1896, a period of time in which Wilde was already imprisoned and awaiting his second trial for the charge of "gross indecency between males." Often referred to as "the trial of the century," Wilde's real-life events were followed by the public, as though one of his plays had suddenly come to life—and the audience waited with anxious breath to learn of his outcome before the final curtain fell, but like the focus of many of his plays, the audience failed to realize that whatever the final verdict, they were the ultimate recipients of the judgment.

When supporters of Wilde circulated a petition in 1896 "requesting a pardon for Wilde" (Summers 399), James refused to sign the petition. Publicly, James presented his position that he did not support Wilde. Reflecting this need for social acceptance throughout his novel, which was published in 1897, Maisie often exclaims "I know" in reaction to situations occurring around her. It is not until the end of the novel that Maisie states, perhaps in despair or frustration, "I don't know." In a moment reminiscent of a sudden revelation, the reading audience realizes they do not really know exactly what it is that Maisie truly knows, only what they believe she knows. Paralleling his own life, James' refusal to sign the petition is his statement of "I know" which reflects his knowledge of what he knows society expects him to do—that is, not to support a socially immoral person such as Oscar Wilde; however, upon Wilde's release from prison and the completion of his work, *De Profundis*, with its message of individualization and the need to fight for the right to liberate oneself from the restrictive social codes of conduct, one might expect to hear James say "I don't know" as he ponders what impact his refusal to sign the petition had on Wilde's life as well as his own.

An analysis of James' novel, *What Maisie Knew*, reveals the influential role of readers as an analogy of the role of those involved in the Wilde trial, since "Maisie's maturation in the course of the novel parallels that which James envisions for the novel-reading public in general. Like the contemporary reader, Maisie begins as a passive consumer whose tastes are clearly inclined to the sensational; she gradually becomes, however—as James hoped the readers would become—a discriminating and sentient observer of the drama surrounding her" (Craig 205). Readers, like Maisie, are characters who contribute to the development of the plot in which James presents morally neutral narrative and description; the readers bring to the work details—the good, the bad, and the ugly—that evolve from their own minds. James relies on the readers to supply their knowledge, often depraved knowledge, of human behavior and experience and to apply this information to Maisie's circumstances thereby revealing Maisie's knowledge imbued with their own experiences as the creation of a new experience.

As if James wants to deceive his audience, the events are revealed as Maisie might see images in a kaleidoscope, clearly focused yet lacking clear definition. With each turn of the page, new information is revealed, and a new picture is presented for Maisie's comprehension. The kaleidoscope that James is turning for us is Maisie's mind, and readers are horrified as they gain a clear perception of the picture that is presented to Maisie in fragmented pieces: a picture that is made possible by James but, ultimately, a picture that they have created. James' story is only a means through which readers may look into the kaleidoscope, Maisie. Once inside her character, readers are presented with isolated images similar to passing clouds that viewers form into objects and shapes. Some see beautiful creations while others see hideous forms, and images seen one day are not necessarily seen on another day. With experience, however, viewers are capable of creating more vivid images. With each reading of the novel, it is possible for viewers/readers to encounter new and old images according to their own perceptions which are ultimately expressions of their own experiences, yet "Maisie's attempt to understand her world is inextricably bound up with her attempt to express herself" (Craig 206); nevertheless, readers attempt to interpret Maisie's experiences according to their own individual knowledge.

The revealed information is not random. Not only does James manipulate words and ideas, but also his readers. He is aware that his reading audience will have an emotional response to the situations presented to Maisie. Jane P. Tompkins, referring to Walker Gibson's essay on the mock reader and his view that a writer is able to lead a reader to a specific position or perspective of a situation, states that "[t]he mock reader is a role that the real reader is invited to play for the duration of the novel. 'We assume, for the sake of experience, [sic] that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume'" (xi). In this manner, James' novel is most effective when readers assume the role of "mock reader" and bring to the work their own experiences. In his preface to

the novel, James reveals his desire to invite the reader to participate in his story by presenting themes "that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connexion [sic] of bliss and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt, so dangling before us for ever [sic] that bright hard medal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody's right and ease and the other somebody's pain and wrong" (James 25). The themes that James presents serve a singular purpose by "making confusion worse confounded by drawing some stray fragrance of an ideal across the scent of selfishness, by sowing on barren strands, through the mere fact of presence, the seed of the moral life" (James 26). In essence, James has planted the seed of doubt for his readers to contemplate, and this seed allows the readers to speculate what is really happening to Maisie. When the seed of doubt is nurtured by the readers' own imagination and suspicions, ugly little details to which James only alluded are permitted to develop strong roots because the readers have convinced themselves that their own assumptions are correct.

After reading the novel and evaluating their reactions to Maisie's situation, readers come to the conclusion that James has manipulated their thoughts through his mastery of superficial language. When they look for the factual information that they believe James has provided, they find that the facts are not present in the novel. Further investigation will reveal that James demonstrates this mastery of language through Maisie, who convinces her listeners that she knows what is happening, when in reality she is as ignorant to the "real" facts as they are; nevertheless, "Maisie discovers very early that by developing a thoroughly 'superficial' language, she can powerfully affect her companions" (Foster 208). Her ignorance precludes the possibility that she is attempting to sensationalize the events in her life; rather, she is simply seeking attention as a means to be loved.

Maisie's method for maintaining her position does not depend on her understanding the details of carnal intimacies, details that are, after all […] left to the imagination of the shocked and excited public. Still, the consequences of sexual infidelities (passions, and such exorbitancies beyond Maisie's experience) do touch her world. Maisie, reading those consequences, speaks more meaningfully of love than literalists would grant, their imaginations limited to the act itself. (Foster 208)

Should the reader be as innocent as Maisie is, James' underlying "method" which is dependent on their corrupt knowledge is lost; however, the innocent reader may still enjoy the story. James cannot assume that all "mock readers" will come to the story with the same knowledge and experiences; therefore, the effect of personal experience as it interacts with the language of the novel creates a situation that is unique for each reader.

This perception becomes clear when readers learn that Maisie's mother has "picked up" a man. This situation meets with the disapproval of Maisie's governess, Miss Overmore who states:

> "The only terms on which, unless they were married, ladies and gentlemen might, as Miss Overmore expressed it, knock about together, were the terms on which she and Mr. Farange [Maisie's father] had exposed themselves to possible misconception. She had indeed, as has been noted, often explained this before, often said to Maisie: 'I don't know what in the world, darling, your father and I should do without you, for you just make the difference, as I've told you, of keeping us perfectly proper. (James 58)"

To a "mock reader" who may be as innocent as Maisie is innocent in this conversation, the thoughts expressed by Miss Overmore may have little meaning other than the interpretation that Maisie concludes: "The child took in the office it was so endearingly presented to her that she performed a comfort that helped her to a sense of security even in the event of her mother's giving her up" (James 58). To the experienced "mock reader," however, Miss Overmore's statements carry significant meaning. The connotation of ideas such as "picked up," "knock about together," and "keeping us perfectly proper" reveals an air of immorality that may be construed as sexual misconduct. Later in the story when Sir Claude reveals to Maisie that "there are quantities of others" (James 123) in her mother's life, Maisie simply accepts this statement as meaning quantities of people, friends. The experienced "mock reader," however, may find it difficult not to realize just what kind of "friends" they are.

The role of "mock reader" is an unspoken invitation that occurs naturally as readers engage with the language of the novel. If the invitation to offer an interpretation were directed towards the readers, the effect would be different because they would search for the author's desired meaning (as if they could discern his intention); however, when readers approach the work as outsiders, they become more critical of the work and are more likely to assert their own experiences as they interact with the language.

Gibson's notion of a speaker addressing a mock reader enables him to overhear a dialogue passing between the two that, when paraphrased, reveals the strategies the author uses to position his readers with respect to a whole range of values and assumptions he wishes them to accept or reject. The concept of the mock reader allows the critic to dramatize the social attitudes implicit in a text by reconstructing the kinds of understandings and complicities narrators and mock readers arrive at over the heads of the characters and quite apart from the manifest content of the prose. (Tompkins xi)

James has an understanding of the complexities of the human mind and knows that readers, when presented with a situation, will naturally apply their own experiences to the situation to gain better insight. James strokes the readers' imagination and prompts them to utilize their personal experiences by stating very little explicitly, yet by implying much through the vagueness of his language.

Although readers may find it difficult to keep straight the constantly changing events of the story (the parents, the affairs of the parents, the parents in loco parentis, the change of residences, or the change of countries), one thought remains constant—exactly what does Maisie know? Even when Maisie states that she knows, readers wonder to what extent she really knows. When readers encounter this thought, it is possible to realize that the movement of James' kaleidoscope presents images that are not so pretty when viewed from an adult perspective because adults realize the potential harm immoral exposure may cause the child. At the height of the novel when all the adult characters in Maisie's life are at odds with each other, Maisie is trying to make sense of the situation, and she is certain of only one thing—it is a matter of choosing sides, but even her certainty is clouded by uncertainty.

If it had become now, for that matter, a question of sides, there was at least a certain amount of evidence as to where they all were. Maisie of course, in such a delicate position, was on nobody's; but Sir Claude had all the air of being on hers. If, therefore, Mrs. Wix was on Sir Claude's, her ladyship [Maisie's mother] on Mr. Perriam's and Mr. Perriam presumably on her ladyship's, this left only Mrs. Beale and Mr. Farange to account for. Mrs. Beale clearly was, like Sir Claude, on Maisie's, and papa, it was to be supposed, on Mrs. Beale's. Here indeed was a slight ambiguity, as papa's being on Mrs. Beale's didn't somehow seem to place him quite on his daughter's. (James 93-94)

Confronted with so much irresolution in her life, Maisie probes Sir Claude for information, and he states "Oh, you know!" (James 184). This is what Maisie wants to hear because she believes it brings her closer to Sir Claude as an equal (as an adult), so she responds "Yes—I know!" (James 184). At this point, James is depending on his "mock readers" to provide the missing details, and he encourages them by stating "What she knew, what she could know is by this time no secret to us: it grew and grew at any rate, the rest of that day, in the air of what he [Sir Claude] took for granted" (James 184).

Although the context of the story leads readers to understand that Sir Claude has taken Maisie's statement for granted, the "mock readers," also take Maisie's statement for granted. They take for granted that Maisie's situation is as bad or as good as they imagine it to be.

Maisie's perception of the fragmented pieces represents a limited and innocent vision of the whole situation that surrounds her. She sees beautiful men and beautiful women and "painted eyes like Japanese lanterns" (James 124); she sees the dazzling and the beautiful, because, above all, she wants to be loved. Even when James turns the kaleidoscope and ugly images appear, Maisie does not see them because they are not part of her experience or her knowledge.

The ironic comment which these references make, however, arises not in the of Maisie, but in the consciousness of the reader, in the greater understanding which he can bring to the events seen by Maisie, who in her innocence and good faith cannot interpret the evil contained in them. Her understanding is confined severely within the limits of what she could know, but the reader's is free to reach far out of the limitation. (Bowden 85) Maisie's view of the world around her is restricted to what is obvious, a surface-level, somewhat superficial view, perhaps a view in which everyone and everything appears beautiful, good, and loving. Although most readers do not admire or condone the actions of the adults as they perceive them, they are aware that Maisie is just an unfortunate little girl who is caught in the middle of a nasty arrangement. They realize that her knowledge of good and evil is confined to her experiences with the adults in her life, and their interpretations of her situation

are enhanced by their own experiences which they apply to her interactions with the adults. Maisie is unaware of what is happening around her, and her reactions to the adult behavior reflect a simple child-like desire to be loved. In a conversation with her father, Maisie is exposed to a situation of who is going to be responsible for her and with whom she wants to live. Her father reveals that no one really wants her not even Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale. To this Maisie replies "Well, it doesn't prevent them from loving me. They love me tremendously" (James 154).

Adult readers, nevertheless, are quick to realize the ugliness present in Maisie's life because they have something that Maisie does not—experience. They are cognizant of the complex codes of language and the innuendos of sordid depravity, while Maisie views language and actions as if she were on a merry-go-round, a quick start, flashes of color, and a sudden stop. With this awareness, readers must remember that Maisie is their link to the story. "Maisie's consciousness […] is the focus of the book: all that she sees, not just what she understands, is presented to the reader" (Lowe 189). Maisie is simply the medium that James uses to tap into his reader's mind. The power of his work is not in what Maisie knew but in what the readers know. The focus is not exclusively on Maisie but ultimately on the readers. Tompkins summarizes the claims of several critics to assert her position that "focusing on the reader engenders a species of moral drama in the domain of criticism" (xv).

To adopt a particular conception of the reader is to engage in a particular kind of virtuous action–the refining of one's moral sensors (Gibson), adding to the sum of human knowledge (Prince), coming ever closer to the truth through attention to linguistic detail (Riffaterre), achieving self-transcendence through self-effacement (Poulet), or building a better self through interpretive enterprise (Iser). What is important about these claims is that although they never deny that the ultimate object of attention is the literary text, they endow the process of reading the text, of receiving it and responding to it, with value. (Tompkins xv-xvi)

How readers respond to Maisie depends on their own knowledge. The more worldly their views, the more personal their experiences, and the more idealistic their beliefs, the more assertive they become in their interpretations of Maisie's dilemma.

The knowledge that Maisie claims to know, nevertheless, is deceptive. She may have the voice of an adult, but she lacks experience because she is a child. For her, language manipulation is part of a game that she has been playing with the adults in her life ever since her parents' divorce, but it is a game she has learned to play as unobtrusively as possible. When she is with her father, "Maisie's inspiration instructed her, pressingly, that the more she should be able to say about mamma the less she would be called upon to speak of her step-parents" (James 151). When she wanted to avoid complications with Mrs. Wix and Sir Claude, "What she had essentially done, these days, had been to read the unspoken into the spoken; so that thus, with accumulations, it had become more definite to her that the unspoken was, unspeakably, the completeness of the sacrifice of Mrs. Beale" (James 205). When pressed into a confrontation with her mother who is involved with a man she picked up, the Captain, Maisie wordlessly imitates her mother's actions. "She had at least now, with the first flare of anger that had ever yet lighted her face for a foe, the sense of looking up quite as hard as anyone could look down" (James 177). Whenever possible, Maisie tries to maintain a role of passivity and to learn information through "a sharpened sense of spectatorship" (James 101), but most importantly, readers "have already learned that she had come to like people's liking her to 'know'" (James 125). Her lack of knowledge, however, forces Maisie to reach a point in the adult game when the game proves to be insurmountable and she is forced to admit defeat. "The method, by which Maisie alternates participants in the game and herself assumes other's roles and projects her own onto another, is a fundamental means of her 'knowledge' which is after all, as much as anything else, knowledge of the game" (Mitchell 177). In a sense, this is the same game, the same method that James is playing with his readers, and, like Maisie, they must eventually admit defeat. The moment of reckoning, however, does not occur for Maisie until the final pages of the novel; it is a moment when she must decide her future by choosing a guardian in place of her natural parents, and it is at this moment that we realize what Maisie actually knows when she utters despairingly "'I don't know–I don't know'" (James 260).

Maisie's statement, "I don't know," is the pin that bursts the balloon, the control that stops the merry-go-round, the utterance that stops the kaleidoscope from turning. Readers now see Maisie as the child she really is, a child who is innocent of corrupt knowledge. Mitchell further clarifies Maisie's position at the end of the novel by stating that "[t]he content of knowledge is important but so is the stance of the knower. […] Maisie has certainly lost her innocence and her ignorance, but her 'knowledge' is not corrupt" (169); unfortunately the readers cannot say the same. Tompkins (reflecting Stanley Fish's claim) states "that giving up the claim to objectivity

(which means relinquishing the claim that one knows the truth) is an honest position because it does not pretend to knowledge that is really unavailable. Implicit in this appeal to honesty are [sic] an appeal to humility" (xxiii).Readers, are now forced to accept (with humility) their role in the novel and the knowledge that they are not innocent and that they possess knowledge that is corrupt. If evil and corruption are present in the novel, they do not appear from the mind of the author but from the mind of the readers.

Readers of James' novel want to believe that now they know the answer to the unspoken question that is posed by the title, *What Maisie Knew*; consequently, if they believe they know the answer, then they are deceived in the same manner that Maisie is deceived. They have no real facts to support the fragmented picture that Maisie creates as she captures them in her spellbinding tale of intrigue, neglect, and sorrow; this is to say that the readers have no real facts as uttered by Maisie or implied by James. What they have is the unique insight of adult readers who are willing to assume the worst scenario by supplying pieces of information that may or may not have occurred. Readers do realize, however, that James makes it possible for them to judge while he admonishes them for being judgmental. Tompkins (reflecting Walter Michael's theory) states "the self that actively and freely constructs its own meanings is just as illusory as the text that contains meanings independent of the reader's perceptual habits" (xxiv). In essence, readers bring to the novel their own experiences of real life events, and they complete the fragmented picture with pieces that are not supplied factually by James, Maisie, or any other character in the novel. If the created picture is ugly, then readers must look within themselves to find the deception, the evidence of ugliness, or they must look to the allusions that James does supply. They cannot assume that all of the characters are irreproachable and good nor can they assume that all readers are dirty-minded and corrupt. The deception, if there is one, is the fact that James has supplied another character that is never mentioned in his novel—the reader; consequently, not surprisingly, this unmentioned character gives new meaning to the work each time it is read. It is a novel with unlimited possibilities similar to the tale of *The Never Ending Story*. As the readers apply their knowledge to aspects of the narrative, the story develops, and, interestingly enough, the story will never be read the same way by any two readers because each reader brings to the novel his or her own personal experiences. Just as Maisie's education is incomplete, the reader's education is incomplete. Jonathan Culler states that it is “only too clear that knowledge of a language and a certain experience of the world do not suffice to make someone a perceptive and competent reader. That achievement requires acquaintance with a range of literature and in many cases some form of guidance” (Tompkins 109).

Since readers’ experiences and values are constantly changing, their interpretations of literary works will constantly change. With this claim in mind, it is easy to understand that James' novel, *What Maisie Knew*, will endure and will appeal to future generations, because each generation of readers will bring to the story unique experiences and values that will be infiltrated into the kaleidoscope to create new patterns of development and understanding. If future readers are horrified by the picture they imagine James has created, they will become more horrified when they realize that they have supplied the explicit pieces of information. In essence, based on the half-supplied and half-implied facts that James presents, they will never know if their interpretations are correct.

What then is the purpose of the story and what message does James wish to convey to his readers? What are they compelled to see, to feel, to figure out, or to surmise? Is it possible that James expects them to accept as truth the insights of a child whose age they do not even know? This thought is unlikely. In a sense, these questions represent the suspense in the novel because readers are constantly trying to discern the author's message. From a moral perspective, they want to believe that James is projecting his views of society and of people he perceives to be immoral. In reality, readers are projecting their own thoughts of their own knowledge, possibly their own actions within society; consequently, they will come to their own horrific conclusions that they are immoral. Although it is not possible to speak for James as it is not possible to know for certainty his intentions, it is possible to refer to a key passage from his novel in which he offers, in a first person narrative, a possible method by which readers can view his work. At a point in the novel when Maisie must confront the complexities of her situation, James speaks directly to the readers and states that:

> "I may not even answer for it that Maisie was not aware of how, in this, Mrs. Beale failed to share his [Sir Claude's] all but insurmountable distaste for their allowing their little charge to breathe the air of their gross irregularity–his contention, in a word, that they should either cease to be irregular or cease to be parental. Their little charge, for herself, had long ago adopted the view that even Mrs. Wix had at one time not thought prohibitively coarse–the view that she was after all, as a little charge, morally at home in atmospheres it would be appalling to analyze. (James 164)"

For all practical purposes, Maisie has been denied an education that might provide her the skills to analyze an appalling situation; her education depended on the ability of her governess, Miss Overmore, who "knew swarms of stories, mostly those of the novels she had read; relating them with a memory that never faltered and a wealth of detail that was Maisie's delight. They were all about love and beauty and countesses and wickedness" (James 51). This is hardly the kind of knowledge that would prepare a child for social interaction; however, the unmentioned character, the reader, has not been deprived of an education that provides knowledge of the world and the ways of corrupt people. Readers, therefore, are capable of analytical skills that allow them to surmise what the possible consequences of Maisie's situation will be. The ironic twist of James' "ugly little comedy" is that readers must acknowledge that they are in possession of knowledge that, in of itself, may be deemed appalling, and they bring this unsolicited knowledge to the story as willing participants who desire to know what it is that Maisie knew.

Unlike a child, who might be amused or intrigued by the pretty shape of a scorpion, the graceful movements of a rattlesnake, the beautiful attire of a queen, or the powerful speech of a politician, most readers are aware of the potential danger to be found in the beautiful. James presents these images to his readers in the guise of a child and compels them to see and to examine their involvement in situations they would rather not acknowledge. Perhaps James does not desire them "to know" what Maisie knew because that would preclude a certainty that there is a truth, an absolute answer. Fish asks the question "In the analysis of a reading experience, when does one come to the point?" (Tompkins 89). His reply might be the response James would make.

The answer is, 'never,' or, no sooner than the pressure to do so becomes unbearable (psychologically). Coming to the point is the goal of a criticism that believes in content, in extractable meaning, in the utterance as a repository. Coming to the point fulfills a need that most literature deliberately frustrates (if we open ourselves to it), the need to simplify and close. Coming to the point should be resisted. (Fish 89)

The world which for some is a beautiful place to live in has many ugly aspects that often go unnoticed by people whose position in life allows them to ignore the tragic results of their disinterest. James states that Maisie may be "morally at home in atmospheres it would be appalling to analyze" (164), because she does not know any better; however, the unspoken question to the unmentioned reader is not what does Maisie actually know, but, rather, what does the reader know? Perhaps the honest answer would be to say "I don't know; I don't want to know."

In the same year that James' novel, What Maisie Knew, was published, Wilde wrote *De Profundis* while in prison. In this letter, Wilde reveals what he does know. He knows that he has been a victim of gay oppression which resulted from the prejudicial and discriminatory social moral codes that condemn those who are different or who deviate from the established norms. He knows that he attempted to conform to society's image of a man but failed to meet their expectations. He knows that while in society he wore a mask in order to present himself as a respectable individual. And finally, he knows that he had to discard his mask to gain self-respect. He emerges from his prison ordeal enlightened by the knowledge that he is a complex, authentic individual who accepts himself for who he is rather than who society wants him to be. James called his novel an "ugly little comedy," and there are many who would call the Wilde trial an ugly little farce. The circumstances that led to Wilde's conviction reflected the ugly truth that society could not or would not accept one who according to Summers denounced wrong and unjust laws created by a wrong and unjust system (747). Wilde's strength and fortitude to overcome his circumstances without bitterness and to accept his own nature affirms him as a true hero and as an inspiration to all people. James' ability to present to society a medium by which they might recognize their own folly is a heroic effort to make right the wrongs he had committed by not championing Wilde in his time of need. If the Wilde trial had been a novel such as James created, perhaps many would simply perceive it as an "ugly reflection of an ignorant society;" unfortunately, they probably would not recognize it as their own.

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