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Lambert Strether: A Dilemma of an Impaired Vision and a Question about the Homogeneity of the Protagonist

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ABSTRACT

The discussion focuses on the downfall of Henry James's protagonist in his novel, *The Ambassadors*. Lambert Strether, who not only fails to get hold of his promise to his well-off fiancé, Mrs. Newsome, but also cannot accept the Parisian life-style and becomes emotionally and financially paralyzed at the end of the novel. One of the major critical discussion on *The Ambassadors* was the nature of its ending; although many believe that it is actually an open-ended novel, the others based their discussion on the embedded facts which are placed by the author in the narrative. Based on the close reading of the text, we posed the question on the homogeneity of Lambert Sterther with other characters (and elements) in the painting-like narrative of the novel. Also, the function of vision, in correlation with the protagonist's consciousness is probed; in this respect, James's definition of "consciousness" has been investigated. Moreover, knowledge and morality are discussed as the key factors that reign over the character's final decision. It has been argued that "vision," and "consciousness" are the two major hindrances which do not allow the protagonist to adapt himself with his surrounding atmosphere.

Keywords: Henry James, consciousness, modern fiction, *The Ambassadors*, vision.

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1.0 Introduction

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The Ambassadors is the eighteenth novel by Henry James, and it belongs to the latter part of James's creational period. James argued several times that perhaps this novel would stand as his best creation, which would shine in the center of his works and be the representative of all the contents, literary and non-literary, which he was in pursuit, in all his literary career. In preface of the novel he writes: "fortunately ... I am able to estimate this as, frankly, quite the best, 'all round,' of all my productions; any failure of that justification would have made such an extreme of complacency publicly fatuous" (James, 2012, pp. xxix-xxx). He is right to an unfathomable extent because the work does surely have that Midas touch which not only brings back many of James's values of previous works, but also has the power to stand alone in the creational level of the author's literary career.

Colm Tóibín, in his preface to the *Modern Library* edition of *The Ambassadors*, quotes from R. P. Blackmur that Lambert Lewis Strether is "a man of the world without a world" (Tóibín, 2012, p.xii). *The Ambassadors* is narrated from the point of view of Strether, who is a man in his fifties which dispatched from Woollett in quest of bringing back the only son of a wealthy widower, Mrs. Newsome, to his hometown, in order to take charge of the family business. Though this seems a small task for such a man like Strether, but he –willingly– lets himself fail in this marathonic chase of fortune. Although "for James, the distinguishing element" in society is 'money or class' (Lesser, 1986, p.402) but it seems that money is not play an important role in the life of the protagonist (at least in this novel). Elsie Michie discusses that although "money" remains predominant in latter James's novels but this element becomes latent and indiscernible. She posits that in *The Ambassadors* "wealth is experienced as so detached from substance and the material world of objects that it becomes entirely disembodied." She maintains that "the peculiar fluidity of James's late novels marks the end point of that narrative of increasing abstraction and the novel's entrance into the modern world" (Michie, 2012, p.183). Michie is fairly correct and a major body of critics align with her that James's later novels are exploiting same materials as well as their predecessors, but the narratives are turning to an "abstract" and obtuse collages which does not allow the materials to flow in linear fashion through the courses; and all the three notable latter James's novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), follow the same pattern where "consciousness" becomes the center, and it gradually fades away the materialistic sense of living in the universe. In this case, the direct influence of William James, Henry's brother, cannot be disregarded, since William was the one who coined the term "stream of consciousness" in 1890.

2.0 Raising consciousness

J. C. Hallman in *Wm & H'ry* traces back the evolution of "consciousness" in the works of James's brothers by looking at their correspondences in the nineteenth century. He Argues that these correspondences map "the trajectory of the brothers' work. They each settled into philosophies and aesthetics, and each made consciousness a feature of their investigations." William "wanted to pinpoint consciousness or at least find a way to describe it." Henry "sought to depict it, even in his letters" (Hallman, 2013, p.12). Hallman seals his earlier claim by asserting that:

Interest in consciousness mostly ran from older brother to younger. Starting in the late 1870s, with the contract to produce *The Principles of Psychology*, Wm wrote a series of essays that inched closer and closer to a definitive statement on consciousness. H'ry read each as they appeared. In 1878, "Brute and Human Intellect" cataloged two kinds of thinking, reasoning and narrative, the latter described as "a procession through the mind of groups of images." (Hallman, 2013, p.17)

It should be noted that when the term was used by Henry in early twentieth century, it was still in its elementary stages and we have to distinguish James's consciousness from its hardcore manifestation in the works of such writers like Joyce and Woolf. To Henry, consciousness is that ever-shifting, rapidly changing images which enter the mind, as the perplexed mind feebly strives to convert those perceptions into the system of the language. So Modernist's writer's agenda is to illustrate how the character perceive its universe, not merely to illustrate what happens in character's world. But as

stated, James's consciousness does not conform with his successors, therefore instead of choosing a first person point of view, he uses a third person omniscient point of view which is limited to the perspective of his focal character; in this way, not only the world centers around the protagonist pivot, but also the reader has to guess how this character perceives and receives the world which surrounds him. The product of these proceedings is the tour de force painting which James puts in front of the audience; thus everything inside the frame of the painting can be exposed to thousands of presumptions and indefinite conclusions about the plot and the characters, and in this manner *The Ambassadors* is no exception from the other works of James's later period and the work easily falls into this category. Furthermore, by acquiring this point of view, James isolates his focal character from every material which is in his surroundings; This is because, as the readers, we are confined to see everything from the perspective of Strether, and as the narrative continues, we understand that the protagonist is not like anyone else in the story, and we cast a doubt on the homogeneity of the character with his surroundings. James refers to this heterogeneous mixture several times in the story as he phrases it as a "sociable solitude" which the character(s) becomes isolated in the frame of the painting of life or narrative; an instance of this locution can be found in book second, Ch. 2 of *The Ambassadors*:

It was at present as if the backward picture had hung there, the long crooked course, grey in the shadow of his solitude. It had been a dreadful cheerful sociable solitude, a solitude of life or choice, of community; but though there had been people enough all round it there had been but three or four persons in it. (James, 2012, p.71)

Another example of this "sociable solitude," is when Strether goes for a walk in a rural countryside of Paris and "had walked many miles and didn't know he was tired; but he still knew he was amused, and even that, though he had been alone all day, he had never yet so struck himself as engaged with others and in midstream of his drama" (James, 2012, p.454). There are many examples of this kind of solitude in the novel and it shows the magnitude of James' illustration of the narrative, which comes here as a form of painting. It also indicates that the heterogeneous elements gather around in the painting and the most focal of these elements are character's "vision," and "consciousness."

2.01 The importance of vision and observance

The story is also about vision, perception, and experience as received by Lambert Lewis Strether, a middle age American, which eventually all his efforts seem to become a failure. At the opening of the novel (even before the first encounter between Strether and Maria Gostrey) James takes advantage of his omniscient viewpoint and hints to the reader that the delay of Waymarsh can lay a traumatic experience and distorting vision on Strether's mission, as "these things, **it is to be conceived**, were early signs ... that" Strether's "relation to his actual errand might prove none of the simplest." Therefore "he was burdened ... with the oddity of **a double consciousness**. There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference" (James, 2012, p.7). As a principled man, Strether feels these early symptoms, and this makes him on alert which leads to his "double consciousness," and later his appeal to Mrs. Gostrey to help him surviving Europe.

Later, through the words of Miss. Gostrey, James reveals one of the key element of Strether's failure:

"I see"—he appeared thoughtfully to agree. "Great is my privilege."

"Oh it's not your privilege! It has nothing to do with me. It has to do with yourself. Your failure's general."

"Ah there you are!" he laughed. "It's the failure of Woollett. That's general."

"The failure to enjoy," Miss Gostrey explained, "is what I mean." (James, 2012, p.16)

If we do not want to delve into the text and the failure discussion instantly, we have to pinpoint that Strether's vision and failure are interwoven together in *The Ambassadors* that one cannot discuss each of them solely. The reader of *The Ambassadors* understands that most of the characters in the novel uses their own kind of spectacles as an aid for their sights; Hutchison notices this and asserts that "Miss

Barrace with her long-handled, tortoiseshell lorgnette is one of several characters in *The Ambassadors* who make use of spectacles of some sort. Maria Gostrey, Gloriani, and Strether also wear “aids to vision” as James often calls them” (Hutchinson, 2009, p.28). With the “aid” of Hutchinson, we also can infer that the structure of *The Ambassadors* is shaped on the pillars of **Observance**; there are many instances in the narrative which the characters coming and going into the scene and talk about a certain character who appears on the far corner of “the stage.” Aside the long conversation between Strether and Maria, we can bring to mind those Boulevard Malesherbes lavishing parties which characters like Little Bilham and Miss barrace come and go and share their “vision” with Strether about Madame de Vionnet, Chad, Jeanne and others. In these chapters the novel becomes like a play.

2.02 Strether: Demeanor as a misfit

After throwing himself into the Parisian life, with the aid of this new vision, Strether starts to wonder and question himself that “Had ever a man ... lost so much and even done so much for so little?” (James, 2012, p.72) As the losses refer to the loss of his child and wife and after that incident nothing actually happened in his life; He realizes that he really has not done anything special in his life; and all his life, he lived to the conformity of the society of Woollett. The promiscuous life of Paris triggers these emotions within Strether; although his vision grasps even the tiny particles in the Parisian air, but his consciousness is not ready to challenge what has already established as the value all his life. Although he sees the ridiculousness of all his errands for Mrs. Newsome, but all his conclusions come “to saying that this acceptance of fate was all he” has “to show at fifty-five” (James, 2012, p.72). As Eric Savoy states: “tormented by his mis-spent youth and his vacant middle age,” Strether “returns to Paris with an inordinate, liminally conscious desire to return, to resume, to pick up where he left off, to make something of himself before it is too late” (Savoy, 2013, p.107).

As we mentioned earlier, the structure of *The Ambassadors* is not like those “streams of consciousness” in other Modern novels. Although the narrative point of view is third person omniscient, but it seems that there is nothing really there to narrate. James’s style of novel, expose him to numerous sharp criticism from his counterparts, later in the century. The most famous of all those tense criticism is E. M. Forster’s *The Aspects of Novel*. There is a chapter in Forster’s nominal book which talks about “pattern and rhythm;” and in this chapter, Forster hammers James’s *The Ambassadors*. He writes:

the characters, beside being few in number, are constructed on very stingy lines. They are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism. Their clothes will not take off, the diseases that ravage them are anonymous, like the sources of their income, their servants are noiseless or resemble themselves, no social explanation of the world we know is possible for them, for there are no stupid people in their world, no barriers of language, and no poor. Even their sensations are limited. They can land in Europe and look at works of art and at each other, but that is all. (Forster, 1985, p.160)

No one can disregard the magnitude of Forster, both as a novelist and a critic. *Aspects of the Novel* especially is a very seminal work which is full of bright ideas, but it rather lucid now that these bright ideas –at least in this section which he discusses *The Ambassadors*– are wrongly executed. Forster is right to a great extent but the major flaw with his criticism of *The Ambassadors* is in his vision. Forster mixes up his own vision of the reality with what is merely conceived through Strether’s vision. Forster seems to indirectly answer his own question when he states that “no social explanation of the world **we know** is possible for them;” by using the plural pronoun “we,” Forster generalizes that his own “vision” is the only one vision that can ever exist; of course this is a little bit illogical from Forster. We have to discern the character from his point of view or “vision,” not from our own standpoints; and this is what James intended to do from the first place. Forster’s vision as a critic is to a great extent justifiable because James’s narrative does allow to find a major plot, theme, pattern, or above all, rhythm; and this creates the problems of processing, classifying, and deciphering in the reader:

As Nicola Bradbury³ argues, *The Ambassadors* is not structured as a linear plot but as a picture composed around a “vanishing point” of perspective that eludes and transcends a “rigid two-dimensional structure of meaning” (Bradbury 38). The novel therefore resists any system of values but shows the difficulty of attempting to catalog or explain the fluidity of reality. This places the novel at an interesting pivot point between Victorian realism and modernist fiction. (Hutchinson, 2009, p.30)

Furthermore, this non-linear pattern or structure of the plot evokes the very definition of the consciousness which we discussed earlier. James’s “consciousness” is centered on the rapid images and cannot be classified by any sort of classification. This also shapes the rule of conduct on the protagonist; so as our observance clashes with protagonist’s observance in a non-linear system of narrative, we somehow think of him as a misfit because we don’t know whether he acts properly base on the circumstance which we also will not know anything about.

In the most sensible way of criticism, we cannot ignore or criticize Strether’s “vision” as if our vision is superior to him; we have to ask why he sees the world in this way? Perhaps the answer to this question is that Strether’s values of the society differs from what actually happen around him. James’s protagonist has moral values and his consciousness does not allow his judgement to fly over unethical spheres. Here, the discussion can be divided into two parts that whether Strether’s vision filters or purifies everything, or his consciousness hinders back everything which is not favorable for him. Whatever this process is, nevertheless the answer is the same that morality is the key factor that rules over Strether’s consciousness. Morality is the case here, not naivety or stupidity, that when Little Bilham calls the state of relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet “a virtuous attachment,” (James, 2012, p.150) Strether easily accepts this claim and does not doubt it even a little. Judith Woolf believes that even this “morality,” impairs Strether’s vision from seeing the reality and therefore open the way for his failure. She writes: “by the end of the novel he will feel cheated enough, but the things that turned him into an emotional cripple happened a generation ago and the only betrayer was mortality itself” (Woolf, 1991, p.89).

2.03 Strether and the question of his virility

As the story continues, Strether begins to realize something in the European air which he did not have back in Woollett. A sense of freedom reigns over him, and he perceives freedom as it is “a queer concrete presence” in Paris:

He felt, strangely, as sad as if he had come for some wrong, and yet as excited as if he had come for some freedom. But the freedom was what was most in the place and the hour; it was the freedom that most brought him round again to the youth of his own that he had long ago missed. He could have explained little enough to-day either why he had missed it or why, after years and years, he should care that he had; the main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been, an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed—a queer concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality, which he could handle, taste, smell, the deep breathing of which he could positively hear. It was in the outside air as well as within; it was in the long watch, from the balcony, in the summer night, of the wide late life of Paris, the unceasing soft quick rumble, below, of the little lighted carriages that, in the press, always suggested the gamblers he had seen of old at Monte Carlo pushing up to the tables. (James, 2012, pp.418-419)

Of course this sense of freedom is “queer” for Strether’s discreet, bounded and once conservative consciousness, but it would perceive as something normal for a Parisian. The most important thing

³ Bradbury, N. (1979). *Henry James*. Oxford [England]: Clarendon Press.

which we derive from this passage is that all the five senses of human being (i.e. the faculties of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch) are beautifully involved in order to grasp one thing and one thing only: freedom. We have to keep in mind that what is called here as “freedom” should be conceived as “individual,” or “personal” freedom in a sense that a human’s faculty liberalizes itself from all the bounds of social orders which limit him from pushing himself over the boundaries of that particular social system. Another crucial point which we derive from this focal passage is that all of these five senses can be categorized under the name “vision;” since all of them are referring to human’s instincts, and their work is to help a person to better distinguish an “outside reality.” We can infer that Strether’s vision is finally have the full capacity to see this freedom as a “concrete substance,” but in Strether’s case this knowledge is not rewarding because the feeling of individual freedom evokes in him “the youth” which “he had long ago missed,” and he begins to question himself why or what for he was drifted apart from this sense of individual freedom? Also, Strether has already opens up to reader about how his consciousness works as he believes if he challenges or questions his queer state of ignorance, it would lead to still queerer state of knowledge: “our general state of mind had proceeded, on its side, from our queer ignorance, our queer misconceptions and confusions—from which, since then, an inexorable tide of light seems to have floated us into our perhaps still queerer knowledge” (James, 2012, p.410). Strether is aware that the “queerer knowledge” is merely the same as the “forbidden knowledge” which resulted in the downfall of Adam from heaven. Strether’s consciousness is like a safe haven that filters every material which his vision inputs, in Strether’s favor. Now that he is going to question his long time established way of life and his shaped consciousness, how is his consciousness going to react? It is better to discuss the final chapters of the novel in order to have a better understanding of Strether’s reaction.

Even though many critics have considered *The Ambassadors* –like *The Wings of the Dove*, etc.– an open-ended novel, but it is extremely argued by others that a misreading of James’s novels can lead to this effect. *The Ambassadors*, for sure, is not an open-ended novel. In the final chapters of the novel, Strether, who takes a day off from the routine bustle of Paris and goes to the French countryside, comes to a sudden apprehension by looking at the French enticing scenery:

Romance could weave itself, for Strether’s sense, out of elements mild enough; and even after what he had, as he felt, lately “been through,” he could thrill a little at the chance of seeing something somewhere that would remind him of a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer’s and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten. It had been offered, he remembered, at a price he had been instructed to believe the lowest ever named for a Lambinet, a price he had never felt so poor as on having to recognize, all the same, as beyond a dream of possibility. He had dreamed—had turned and twisted possibilities for an hour: it had been the only adventure of his life in connexion with the purchase of a work of art. The adventure, it will be perceived, was modest; but the memory, beyond all reason and by some accident of association, was sweet. The little Lambinet abode with him as the picture he would have bought—the particular production that had made him for the moment overstep the modesty of nature. He was quite aware that if he were to see it again he should perhaps have a drop or a shock, and he never found himself wishing that the wheel of time would turn it up again, just as he had seen it in the maroon-coloured, sky-lighted inner shrine of Tremont Street. It would be a different thing, however, to see the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements—to assist at the restoration to nature of the whole far-away hour: the dusty day in Boston, the background of the Fitchburg Depot, of the maroon-coloured sanctum, the special-green vision, the ridiculous price, the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon. (James, 2012, pp.448-449)

He, who did not have the money to buy Lambinet’s painting back in Boston, now finds himself living in that particular picture and landscape; “it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was **freely** walking about in it” (James, 2012, p.450). Here, of course, we can deduce three inferences from the word “freely.” The first connotes to the matter which he did not have the money

to buy that painting but he can now exploit all his senses to feel or to have or live in that particular picture; the second refers to his “individual freedom,” which he did not feel in Woollett but now he is gaining it in Europe; third, we can derive that James is hinting to the painting format or structure of the narrative, which now the character thinks that now he is in complete harmony with his surroundings, but this third aspect is going to be ruined in a jiffy when Strether sees two strangers, rowing on a boat, seeming to appear from the bend of the river into the center of his consciousness’s illustration. In his amazement, Strether realizes that the couple are Chad and Madame de Vionnet. As the three dines together, Strether has the epiphany that understand the carnal nature of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s relationship. This erupts sets of emotions and questions in Strether. He, who thought of himself as a homogeneous element of the painting which he lives in it in complete harmony, now upon this sudden realization starts to question himself: “there was the element of the awkward all round, but Chad and Madame de Vionnet had at least the comfort that they could talk it over together. With whom could he talk of such things?” (James, 2012, p.466) This habit of self-questioning casts a mortifying sense of loneliness on Strether.

Upon the late realization of Strether, the reader notices that there were certain specific clues in the narrative earlier that could aid Strether to Understand the carnality of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s relationship, but why at the end of the novel, this sudden realization hits Strether like a thunder? One of the very conspicuous example of these aids is when Miss Barrace discusses with Strether about Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s sort of attachment to each other, she is clearly implicating that they are engaged in a carnal affair: “well then, how could she do more? Marrying a man, or a woman either ... is never the wonder, for any Jack and Jill can bring that off. The wonder is their doing **such things** without marrying.” (James, 2012, pp.221-222) the question for us is that why Strether did not understand these hints earlier, and why this epiphany comes so late for him in the novel? What makes Strether’s consciousness vulnerable in the late stages of the novel is a feeling of confidence and complacency which he gains when he finds himself in Harmony (homogeneity) with other elements of the Painting. This confidence leads to an act of questioning everything that surrounds him, and therefore the consciousness liberate itself from the bounds of discreetness, and in other words overturn the long-established system of consciousness within Strether’s faculty. Of course this procedure results in a very challenging kind of consciousness that not only understand the carnality of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s relationship, but also unravels that Madame de Vionnet is really an ostentatious liar who would literally do anything to save her extramarital affairs.

3.0 Conclusion

Based on our discussion, we can conclude that *The Ambassadors*, does not have an open-ending narrative since James included the much needed materials for our conclusion in his novel. After repairing his “vision,” Lambert Lewis Strether understood that he is not homogenized with his surroundings i.e. the soon to be modern world which he lived in; so he decides that he cannot stay in Paris because his conservative consciousness cannot go a long with false and flamboyant Parisian life-style, where everyone tries everything just to find their identity and simply get away from their loneliness. On the other hand, living in Paris had also good effect on Strether, and he wants to keep this effect forever; Paris purified his vision, and brought senses of youth which he was taken for granted for a long time. He wants to keep these senses for himself also; therefore, although he knows that he has to back to Woollett, but he is not willing to go back to the same life which he had under the closed and conservative Mrs. Newsome’s pressure which he is force to censor his own vision and in other words live as a dead man.

If we think of what happens to Strether in the ending of the novel as an epiphany, based on the terrestrial scale we have to consider this epiphany as a failure; also we should consider him as a loser because he cannot allow himself to stay in Paris and pursue love, nor go back to Woollett and pursue fortune; here, the factors like consciousness and knowledge do not let Strether to easily conform himself to the rules of this new world (era): “finally, in Strether’s hotel room, during the night he

abandons the attempt to make sense of the situation and escapes into his imagination. His new knowledge strikes him not as a triumph but as a failure” (Hutchinson, 2009, p30). also morality is the factor which makes him a misfit in this estrange new world and pave the way for his downfall.

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