



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4.,2016 (Oct.-Dec.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON ART OF FICTION BY HENRY JAMES

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ABSTRACT

For Henry James fiction is 'a personal direct impression of life; value depending upon the intensity of impressions.' When he began his literary career, fiction was comparatively new in comparison to other genres of literature. There was no operative consciousness and writers were 'telling' with moral pills. The rhetoric of fiction was less sublime and the only rough was used in novels. Besides there were more canons and conventions, more ideologies, more emphasis on linguistic subtlety and it lacked authenticity due to deprived first-hand experience.

Henry James detested looseness in fiction, felt the importance of amusement, championed the causes of the indirect approach, central intelligence, and international theme. He showed his concern for 'form and order', authenticity and a new vision in which imagination and fiction could be mixed. He wanted to 'limit the facts', create a 'central consciousness' which could lead to the unity of subject; introduce 'dignity, nobility and goodness in his subjects', put more emphasis on 'psychological' aspects rather than on external, social or outward world. He had a 'philosophical' bent of mind to see an ideal concept of man. He had a sense of 'morality', so he dubbed Zola as immoral. He also aspired for 'hopefulness' and condemned Maupassant by saying that life is not a series of despair. He believed in 'human life' and not only perfection and style as Flaubert strived for. He wanted 'a fewer details' in novels as opposed to Balzac's concept so that there could more room for inner consciousness.

Henry James felt that life may be chaotic or a splendid waste but art gives it beauty and meaning through form and expression.

Key Words: Art, Fiction, Henry James, Novel

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Henry James was a pioneer in theory and criticism of the novel though he did not pen down any systematic writing in a book form on the art of fiction. To find out his theory on the art of life, fiction, poetry, criticism; we have to analyze his essays, reviews, notebooks, prefaces, letters etc. But before retailing James' theory; it would be interesting to dwell upon other's opinion on the art of fiction. Crawford felt fiction as a 'pocket theater' whereas Henry Fielding had a notion that fiction is a 'comic epic in prose'. For Meredith, it was

` a summary of actual life including both the within and without of us' and for Nash, it was nothing more than `stories of action'.

But for Henry James, Virginia Woolf and Charles Morgan, it was something deeper. They felt that the fiction must have the tendency `to subordinate action to psychology' and the central theme should be in the mental and spiritual developments of the character rather than in their physical adventures. James also refutes the remark of George Moore about the novel as ` a drawing room entertainment addressed chiefly to ladies'.

For James a broad definition of novel can be ` a personal direct impression of life, value depending upon the intensity of impressions and it must have freedom to feel and say.' In the beginning, English novel was not discutable. It had no theory, no conviction, and no consciousness. James was the first to codify a theory of fiction and he was the first to catch `the atmosphere of the mind' in his novels. James was primarily an analytical writer, not content with the face value of human behavior and the result was his withdrawal from appearance and the superficial forms of life.

For James, the novelist is a particular window open to the world simultaneously intensely consult and the same time intensely ignore life. His own inspiration derived from his own experiences which for him were *impressions* but he nourished the impressions or the *germ* by his `essence'. He keeps only the *essential essence* and the rest is estranged which resulted in decreasing number of events and of course no series of events. When he discussed relations between people and people and people and events, he discussed them in particular situations rather than in general. His subjects have plastic and moral contents. The development of his novels was primarily psychological and the value of his work lied in the framework and in the story. His subjects live more in inner thoughts and tensions rather than in the real world. Their motivations, feelings, impulses are better known than their acts.

He felt that the only reason for the existence of a novel is to represent life and this is the reason why he admired the contemporary French writers even if he disliked them on account of immorality. He valued realism so much that he could not exchange Madam Bovary of Flaubert for George Eliot's novel whose morality he admired.

James was amazingly a prolific writer. He wrote everything except poetry. He failed as a dramatist; however, he learnt from it the `mastery over fundamental statement. 'James was a journalist, a foreign correspondent, a serious critic and a playwright. He altogether wrote eighteen prefaces for his novels which turn his critical mind upon himself- form, theory, art in general. His letters too are warm and fresh and contain vital views regarding the art of fiction. He believed novel as the most elastic of all the art form. He was the first intensely moralistic novel critic. He saw literature as a human and moral concern.

James believed his prefaces as a manual of novel writing, though they are much disorganized. The central obsession of his preface is `form' and he feels that without it, they are like fluid puddings as the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

James also believed in the superiority of art over life. He complained that English novel had no air of having a theory even the French had it though it was a new idea relatively for them too. Since fiction is one of the forms of art, Henry James' poetics on art helps us to understand his art of fiction. His writings are interpersonal with various views, statements, definitions of art and the art of fiction.

James did not believe in `art for art sake' nor did he believe in ` art for life sake'. He had decided moral leanings towards morality but it was never at the cost of art. Flaubert has a major default of intelligence in ` Madame Bovary' because here it is an addiction to art that is set over against life. The sense of life is a serious matter in creative literature. Even Balzac in `La Comedie' is extremely populous though it misses the sense of life. Henry James says that `the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.' He also believes that ` a good novel is not at all a deliberate moralizing pill and with a happy ending, but it is the execution of good impulses in the minds of readers and other human beings whereas bad novels sweep into unvisited limbo. A good novel always stimulates the desire for perfection.

Mr. Besant says that a novelist must write from his own experience, his characters must be real as met in actual life. However, reality has `a myriad forms' – literal, physical, external, psychological or emotional

depending upon the imaginative power of a novelist `to catch and present a particular kind of reality of life and the world and make it legitimate, cogent so as to hold and sustain our interest and attention. The aim of reality is the supreme virtue of a novel.

Henry James believes that `experience' does not mean war, battle, upheaval, revolt, revolution, invasion or aggression. It is never ending and is all around. But it all depends on upon the imaginative sensibility and the fertility of the novelist's minds. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience. In the same way, `adventure' or `incident' does not necessarily mean some hair-raising incident but it may be apparently a little happening.

He also feels that there cannot be a conventional distinction between the novel of character and a novel of incident. In fact, the novel is an organic whole- it has almost all the elements in a proportional degree; impressions, experience, narration, description, and reflection, story, and dialogues which must cooperate, reinforce, advance, multiply and intensify one another.

To James the classification of novel can be one which has life and that which has not. But even this is not the right classification because a novelist can make his novel `have life' in many ways. For example, for Dickens, social phenomenon, social evils, and exploitations dominate the scene and infuse `life' whereas, for D.H. Lawrence, life is in physical desires and urges; whereas for Henry James, life is a bit deeper, more inner or psychological.

James also opposes Besant's ideas that a fiction should have a conscious moral purpose. He says how novels being a picture can be moral or immoral. He says it has not a purpose but diffidence. He has a fascination for the rich subject but he also says that an artist has not to rule out or reject the unpleasant, ugly and the disagreeable experiences.

For novelists like Henry Fielding, Thackeray, Dickens and the like; the external, the social, the outward were exciting but it is psychological which is the most exciting for James. However, he does not lag behind in fully appreciating the novel or novelists of another kind. In his essay, `The Future of Novel' Henry James opines that the novel is all pictures, the most comprehensive and the most elastic. It will stretch anywhere and it could include anything, subject being the whole human consciousness. James believes in the fullest freedom of mankind and the liberty of mind and desires a novel not be tethered to rules and restrictions. To deduce James's fictional views and principles, we must analyze his views on a few other novels and novelists.

Henry James rejects the novel `Our Mutual Friend' because this is devoid of life and a central inspiration to unify the various events. He says there is no trace of `nature' in Wordsworth's sense or reality. James wishes philosophical bent of mind in a novelist so that he may see an ideal concept of `man'. James rejects `The Belton Estate' on the ground that its realism is photographic and there is no central consciousness. For `Middlemarch' he opines that it has no systematic design and is an indifferent whole. However, the novel has some merits also like it has a combination of instinct and thought, fact and fiction. James rejects `Far from the Madding Crowd' because of its diffuseness and padding. James is vexed with its defects and expects rules for all time for neatness, tightness and lesser length to rule out padding. For `Nana' he says it has naturalism but it is devoid of morality. He also comments that never was any other writer as dirty as Zola.

While discussing novelists like Maupassant, he feels that Maupassant's views towards life are dark and negative. James says that there must be hopefulness as life is not a series of despair. By this alone human life is to be sustained, maintained or consoled. James is disturbed by the themes of sex, nakedness, and prostitution in Maupassant's writings. However, he pacifies his feelings for him by saying it all feeling, all experience and impression and Maupassant himself feels that any novelist sees the world from his own point of view.

Flaubert for him was novelist's novelist, who bothered much for perfection and style but he was also devoid of human life or vital human experience inadequate degree. In the same way, he does not appreciate Balzac because of his numerous details of numerous things, which gives no room to inner consciousness. James feels that Balzac is obsessed of the material, the financial, the social and the technical which becomes antidotal to something divine, spiritual, idealistic and the sacramental. He advises Emile Zola that a novel is like

a big ship to give room to multifarious impressions and carry these to the desired destination without any jerk or upheaval. He has an assimilating and vivifying power. For James, D' Annunzio lacked the moral sense. However, in him, there is an ideal fusion of all necessary qualities like exciting sensibility, splendid visual sense, ample and exquisite style. James believes that life and literature should be mixed in such a way that it should be a very difficult to separate one from the other. Although James theorized that for a novelist there is all life and all experience to be presented yet he shows his aversion or reaction to finding the sexual passion dealt with a novel of D' Annunzio. For Turgenev who is a storyteller, James feels that his tales are a magazine of small facts and he strikes at living details. This is the secret of novelist's art.

Before James, there was no full-fledged or satisfying theory of the novel. Drama and poetry were acceptable forms of literature. During the 18th century, the branch could not come into its real form. Ian Watt in 1852 was trying to give the novel a separate entity. Henry James used the concept of 'the operative consciousness' which was not in full measure. The novelists were fond of 'telling' and author's intrusion in the novel was quite visible sometimes even with moral comments as we find in Walter Scott's 'The Secret of Midlothian'. Besides, there was no 'advance rhetoric of fiction'. Usually, the plainer, the rougher and the less sublime were used in prose. Novels in the 18th and the 19th century in England were tagged to fixed canons and conventions. To represent character and action, the emphasis was put on episodes, events, actions and the external matters. Novels were also largely ideological as in Robinson Crusoe of Defoe which had a providential pattern and social criticism of life within accepted codes of conduct. The illusion of reality could often be marred by the novelist's moral pill or the author's intrusion. Emily Bronte had the same habit. Surprisingly some English novelists who were also artists did not exercise their mind on theory. Richardson used an epistolary form which proved a good solution to the problem of presenting a point of view indirectly. Organic construction of the stories achieved plot character relationship in his novels.

Jane Austen had a happy equilibrium in all general senses. She was the first writer of the pure novel. Her plots were on the contrasting feature, romanticism, and practicality. She satirized fancies, achieved dramatic objectivity and gave lively pictures of elegant society. She created sparkling dialogues and style with a classical perfection.

Thackeray emphasized on linguistic subtlety than on character and action. The distinguished trait of the English novel had been realism. It had a social, moral or ideological basis. But the idea of devising a perfect medium to give the vision of reality and the maximum expression; seems alien to the English novel. If some achieved it as Richardson did, it was all accidental or if Jane Austen and Thackeray, it was all due to their inherent artistic sense. But none of them formulated a theory deliberately. The same thing was missing even in American novels.

There was a concern for art in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letters'. It missed economy of detail, punctuation, and observance of the principle of unity and novelists gaze on the human soul. In The Blithedale Romance, the action of the novel is viewed through one of his characters. He is interested in the impact of sin on human conscience.

Before William Dean Howells, there was the tradition of romance in American novels. Howells was the chief exponent of realism in American fiction. He believed that novelists should deal with human life in simple reality and not indulge in a romantic escape. In the later phase of his life, he was attracted to Tolstoy with his image of God and his presence in human life.

Before Henry James, there was a romantic strain in American novels. Thus it is obvious that the English, as well as the American novels, had no viable theory on the art of the novel. They lacked form because there was apathy for the aesthetics of the novel. Henry James appeared timely on the literary scene.

Authenticity was an important concern for the novelists of the period and it was believed in **personal** first-hand intercourse with the world. George Eliot attacks women novelists of her day because they were trying to write like men without taking the fundamental difference of sex. But the knowledge of life may be obtained in various ways besides direct personal experience. It could be taken from books, conversation,

people etc. James uses and utilizes all kinds of information. However, the first-hand experience keeps the story fresh and interesting.

It was also believed that there should not be any gap or inconsistencies in a novel. It should be artistically told. Parts should be arranged with a due sense of balance and proportion. However, E. M. Forster does not appreciate this approach. He says that 'The Ambassadors' is a reward due to the fine artist for hard work. He attains it at the cost of a short list of characters and they are constructed on very stingy lines. This is all in the interest of pattern. He believed in a single topic, situation, and gesture to occupy the characters and provide a plot. To E. M. Foster a rigid pattern is to shut the doors on life. James as a practitioner might have failed in some of his novels but 'The Portrait of a Lady' was both the beauty of symmetry and fullness of life. For this reason, the absence of vitality of life in Flaubert, though he has a beauty of symmetry, James does not give his full-fledged praise to him.

James also feels that there should be a new vision in which imagination and reality should be mixed in a proper way. He also says that facts should be limited otherwise the novelists will become a recorder like Balzac who had an obsession with the actual. He also says that 'form' is important and any disregard for form leads to an abuse of dialogue. Henry James' Prefaces are more eloquent about form. Besides 'form', it is only through large lucid reflector 'the acute central consciousness' that the values of a story can be fully expressed and the unity of the subject manifested.

James has an innate leaning towards some 'dignified' subjects. A novelist like James can introduce dignity, nobility, and goodness even in an ignoble subject or theme like that in 'What Maisie knew'. In this novel, the chief characters are stupid and ignoble but only Maisie's 'freshness', her innocent fluttering's, acute intelligence and wonder make it the stuff of poetry, tragedy, and art.

For the first time, Henry James took seriously the writing of the novel as an art form. He emphasized on designing of materials or patterning of subject matter or coherence. He discarded redundancy. He had a lifelong passion for facts, for experience and impressions, human contacts and knowledge. He felt that a novel must have life, an ideal vision, a moral leaning and a round finish. The central consciousness in a novel as theorized by James is like the center, and other smaller characters revolve around him.

For James life may be chaotic, inexhaustible, a splendid waste but art gives it beauty and meaning through form and expression. James has a fascination for a great morally dignified character. Only great subjects with moral problems interest him. Recognition of error or acceptance of one's fault is the very nerve of Jamesian novels. He paid utmost attention to the moment of revelation. He says a novel must be logical, convincing and natural or lifelike. He also says that reality does not mean 'literal actuality'. He has a passion for good and great subject matter. Henry James had large and illuminating ideas about the theory of fiction in his prefaces. Statement of the anecdote and the circumstances, in which it was told, from where James drew the germ of the story – a single phrase, a single sentence, a short anecdote told or uttered by someone could lead to the creation of a novel. Henry James brought to bear certain emphases on the art of fiction throughout the preface- a presiding intelligence, the method of indirect approach, the necessity of being amusing, expressive relation between art and life and an international theme which deals with the opposition of manners and the use of innocent characters as the subjects of drama.

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