

POINT OF VIEW IN THE NOVELS OF HENRY JAMES

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ABSTRACT

The point of view, technically speaking, is simply the angle from which a tale is told or recorded. In other words, since no story gets told or written of its own, there must be someone to do the job with the maximum of intensity and truth, and minimum of intrusion and attenuation. In the omniscient narrator's method, the point of view is necessarily the author's; either the drift of the plot reveals it, or, as often happens, it may be voiced through a sympathetic character or a chorus or an alter ego or a deputy. There it has little concern with the compositional aspect of the problem; the angle of vision is the primary thing. The author's point of view may be more comprehensive than, or even superior to, a particular character's point of view; it is not necessarily truer or more reliable. In this article, we will discuss point of view in different writings of Henry James.

Key Words: Point of View, novels, writings, Henry James

As early as 1869, when Henry James had still to write his first novel, in a review of George Eliot's poem, 'The Spanish Gypsy, he wrote:

'In every human imbroglio, be it of a comic or tragic nature, it is good to think of an observer standing aloof, the critic, the idle commentator of it all, taking notes, we may say, in the interest of truth.'

Henry James uses the point of view technique in a variety of ways in his sprawling fictions from 'Roderick Hudson' to 'The Ivory Tower'. Not only does James use the central consciousness in a variety of ways, he also as he proceeds, seeks constantly to refine and extend it. In Roderick Hudson, it is the hero's friend and benefactor, Rowland Mallet, whose consciousness serves as a mirror and guide. He is certainly not the ideal, disengaged observer of truth James wants **the central intelligence** to be, for he is immersed in the element itself. And yet he is sufficiently objective and clear eyed to maintain the essential truth of things; he has a kind of central sanity about him. He is not exactly a 'passive observer' as J. A. Ward seems to think; the quality of his consciousness has a certain serenity about it, not passivity. Rowland indeed is a fine example of the point of view technique involving not the central character himself, but an engaged associate who is at once a compositional center and a center of vision.

In 'The American', it is the hero himself who is the primary agent, and whose consciousness is employed at a refracting medium. Christopher Newman's discovery of the self through a process of enchantment, betrayal and sacrifice is rendered almost wholly in terms of his agony and awareness. He is not telling his own story; his story is being told by James, but the reader seldom moves away from his consciousness or area of vision. In other words, there is almost identification between the point of view of the

protagonist and that of the author, though the former does not serve as a 'deputy' in the usual sense of the word. James says in the preface of his novel,

'...for the interest of everything is all that it is his vision, his conception, his interpretation: at the window of his wide, quite sufficiently wide, consciousness we are seated, from that admirable position we 'assist'.'

Even though neither 'Roderick Hudson' nor 'The American' is free from authorial intrusions, we see James's own intelligence and voice more subtly engaged in narrating the story of Isabel Archer through her expanding consciousness than we see in the earlier books. 'The Portrait of a Lady' is a fine and revealing example of the Jamesian paradox that a technique is best honored in the breach. Two famous instances of the departure from 'the commanding center' – Ralph Touchett's eloquent plea on behalf of his cousin which results in her uncle's magnificent legacy and Madame Merle's sinister arrangements with Osmond in regard to Isabel's marriage- have been cited, but a closer analysis of the text will reveal several small and shy but meaningful, 'treacheries' to the point of view technique.

Even as James continued to refine and expand the point of view technique, he kept on writing novels and tales where he does not press it into service, as for instance, in 'The Europeans', 'Washington Square' and 'The Bostonians'. Even in 'The Princess Casamassima' where the city of London is itself a dramatic character, it's not always Hyacinth's consciousness which can be effectively used to render the poetry of the place, for there are so many things happening all the time in that pulsating metropolis which do not form part of it. Thus, the breaches here in the point of view technique are even more significant and extended than in 'The Portrait of a Lady'.

However, apart from 'The Ambassadors', the purest examples of the point of view technique are to be witnessed in the novels of the dramatic phase, for here consistency, economy, compression and intensity – the sought virtues- can be best achieved that way. 'The Spoils of Poynton' and 'What Maisie Knew', in particular, are technically speaking, virtuoso achievements, whatever their other faults.

In 'What Maisie knew' we have perhaps the most challenging use of the point of view technique in James, for here the novelist has to show the confused and wretched drama of gay adulteries and fornications through the bewildered, but avid, consciousness of a child. F. O. Matthiessen puts it thus:

'There is a vast difference between James's method and that of the novels of 'the stream of consciousness'... James's novels are strictly novels of intelligence rather than of full consciousness.'

One of the most remarkable aspects of the point of view technique, as critics have often pointed out, following James's own assertion in the preface to 'the Ambassadors', is the creation of Mrs. Newsome's character. We never meet her in person, but she is as vividly realized for us as any other character in the book. Her felt presence is so energized as to make her a fully involved and active figure in the drama. The covert presence of Woollett on Strether's consciousness, in fact, invokes for us not only the image of the vigilant absentee, but also the entire ethos of a provincial town in New England. By keeping everything stationed in a single consciousness, it has been possible for James to bring off this unique effect.

There are several other *nouvelles* and stories where James uses the central consciousness as a mode of narration though the method varies from tale to tale. In these novels the central intelligence is a narrator rather than the agent of the story as in 'The Aspern Papers', 'The Turn of the Screw', 'The Liar', 'The Friends of the Friends' and 'The Sacred Fount'.

James uses the technique of the multiple points of view in his earlier novels also but to limited extent but in Ralph Touchett's case in 'The Portrait of a Lady', it is contemplated as a full blown compositional principle. That is to say, more than one consciousness is employed to render or dramatize the 'donnee'. We watch events successively through the eyes of the chief protagonists, and left to collate our impressions and draw our conclusions. This has the merit of extending the area of interest, and of breaking the monopoly of vision. The technique, as J. A. Ward points out, singularly suits the type of novel which relies on multiplying relationships. 'The novel of relations', he adds, 'logically require the technique of multiple points of view; the technique not only supports the subject, it is the subject,' thus, where a novel is conceived as a single character show, all the other figures being subordinated its interests as in 'the American' and 'The Portrait of a

Lady' and 'The Ambassadors, the single point of view technique alone can lend sufficient intensity and saturation to the tale, but where two or more principal characters are, more or less, of equal force and magnificence, and where the poetry of tension is released as a result of that polarity, the multiple points of view technique can best ensure the complex vision of the book.

In 'The Wings of the Dove', James has fixed three 'centers' – Kate Croy, Merton Densher and Milly Theale in addition to one 'reflector', Mrs. Stringham, whose point of view may be seen at work intermittently in several sections of the novel. Of course, she does not become at any stage a visionary center, and the tragic and harrowing drama of love, complicity and betrayed trust is processed individually through the three involved consciousness and the supplementary mirror.

'The Golden Bowl' is another fine dramatic novel of interlocking relationships, involving four characters in intersecting destinies, struggling to tease out the puzzle of marriage, stitch by stitch. Here James fixes two primary centers of consciousness- Amerigo and Maggie Verver-and the book is divided structurally into two parallel levels, showing a tight organizational economy and finish. The issues framed in one's consciousness are tested in the others. A kind of stereoscopic view is thus established, giving the reader a rounder view of things.

Though the high value Henry James attached to making a central consciousness the fulcrum of his fiction was primarily for the purpose of compositional beauty, precision, economy and elegance, his faith in the poetry and reach of consciousness gave the technique in question a philosophical stance. That's why indeed we talk of the compositional center and of the visionary center in his more fully realized novels and tales. In a novel like 'The Ambassadors', for instance, the two centers gradually close in upon each other to form a unified, coherent and organic whole. However, the point of view technique, undoubtedly, has some built-in weaknesses and insufficiencies, for instance, when things are seen through a single, restricted consciousness, the great bustle or hum of life around it does not cease to exist, only because it does not directly fall within its experience. In fact, it keeps impinging upon it all the time in the form of the time-spirit.

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