



Henry James: A Critical Analysis of His Art of Fiction

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Abstract: *Henry James was a pioneer in theory and criticism of the novel though he did not pen down any systematic writing in book form on the art of fiction. Henry James fiction is a personal direct impression of life and 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 the 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.*

Key Words: Poineer, criticism, novel thought, systematic, fiction, personal, impression, intensity.

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 'formand 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 be more room for inner consciousness.

In "The Art of Fiction" of 1884, James observed that novelistic convention required "a distribution at the last prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, million appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks;" such an ending was like that of "a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices." Henry James was a pioneer in theory and criticism of the novel though he did not pen down any systematic

writing in book form on the art of fiction. To find out his theory on the art of life, fiction, poetry and criticism, we have to analyse his essays, reviews, notebooks, preface, letter 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 theatre' 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 with and without 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 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 impression and it must have freedom to feel and say.' In the beginning, English novel was not discussable. 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 behaviour and the result was his withdrawal from appearance and the superficial forms of life.

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 wrote altogether 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 forms. He was the first intensely moralistic novel critic. He saw literature as a human and moral concern.

James 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 even for them. 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 view, statements, definitions of art and the art of fiction.

James did not believe in "art for art's sake", nor did he believe in "art for life's sake". He had decidedly 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 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 moralising pill with a happy ending but it is execution of good impulses in the minds of readers and other human beings whereas a bad novel sweeps into unvisited limbo. A good novel always stimulates the desire for perfection.

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 also depends upon the imaginative sensibility and the fertility of the novelists' 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.

James 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 dialogue which must cooperate, reinforce, advance, multiply and intensify one another. 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 that 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, Dickens, Thackeray 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 novelist 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 to be tethered to rules and restrictions. To deduce James' fictional views and principles, we must analyse his views on a few other novels and novelists.

Flaubert was for him novelist's novelist, who bothered much for perfection and style but he was also devoid of human life or vital experience to an 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 sacramental. He advises Emily Zola that a novel is like a big ship to give room to multifarious impression 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. Although James theorised 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 the 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. Novelists were fond of 'telling' and the 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 19th centuries 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 satirised fancies, achieved dramatic objectivity and gave lively pictures of elegant society. She created sparkling dialogues and style with classical perfection.

Before Henry James, there was a romantic strain in the American novel. 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 utilises all kind 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 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. Forster 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 him full-fledged parise to him. James also feels that there should be a new vision in which imagination and reality should be mixed in a proper way. 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 ignorable but only Maisie's 'freshness', he innocent fluttering, 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 emphasised on designing of materials or patterning of subject matter or coherence. He discarded redundancy. He had a life-long 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 round finish. The central consciousness in a novel as theorised by James is like the centre and other smaller characters revolve around him. For James life may be chaotic, York, 1920. 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 life like. 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.

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