

**HENRY JAMES: RECONCILIATION OF ART AND MORALITY**

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Henry James has received wide critical attention. His work has been commented upon and evaluated from several points of view. A glance at the work done by some of the critics may serve a useful purpose in identifying the areas where established critical opinion may not be entirely satisfactory. The emphasis of the critics focusing on his art has been on establishing him as a writer who made major contribution to the development of the novel as the reconciliation of art and morality.

R.P. Blackmur finds James' theory "Very tempting" because it reveals how moral values get into a work of art without leaving you to shudder for the fate of the art. Blackmur further sees maintaining that the artist, "with all the rush and elegance of immediate experience..... creates the moral values out of the same material and by the same means with which he creates his other values out of the actual and by means of imagination."<sup>1</sup> This is so because a proper imaginative grasp of the subject partakes of the moral sense. In the domain of art, the two in fact, become one or reconcile. J.W. Beach rightly observes that "in essence, James' morality is indistinguishable from his esthetics- that his ethical system of values is essentially an esthetic system. What he is concerned with, from the beginning to the end of his writing, is the fine art of living."<sup>2</sup>

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J.H. Raleigh also points out “Each person is his own arbiter and must arrive at moral decisions by an appeal to his own experience, which, in this case, usually means sense impressions, and, finally, morality becomes purely esthetic. The consciousness most sensitive to impressions is liable to be the most moral. So in James’ fiction, there is an equation between the esthetic and the moral sense, and the individual who most appreciates the beauty of a renaissance painting is also the most moral.”<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Reilly observes: “Fiction is no more moral than life, but no less either. The substantial connection between life and imitative art is that neither is the cause of either goodness or wickedness but that both present to man the essential condition of morality. It is a relationship ironic enough to have met with James’ approval.”<sup>4</sup>

Tony Tanner comments: “Preface not only remain one of the richest sources of insight into James’ intensions in his novels; they elevated discussions of the whole genre of the novel to height of aesthetic and moral seriousness which had never previously been attained; and which established the point of departure for all subsequent exploration and criticism of the novel.”<sup>5</sup>

Art, James avers, makes life and life in turn Art. A novelist can not escape the affinity between Art and morality. Henry James who dealt with all the issues and possibilities of the art of the novel was inevitably drawn to that of morality and fiction. He had a few characters of orthodox religion like Madam and Vionnet and Claire de Cintre who are catholics or the pricne in *The Golden Bowl*. Their religion, however, did not influence their consciousness.

James is concerned not with moral causes but moral effects. He does not refer to any Divinity that shapes or distorts man’s end or with the soul as such. He observers human relations and the finer qualities of human life, beauty and goodness, which his American women characters symbolize. In *The Ambassadors* there is what matter is that radiant scene of Madam de Vinnet praying in Notre Dame, but what matter is Stretcher stepping back into his Jamesian role as a vessel of consciousness. He shows spiritual process in Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, or Milly Theale, most real and edifying of characters in *The Wings of the Dove*, their sensitivity rather than their moral mainsprings. He deals with moral behaviour rather than with the deterministic or external cosmic factors playing upon human life. His characters make choices like “Isabel Archer’s decision to return to her husband, Strether’s decision to return to America, Newman’s decision to renounce Vengeance on the Bellegarde family.”<sup>6</sup>

He deals with evil in some form the characters of Gilbert Osmond, Madam Merle, Charlotte Stant. Evil is an act of the Will and not consciousness as Rober J. Reilly writes, “In the

Jamesian world there are people we see as good and those we see as evil, but a little reflection suggests that the difference between them is not to be found in levels of consciousness but where the difference always said by moralists to reside- in the will.”<sup>7</sup>

James came under the influence of English Tradition which moulded his thought and subsequently his creation. Max Beerbohm states: “I do not happen to have heard any preacher in whom was a moral fervour so great as is Mr. James’ fervour, or one whose outlook on the world seemed to me so fine and touching and inspiring.”<sup>8</sup> The salient point in James is that he is liberal, an enlightened thinker and a humanist, the greatest quality of a novelist. Fanny Assingham asks in *The Golden Bowl*, what is morality but high intelligence?”<sup>9</sup>

In James’ theory of novel aesthetic, coincides with the moral and is inseparable from it. A person of the most advanced consciousness can only blend together the aesthetic and the moral; in fact, the we find in Henry James a principle of equalitarianism which reconciles the two apparent disparates. James’ insistence on moral values is for ensuring development of the action of the novel. As James wrote in *The Art of Fiction*:

“There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth.”<sup>10</sup>

There is always a close relation between the moral and the art. Henry James had dedicated his career, in artistic consciousness and a mind at work, to the formulation of an aesthetics. He discussed and expounded the latent power, the possibilities, the high purpose and the activities of the creative mind in the novel. His novels are witness to this, so are his critical writings. He analysed art in general and specific to his own craft. He dealt with the reconciliation of art and morality. He weighed the scales and measured what quantity of each could be put into a novel in conformity with his vision of life.

The fountain of his being flowed from the subtleties of art to morality and to, what is most dominant of all, life. So, we can conclude that he accomplished what is seldom done with such effect a reconciliation of two diverse element morality and art into one single organic composition – the Jamesian novel.

## REFERENCES

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