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**THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMINIST IDEALS
IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE BOSTONIANS***

When it was first published in 1886, Henry James's *The Bostonians* received a mixed reception. It was described as 'brilliant, full of points and eminently readable'¹ and as 'undeniably interesting to an unusual degree'². Others were less charitable: 'condensed into one volume, *The Bostonians* would be as good as anything Mr. James has written; expanded into three it is nothing short of tedious'³. However, one point on which the majority of contemporary critics agree is that the novel is interesting from the point of view of its character portrayal; they are 'rounded, life-like, perfect portraiture of existing types' wrote *The Boston Evening Traveler*⁴; 'The interest of the tale is psychological.... Mr James introduces us to a crowd of characters, very original, and most carefully designed by innumerable minute touches.'⁵ But what is it that James seeks to do with these 'perfect' rounded characters? How do the methods he employs in his characterization help us to

¹ Barnett Smith, G.: *Academy* [England] series 722 6th March 1886 in *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes, p. 154.

² *London Daily News*, 25 February 1886, *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³ *Athenaeum* [England] 3045 6 March 1886, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴ *The Boston Evening Traveller*, 19 March 1886, *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵ *Pall Mall Gazette* [England] 15 March 1886, *Ibid.*, p. 153.

understand the novel as a whole? And what, if anything, does James's novel tell us about his own views on the situation of women in Nineteenth Century America?

Let us first take a look at the immediate history of the period and at some of the contemporary views held by and about women at this time.

By the 1880s, certain groups of women had been pressing for equal rights and female suffrage for over half a century. It must have taken a great deal of strength and courage on the part of these early feminists to oppose the well-established and deep-seated views of the intensely patriarchal society in which they lived. Barbara Welter gives us an indication of the feelings which male society had about those who attempted to subvert its values:

If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex virtues which made up true womanhood⁶, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic. It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the Nineteenth Century American had – to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand.⁷

⁶ Welter defines the attributes by which 'true womanhood' was judged as four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.

⁷ Welter, Barbara: 'The Cult of True Womanhood', «American Quarterly», Vol. XVIII, 1996, p. 152.

Despite the threat of ostracism, many continued to dispute these traditional views of women, questioning their supposed frailty and inherent submissiveness, raging against the charge that women were unfit for the world of men and belonged in a purely domestic role. In fact, these supposedly pale and delicate creatures were actually, as William O'Neil points out, the same individuals who 'operated machines, hand washed clothing and toiled over great kitchen stoves'; even the weight of the clothing they wore, the mass of metal, cloth and bone should itself have disproved the notion that they were peculiarly delicate creatures⁸. Yet still they were seen as inferior to men. Even the great philosopher Emerson stated that women 'are more vulnerable, more infirm and more mortal than men.'⁹

By the 1880s, feminists were drawing attention to what they felt was a 'history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward women, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.' It was imperative for them that women gain 'immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.'

Few people nowadays would dispute the importance of these early feminist movements in bringing about the greater freedom of choice which women enjoy today, but what treatment do these feminist ideals receive in *The Bostonians*? How does James employ his celebrated characterization technique in helping us to

⁸ O'Neill, William: *Everyone Was Brave; A History of Feminism in America*, Quadrangle, 1969, p. 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

understand the plight of these early feminists? Does the character of Olive Chancellor and her failure to succeed in her quest to retain Verena as a mouthpiece for her organization mock feminist ideals, or does the novel simply seek to illustrate the seemingly impossible struggle for equal rights and female suffrage? What does *The Bostonians* actually have to say about the situation of women in Nineteenth Century America?

Throughout the novel the reader is witness to a great deal of human anguish especially in Basil Ransom and Olive Chancellor's struggle for the possession of Verena. In many ways these two characters can be seen as direct opposites to one another; Ransom representing the traditional patriarchal society and Olive representing feminist ideals. Regardless of how noble Olive's cause is, however, we find that, as a character, she is portrayed in a rather unflattering way. Before Ransom has even met her she is depicted as a trouble-making busybody; in the words of her sister: 'She's a female Jacobin – she's a nihilist. Whatever is, is wrong'¹⁰. The description of Basil's first sight of her is similarly unflattering:

'A smile of exceeding faintness played about her lips – it was just perceptible enough to light up the native gravity of her face. It might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison.' (p. 39).

Despite her less than charismatic portrayal, however, Olive is ultimately presented as a tragic figure. She is always going to lose to Verena because the 'similarities'

¹⁰ James, Henry: *The Bostonians*, Charles Anderson ed., Penguin Classics, 1986, p. 37.

between them are only superficial. Olive is a true believer in equal rights for women and feels that she is ‘in complete possession of the subject ... it was the only thing in her life which she felt she had really mastered.’ (p. 191). She feels all the suffering of women over the years within her, ‘all the bullied wives, the stricken mothers, the dishonored, the deserted maidens who lived on earth and longed to leave it, passed and repassed before her eyes.’ (p. 191). The intense burning pain which Olive feels, however, is merely a ‘subtle flame’ (p. 192) in Verena, a flame which will eventually be extinguished by her love for Basil Ransom. Olive temporarily convinces Verena that ‘after so many ages of wrong, men must take their turn, men must pay.’ (p. 192). But of course they do not, not in this novel; instead it is Olive who pays, pays for having ideals which she cannot realize. James seems keen for us to recognize the inevitability of Olive’s eventual loss of her close friendship and with it, her dream. In Olive’s eyes Verena is too good to be true; a beautiful, charismatic and talented speaker, young enough to be moulded yet old enough to be taken seriously; a girl who appeals to men and women alike and who is ‘haunted ... with the fear that Verena would marry’ (p. 134). Olive may only be ‘haunted’ by this fear but her sister, the widowed Mrs. Luna, is convinced of the fact. She states that:

‘She would stay with Olive as long as it served her purpose [...] she will give Olive the greatest cut she has ever had in her life [...] she will run off with some lion tamer; she will marry a circus man.’ (p. 213).

Of course, it is to be worse than that; she will run off with Basil Ransom, the southern traditionalist, the very antithesis of Olive; a man whose views on everything are diametrically opposed to her own. When Olive is eventually defeated, however, we feel pity for her despite her ambitious nature and her charismatic deficiencies. Her shortsightedness and self-delusion eventually conspire to bring her to her knees and even Basil Ransom ‘palpitating with his victory, felt ... a little sorry for her.’ (p. 433).

But why does James allow Olive’s world to collapse so completely? Are we to infer that women can only truly find happiness in a domestic role, as that of wife and mother, and that any attempt to deviate from this allotted role will result in nothing but misery for those bold enough to try it? Is James seeking to subvert contemporary feminist ideals in a particularly cruel and callous way? It seems unlikely. It seems more likely that the author, rather than attempting to subvert these ideals, is merely questioning the methods employed by Olive to realize them; not least in her obsession with possessing Verena. How can Olive possibly fight for female emancipation whilst simultaneously making a prisoner out of Verena?

Furthermore, if we were to assume that James’s novel is set against feminist ideals on the basis that his portrayal of Olive is unfavorable, then we have to ask why he does not also portray the other female reformers in the same way. A good example of this is the character of Miss Birdseye. Here we are presented with an aged

philanthropist who has dedicated her life to selflessly pursuing various causes. The description of her which we are given, depicts a genuinely kind old woman with many endearing, if eccentric, qualities. She is the battle-fatigued veteran of good causes who in reality has achieved very little:

‘She was a little old lady, with an enormous head; that was the first thing Ransom noticed — the vast, fair, protuberant, candid, ungarnished brow, surmounting a pair of weak, kind, tired-looking eyes, and ineffectually balanced in the rear by a cap which had the air of falling backward, and which Miss Birdseye suddenly felt for while she talked, with unsuccessful irrelevant movements. She had a sad, soft, pale face, which (and it was the effect of her whole head) looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent.’ (pp. 54-55).

However, the fact that she is presented rather more charismatically than Olive Chancellor does not mean that James is suggesting that she has chosen the correct path through life. In the words of one critic:

‘Miss Birdseye is a kindly example of those professional reformers who, deep in magnanimous schemes for foreigners and others with whom they have no valid individual contact, fail entirely to establish for themselves any true personal relationship with the world and with their fellows.’¹¹

Although inherently kind, Miss Birdseye’s complete dedication to philanthropy has left her a tired, lonely old woman. As life comes to an end, we read that there was

¹¹ Gorley Putt, S.: *A Reader’s Guide to Henry James*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, p. 180.

‘Something almost august in the trustful renunciation of her countenance; something in it seemed to say that she had been ready long before, but as the time was not right she had waited, with her usual faith that was all for the best.’ (p. 384).

Olive may strive to be like Miss Birdseye but her extreme views and her complete refusal to indulge in relationships with men, culminating in her obsession with and eventual loss of Verena, means that she will never attain the quiet contentment and dignity Miss Birdseye does in death.

James’s treatment of Miss Birdseye would seem to indicate not that it is wrong to indulge in charitable work, whether that work be the fight for the abolition of slavery or the fight for the equal rights of women, rather that it is wrong to immerse oneself in this sort of life to the exclusion of everything else. In Miss Birdseye’s case this culminates in her dying a lonely, fatigued old woman; In Olive’s case it leads to an unnatural obsession with possessing Verena when she should be developing a more logical, coherent method of attaining her goals.

So who do we look to as an example? Maybe it is Basil Ransom, the nearest we come to a hero in the novel. Is it through him that we see James’s view of Nineteenth Century feminism? Are we supposed to view him, Charles Anderson asks, as ‘the chivalric champion of family and traditional society?’¹² Ransom, we feel, is always going to win a battle for Verena’s affection with Olive, but does his success and his charming nature mean that we are to support him in his views on women? One can

¹² James, Henry: *The Bostonians*, cit., Intr., p. 7.

only hope not. Ransom's views are intensely chauvinistic; he is 'addicted...to the old forms of address and gallantry' and holds that women are 'delicate, agreeable creatures, whom providence has placed under the protection of the bearded sex'. Women, in his view, 'were infinitely tiresome when they declined to accept the lot which men have made for them.' (p. 202). And we must not assume that such attitudes were acceptable in Nineteenth Century America; even the narrator predicts that it is Ransom's belief in male superiority which prevents him from being a hero in the traditional sense. True, the rather more favorable portrayal of his character means that we are more likely to sympathize with him than we do with Olive Chancellor, but this does not necessarily mean that through him we find James's true view on the situation of women. As Anderson notes 'by the end of the novel [Ransom] is as obsessive in his male chauvinism as Olive is in her feminism.'¹³

It would be wrong to attempt to isolate particular characters in *The Bostonians* as being representative of James's views on Feminism in the 1800s. It is safer to accept that certain characters are simply representative of certain social types of the period. Throughout the novel we are guided towards seeing both the good and bad points in the various characters. In Olive Chancellor we are faced with an example of what can happen to an individual who becomes obsessed with a particular ideal, the basic premise of which is good. In taking her fight for equal rights for women to an extreme by excluding men from her life, she ultimately excludes herself from being

¹³ Ibid., p. 26.

taken seriously as a champion of her cause. In *Miss Birdseye* we are gently reminded of those professional reformers to whom benevolence itself has become the whole basis for living and who ironically, in pursuing this particular lifestyle, fail to secure true personal relationships with their fellow humans. Basil Ransom, the novel's ultimate victor, is, at the other extreme, representative of old-fashioned ideals and as such becomes the embodiment of male chauvinism. If there is a character who comes close to setting a good example, then it is the pragmatic Dr. Prance, who, in a conversation with Basil Ransom, states that

“Well, what it amounts to is just that women want to have a better time. That's what it comes to in the end.”

“And don't you sympathize with such an aspiration?”

“Well, I don't know as I cultivate the sentimental side,” said Doctor Prance. “There's plenty of sympathy without mine. If they want to have a better time, I suppose it's natural; so do men too, I suppose. But I don't know as it appeals to me—to make sacrifices for it; it ain't such a wonderful time—the best you *can* have!” (p. 68).

Dr. Prance has solved the problem of her own emancipation in succeeding as a professional; as such she contributes to her own well-being, to society and, indirectly, to the feminist cause. She represents a happy medium between the unrealistic optimism of self-seeking social reformers such as Olive Chancellor, and the stagnancy inherent in the beliefs of traditionalists like Basil Ransom. As the narrator

informs us, Dr. Prance deals ‘in facts’ (p. 349) and it is her seemingly simplistic observation that men and women ‘just want to have a better time’ which would appear to illustrate the novel’s emphatic theme, namely that it is necessary for both sexes to compromise their ideals if true happiness is to exist between them.

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