



The Value of the “Study of a Romantic Mind”: Henry James’s “The Story in It”

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Abstract

Henry James’s four references to his short story “The Story in It” (1902) in his notebook entries reveal his keen interest in the story of an honest woman. In Maud Blessingbourne’s intense disputes with Mrs. Dyott and Colonel Voyt on the nature of a “story,” the definition of “relation,” and the absence of decent women characters in European fiction, Blessingbourne’s righteousness, sincerity, and tolerance are highlighted. The paper contends that James advocates the importance of abiding by the aesthetic principle of freedom based on sincerity in fiction writing in response to Walter Besant’s emphasis on the consumptive nature of “story”.

Keywords: Value, the “study of a romantic mind”, Henry James, “The Story in It”.

Introduction

“The Story in It” (1902) treats the art of reading and writing fiction in relation to gender relations and moral agency. It proves to be a significant window reflecting Henry James’s engagement with British Aestheticism. In “The Story in It”, Maud Blessingbourne detects the absence of decent women in French and Italian novels. During her visit to her widow friend Mrs. Dyott, she encounters Colonel Voyt for whom she withholds a secret passion. While Mrs. Dyott and Voyt strive to conceal their relationship and denounce the usefulness of a story without passion or adventures, Blessingbourne challenges their definitions of such terms and maintains her respectability by renouncing her sentiments for Voyt. Mrs. Dyott, having learned from Blessingbourne that she only speaks for herself where moral integrity is concerned, acknowledges that Blessingbourne deserves moral support. Blessingbourne’s impact on Mrs. Dyott is evident when the latter is awakened to Voyt’s hypocrisy and immorality. Tremper rightly detects James’s criticism of “disordered moral sense” (Tremper, 1981, p. 16) in “The Story in It”, yet Voyt’s intractable patriarchal views about the purpose of fiction writing, reading and gender relations fail to receive an interpretation. Though Callen approves of Blessingbourne’s virtuousness, he contends that Blessingbourne is an ideal vision that needs yet to be convinced (Callen, 1990, p. 50). However, details exemplifying Blessingbourne’s character of righteousness and tolerance abound. While Izzo reveals the functioning of the patriarchal authority embodied in Voyt and recognizes the power of Blessingbourne’s story (Izzo, 2002, p. 225), her interpretation of Mrs. Dyott as a betrayer of Blessingbourne’s secret to monopolize Voyt’s love is in contradiction with textual evidence. Despite critics’ recognition of the story’s ethical considerations, James’s complex engagement with British Aestheticism has received insufficient analysis. The paper contends that James advocates the importance of

abiding by the aesthetic principle of freedom based on sincerity in fiction writing. Blessingbourne's moral integrity, her firm belief in the necessity to represent honest women, her view on relation, and her choice of not to pass moral judgment on others help to effect a gradual atonement in Mrs. Dyott. This, in turn, subverts Voyt's argument that only indecent women constitute a "story," justifying the value of the "study of a romantic mind" (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 136).

1. On the "Story"

That Henry James makes repeated references to "The Story in It" (1902) in his notebook entries between 1895 and 1899 manifests his belief in the value of "the study of a romantic mind". James's belief can be fruitfully read in conjunction with his disputes with Walter Besant about the nature of a story. It is notable that Blessingbourne is a competent reader and a potential novelist familiar with the European novelists' tendency to represent indecent women. Her living and reading experiences as an honest woman empower her to counter Mrs. Dyott and Voyt's argument to the effect that only stories about women of dubious reputation appeal to the public. It is significant to find that Blessingbourne not only accomplishes her aesthetic pursuit but also exerts a positive influence on Mrs. Dyott and Voyt in engendering the former's efforts to redeem her dishonorable past and disturbing the latter's conscience. To some extent, their disputes on the relationship between the nature of a story and women's moral condition validate James's belief in the value of representing honest women, which differs from Besant's view to the effect that women characters' adventurousness in novels guarantees their practical appeal to the public. As Freedman posits, James expresses his "disavowal of Besant's unsubtle professionalism." (Freedman, 1990, p. 178)

In "The Art of Fiction", James keenly observes Besant's vague reference to a story as a tale of adventures. As he challenges in "The Art of Fiction",

Mr. Besant does not, to my sense, light up the subject by intimating that a story must, under penalty of not being a story, consist of "adventures." He mentions a category of impossible things, and among them he places "fiction without adventure." Why without adventure, more than without matrimony, or celibacy, or parturition, or cholera, or hydropathy, or Jansenism? This seems to me to bring the novel back to the hapless little *rôle* of being an artificial, ingenious thing—bring it down from its large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life. And what *is* adventure, when it comes to that, and by what sign is the listening pupil to recognize it? (James, 1984b, p. 61)

While Besant equals a story to adventures, he neglects the fact that the defining standards of adventures differ depending on novelists. James's conceptualization of adventures entails setting no limit to the topic or the origin of the character. As James intends to characterize a male artist as shown in his notebook of "The Story in It," it may be his design to embed within the literary work his views on the essence of a story. And it only enriches the gender dimension of the story when he represents Blessingbourne as the novelist figure. The relationship between gender, story, and fiction writing becomes more explicitly defined in James's second notebook entry. (1898)

James clarifies in the second entry that his work concerns whether an honest woman has a story. "*L' honnête femme n'a pas de roman*--beautiful little 'literary (?)' subject to work out in short tale. The trial, the exhibition, the proof: --either it's not a '*roman*,' or it's not *honnête*. When it becomes the thing it's guilty; when it doesn't become guilty it doesn't become the thing." (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 170) Being acutely interested in the definition of honest women and a story, James detects a novelist's dilemma of being torn between producing a

marketable work at the cost of the faithfulness to life and writing works that disregard their potential material benefit.

The third notebook entry (1899) details the outline for what James calls “*L’ honnête femme-- n’a pas de roman story*” (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 176). A married artist has an argument with a “young, ‘innocent,’ yearning woman (a widow, say)’ about whether an honest woman could make a story (Edel and Powers, 1987, pp. 176-77). The artist firmly believes that if a woman in a story is honest, it would not be called a story, and if it is a story the woman in it would not be honest. The “story” in this sense indicates an appeal to the public, implying that only a dishonest woman’s experience would win the audience. James explains further that despite the young woman’s secret love for the artist, she refrains from revealing her feelings. Instead, she confides her sentiments to her female friend, who is the artist’s mistress. James refers to the artist’s mistress as “thoroughgoing”, “the ‘lost’” and developing “a relation” (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 177) to display his moral condemnation. This woman considers a romance as a “relation” (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 177) and questions the usefulness of her young friend’s renunciation. The artist’s response to this questioning, however, reveals his divergence from his mistress: “‘It only does- what it can do- for ME!’”, which seems to James “the climax” of the story (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 177). It is essential to note the artist’s approval of the young woman’s renunciation. In comparison with the second notebook entry, this one places a high premium on the value of the artist’s moral agency. Yet, in the final notebook entry written some months later in 1899, James clarifies his intention further by stating that his writing is “*the roman de l’honnête femme*” (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 186). Compared with the first notebook entry, this final one unfolds James’s confidence in the value of an honest woman in her constituting a story. The two women that James refers to in his notebook entry emerge in the story as Blessingbourne, the honest woman with a romantic mind, and Mrs. Dyott, Voyt’s mistress.

2. Different Values

In the beginning of “The Story in It,” the reader is enabled to observe the two female protagonists who hold different values.

Her visitor, settled on a small sofa that, with a palm-tree, a screen, a stool, a stand, a bowl of flowers and three photographs in silver frames, had been arranged near the light wood-fire as a choice “corner” – Maud Blessingbourne, her guest, turned audibly, though at intervals neither brief nor regular, the leaves of a book covered in lemon-coloured paper and not yet despoiled of a certain fresh crispness. This effect of the volume, for the eye, would have made it, as presumably the newest French novel--and evidently, from the attitude of the reader, “good” -- consort happily with the special tone of the room, a consistent air of selection and suppression, one of the finer aesthetic evolutions. If Mrs. Dyott was fond of ancient French furniture, and distinctly difficult about it, her inmates could be fond--with whatever critical cocks of charming dark-braided heads over slender sloping shoulders--of modern French authors. (James, 1996, p. 403)

The story’s engagement with British Aestheticism is manifest as represented in this paragraph. Blessingbourne’s situating herself in a “choice corner” predicts her moral superiority, which is in keeping with the aesthetic beauty embodied in the beautiful and cozy surroundings, and, enhances the value of her reading activity. The newest French novel is depicted as chiming in with the house decoration, which displays her hostess Mrs. Dyott’s finer aesthetic evolutions. While Mrs. Dyott has a blind preference for the ancient French furniture, Blessingbourne is introduced as an intellect deriving pleasure from novel reading. Mrs. Dyott’s possession of the furniture serves more to impress the public rather than to express her personality. Ironically,

her scant knowledge about the collected furniture fails to qualify her taste as being professional. Blessingbourne's reading, however, points to her interest in exploring human relationship, and the "critical cocks of charming dark-braided heads over slender sloping shoulders" imply her disagreement with the fictional representation of the characters, which predicts her forthcoming disputes with Voyt on the nature of a story that would reveal her marked divergence from those aesthetes who are possessed by personal interest.

The theme of whether an honest woman constitutes a story is highlighted when the two female protagonists are represented as reacting to Voyt's forthcoming visit. Blessingbourne is more honest with her innocent feelings for Voyt and has no intention of concealing them. As the following highlights, Blessingbourne is being truthful to herself,

Maud Blessingbourne, when she lowered her book into her lap, closed her eyes with a conscious patience that seemed to say she waited; but it was nevertheless she who at last made the movement representing a snap of their tension. She got up and stood by the fire, into which she looked a minute; then came round and approached the window as if to see what was really going on. (James, 1996, p. 404)

Blessingbourne's naturalness is evident as shown above, which illustrates her innocent sensibilities and honest character. Mrs. Dyott, who has been developing a love affair with Voyt, strives to conceal their relation. It is a small wonder to note that she attempts to insinuate Blessingbourne's moral integrity based on the latter's reading of French novels.

"Another French one?"

"I'm afraid."

"Do you carry them by the dozen--"

"Into innocent British homes?" Blessingbourne tried to remember. "I believe I brought three—seeing them in a shop window as I passed through town. It never rains but it pours! But I've already read two."

"And are they the only ones you do read?"

"French ones?" Blessingbourne considered. "Oh, no. D' Annunzio."

"And what's that?" Mrs. Dyott asked as she affixed a stamp.

"Oh, you dear thing!" Her friend was amused, yet almost showed pity. "I know you don't read." Blessingbourne went on; "but why should you? You live!" (James, 1996, p. 404)

Evidently, Mrs. Dyott presumes the corruptive influence of French novels on Blessingbourne. On the other hand, Blessingbourne is keenly observant of Mrs. Dyott's bias as demonstrated in her employment of the phrase "innocent British homes". While Mrs. Dyott's bias is ungrounded, Blessingbourne is honest with her reading habits which cover both French and Italian novels. It is significant to note that as Blessingbourne experiences life according to how novels represent it, she is also a meticulous observer of life as represented in her summary of Mrs. Dyott's character "You live". And it is the relation between Mrs. Dyott and Voyt that competes with Blessingbourne's development of her sentiments for a better claim to "the story".

Blessingbourne's astuteness is manifest when she infers about the relation between Mrs. Dyott and Voyt, and her sincerity forms a contrast with Mrs. Dyott's evasiveness. For example, when Blessingbourne questions if Mrs. Dyott expects Voyt on such a stormy day the hostess pretends not to heed her implication. She even suggests that Blessingbourne cares for Voyt's company. Blessingbourne does care for Voyt's company at this stage, yet it is not a relation with Voyt that Blessingbourne seeks. Instead, Blessingbourne prefers to maintain her moral

integrity by concealing her secret feelings for Voyt. Mrs. Dyott, however, makes various attempts to camouflage her illicit relation with Voyt. It is exactly on this site that the rivalry for the better claim for a story to appeal to the public is initiated. Indeed, what follows is a close interweaving act of the conventional love affair in fiction and Blessingbourne’s disciplining of her feelings.

The intimacy between Voyt and Mrs. Dyott is depicted, yet their tension is tangible due to Blessingbourne’s emblematic moral presence. Their clasping of hands and physical closeness are enacted in an atmosphere of tension and fear. “Thus they were mutually held, and the closeness was at any rate such that, for a little, though it took account of dangers, it did without words. When words presently came the pair were talking by the fire, and she had rung for tea” (James, 1996, p. 406). Mrs. Dyott’s anxiety is caused by her realization that Blessingbourne has discovered her relation with Voyt. And yet, Mrs. Dyott exhibits her perception of Blessingbourne’s feelings for Voyt. As Mrs. Dyott reveals to Voyt, ““She believes so in *you*?” ‘She believes so in you. So don’t be *too* nice to her”” (James, 1996, p. 407). Blessingbourne seems to expect Voyt to mend his ways, which, if granted, would echo with the married artist’s appreciation of the young woman’s renunciation as illustrated in the notebook entry. However, Voyt fails to adopt such moral principles, revealing the gap between what is represented as real life and what is idealized in art. As James articulates, “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.” (James, 1984b, p. 46) Blessingbourne is gradually led to realize Voyt’s unscrupulousness, and it is in her disputes with him about the relationship between fiction writing and living that Blessingbourne enunciates her belief in the necessity to represent honest women.

3. On Novel Writing

Divergent views concerning novel writing and man-woman relationships are represented in the three characters’ discussion. Despite Blessingbourne’s sincere reading practice, she suffers from moral disparagement from Voyt and Mrs. Dyott. Critiquing French novels for their obsession with characters of dubious morality, Voyt boasts that British novels do not treat a relation between a man and a woman as the French ones do:

“They do what they feel, and they feel more things than we. They strike so many more notes, and with so different a hand. When it comes to any account of a relation, say, between a man and a woman--I mean an intimate or a curious or suggestive one--where are we compared to them? They don’t exhaust the subject, no doubt,” he admitted; “but we don’t touch it, don’t even skim it. It’s as if we denied its existence, its possibility. You’ll doubtless tell me, however,” he went on, “that as all such relations *are* for us, at the most, much simpler, we can only have all round less to say about them.” (James, 1996, p. 410)

Voyt highlights the artistic differences between the two countries when he observes the French fictional representation of the complicated relationship between men and women and the British taciturnity. Given Voyt’s entanglement with Mrs. Dyott, his attempt to deny such a relation is ironic and indicative of his moral cowardice. In effect, James already attacks the emblematic hypocrisy in “The Art of Fiction” when he challenges Walter Besant’s celebration of British novels’ freedom from sources of corruption. As James writes,

In the English novel (by which of course I mean the American as well), more than in any other, there is a traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know, that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature. There is the great difference, in short, between what they talk of in conversation and what they talk of

in print. The essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field, and I should directly reverse Mr. Besant's remark and say not that the English novel has a purpose, but that it has a diffidence. To what degree a purpose in a work of art is a source of corruption I shall not attempt to inquire; the one that seems to me least dangerous is the purpose of making a perfect work. As for our novel, I may say lastly on this score that as we find it in England today it strikes me as addressed in a large degree to "young people," and that this in itself constitutes a presumption that it will be rather shy. There are certain things which it is generally agreed not to discuss, not even to mention, before young people. That is very well, but the absence of discussion is not a symptom of the moral passion. The purpose of the English novel- 'a truly admirable thing, and a great cause for congratulation'- strikes me therefore as rather negative. (James, 1984b, p. 63)

James acknowledges that novelists are blessed with the freedom to treat any subject, yet he perceives that there is a difference between what is printed and what is discussed in real life. Besant stresses in his lecture that there should be a "conscious moral purpose" of the novel (James 1984b, p. 62), yet to James, Besant confuses the questions of art with those of morality. And James also questions Besant's failure to provide his defining standards for morality. Thus, in the above quote, James faults the English novels for failing to acknowledge the inclusiveness of novel themes. He challenges Besant's notion about purpose, critiquing the act as a lack of confidence in the audience's reaction to the delicate themes. James contends that it should not be "a truly admirable thing and a great cause for congratulation" simply because English novels avoid the "thorny problems" in reality, and he explains it as a demonstration of "the moral timidity of the usual English novelist" (James, 1984b, p. 63). In the story, Voyt assumes a similar attitude when he boasts of the superiority of British novels in being silent about the relations between men and women. As James notes about the discrepancy between what English people talk about and what is printed in novels, Voyt adopts similar ethical standards. As is clearly shown in the story, Voyt conducts a love affair with Mrs. Dyott, yet he claims that the relationship between British men and women is simple.

There can be found in the story James's challenge of both Besant's definition of the element of a story and his attaching importance to "conscious moral purpose" in "The Art of Fiction."

"It sticks out of you, you know, that you've yourself written something. Haven't you- and published? I've a notion I could read *you*."

"When I do publish," she said without moving, "you'll be the last one I shall tell. I *have*," she went on, "a lovely subject, but it would take an amount of treatment- !" (James, 1996, p. 411)

It is Blessingbourne's insightfulness that makes Voyt believe that she is a writer, and he naturally feels anxious about being probably represented in Blessingbourne's novel. In a sense, Blessingbourne shoulders the responsibility to represent women who are honest and have stories. Novels of quality, it seems to her, should be faithful to life, and representations of women who are both honest and cherish rich sensibilities should be enacted. Blessingbourne openly expresses her sharp criticism of the fictional treatment of women as slaves to passion or victims to relations.

"Oh, to tell it would be to express it, and that's just what I can't do. What I meant to say just now," she added, "was that the French, to my sense, give us only again and again, for ever and ever, the same couple. There they are once more, as one has had them to satiety, in that yellow thing, and there I shall certainly again find them in the blue." (James, 1996, p. 411)

It seems to Blessingbourne that, compared with British and American novels, French ones are more worthy of reading on account of their brave treatment of subjects, though she does have reservations about their stereotypical representation of women. To Blessingbourne, British and American novelists lack moral confidence in not writing about the relation between men and women. And she proves to be a serious reader who critiques French novelists’ obsession with female images of moral corruption to the exclusion of women of respectability. It is her belief that honest women abound in life and that they deserve fictional representation. As Blessingbourne explains, “I *love* life- in art, though I hate it anywhere else. It’s the poverty of the life those people show, and the awful bounders, of both sexes, that they represent” (James, 1996, p. 411). Blessingbourne’s criticism of the French novels lies in that they are written to satiate the public’s desire for physical passions (James, 1996, p. 411), and that they never know how to portray “a decent woman” (James, 1996, p. 412). Blessingbourne’s remarks reflect James’s contemplative study of the relationship between novel writing and moral consciousness. Different from Besant who stresses the need for novelists to cultivate “conscious moral purpose”, James attaches great importance to the principle of sincerity. “But the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel is, as I have already said, that it be sincere” (James, 1984b, p. 64). Being sincere, in this sense, means to be truthful to life in representing images regardless of personal concerns, which is “the realm of the disinterested dedication to the values of the aesthetic” (Freedman, 1990, p. 179). And the disputes between Blessingbourne and Voyt can be viewed as analogous to the disputes between James and Besant.

In effect, Blessingbourne challenges Voyt’s definitions of “interest”, “passion”, “behavior”, “adventure”, “romance” and “relation” etc. in the same way as James does of Besant’s conceptualization of these terms. For Blessingbourne, what she seeks in novels is “anything but an interest” (James, 1996, p. 411), suggesting that novelists should not write to curry public favor. While Voyt’s reading is characterized by his interest in the satiation of passions typical of utilitarian writing, Blessingbourne expresses her dissatisfaction with the current novel writing practice that fails to portray any “decent woman” as shown above. In Blessingbourne’s view, novelists as beings of privilege are responsible for representing all types of women in life. And this is where James’s gender criticism is incorporated into his art of fiction writing. The boundaries that Voyt marks for both novelists and women are explicitly revealed in his remarks: “‘Your complaint of their monotony is a complaint of their conditions. When you say we get always the same couple what do you mean but that we get always the same passion? Of course we do!’ Voyt declared. ‘If what you’re looking for is another, that’s what you won’t anywhere find’” (James, 1996, p. 411). According to Voyt, novelists and women are justifiably subject to commodity cultural values that demand the former to be materially successful and the latter to be products for public consumption. Blessingbourne, however, persists in believing in an inclusive representation of women and in critiquing those novelists who write only for mercenary interest. When Mrs. Dyott states that Blessingbourne does not “‘so much as form a relation’ Blessingbourne responds that ‘Doesn’t it depend, again, on what you call a relation?’” (James, 1996, p. 414). Blessingbourne defines “relation” as “an innocent one” (James, 1996, p. 414) whereas Voyt despises such relation on account of its not appealing to the public. He explains further that the subject of art is about one’s floundering in a situation where one chooses between giving up the relation and carrying it on.

What is it but, with absolute directness, a question of interest, or, as people say, of the story? What’s a situation undeveloped but a subject lost? If a relation stops, where’s the innocence? It seems to me you must choose. It would be very pretty if it were otherwise, but that’s how we flounder. Art is our flounderings shown. (James, 1996, p. 414)

Voyt generalizes the public understanding of the story as a matter of “interest”, and interprets “innocence” as having the same meaning as “relation”. It is at this juncture that Blessingbourne is awakened to Voyt’s patriarchal values that are aimed to treat women as tools for a relation, the result of which leads her to reconsider her sentiments for him.

Blessingbourne challenges Voyt’s assumption of the public’s taste for interesting stories that deal with relations, which manifests her breadth of vision of a richer life. When Voyt defines art as showing “our flounderings,” he assumes that all people wish to be involved in relations. Contrary to Voyt who assumes the public tendency to read stories that deal with “flounderings,” Blessingbourne articulates her stance to the effect that she would rather “flounder out” of a relation. “Mrs. Blessingbourne-- and with an air of deference scarce supported perhaps by its sketchiness--kept her deep eyes on this definition. ‘But sometimes we flounder out.’” (James, 1996, p. 414). Blessingbourne’s rare perception of life forms a glaring contrast with Voyt’s impoverished one. Her definition of art points to “the story in it” in the sense that she, an honest woman, both maintains her moral integrity and catches a glimpse of adventures for an inclusive fictional representation of women. Remaining a practitioner of her beliefs, Blessingbourne would most probably write something with “the story in it”. It is a small wonder that Voyt and Mrs. Dyott, guilty of their liaison, should feel anxious about being treated as the prototypes for Blessingbourne’s protagonists. As Voyt mocks Blessingbourne in defense: “they’ve been in long enough to point a moral. That is to point ours” (James, 1996, p. 415).

Voyt intends to reduce his guilt for the love affair with Mrs. Dyott by insinuating that Blessingbourne is disreputable. “We’ve spoiled her subject!” is Mrs. Dyott’s contribution in their concerted efforts to attack Blessingbourne who has potential for writing her story. On the other hand, Voyt suggests that “‘it’s better to spoil an artist’s subject than to spoil his reputation. I mean,’ he explained to Maud with his indulgent manner, ‘his appearance of knowing what he has got hold of, for that, in the last resort, is his happiness’” (James, 1996, p. 415). They both attempt to pass a moral judgment on Blessingbourne, and connive to prevent Blessingbourne from writing a story about her adventures because it might expose their unscrupulousness. Voyt attempts to add another blow to the attack by concluding that Blessingbourne’s happiness is ruined, though it finds Blessingbourne’s unscathed: “You can’t spoil my happiness.” (James, 1996, p. 415) Having gained more clues about Voyt’s moral depravity, Blessingbourne emerges resilient instead of being killed as Mrs. Dyott has predicted. Even though she cannot be certain about the universal recognition of the importance to remain respectable in the process of experiencing her adventures, she remains a confirmed believer in the valorization of virtuousness and art. As Mrs. Dyott concludes about Blessingbourne’s disillusionment, she emphasizes that she has her “little decency” (James, 1996, p. 416). Mrs. Dyott’s questioning about Blessingbourne’s purpose of developing an innocent relation leads to their “intense discussions” about the utility of her virtuousness, drama, attachment, passion unshared, the “good fortune” of the object of her attachment, her romance, honesty. (James, 1996, pp. 416-17) It is only after their discussions that Mrs. Dyott would later be able to revise her understanding of Blessingbourne.

When Mrs. Dyott expresses her doubts about the usefulness of Blessingbourne’s romance, Blessingbourne points to her heart, indicating her faith in individual decency. And for Blessingbourne, her self-respect should constitute Voyt’s “good fortune” (James, 1996, p. 417), which is an implicit criticism of his moral degeneration. Blessingbourne’s restraint from sharing her secret passion for Voyt illustrates her adherence to decency. What fails to be defined in the previous part of the story concerning the terms such as “drama, passion, romance, relation”, at this juncture, becomes clearly shown in the dialogue between Blessingbourne and Mrs. Dyott. (James, 1996, pp. 416-17) On top of Blessingbourne’s list of the qualities that

should constitute her values is her “little decency” (James, 1996, p. 416). Nevertheless, Blessingbourne explicitly declares that she is solely responsible for her moral behavior: “Ah, that I don’t pretend it either should be or *can* be. I only speak for myself” (James, 1996, p. 417). And this is not in keeping with what James describes as the climactic point in the third notebook entry. According to James’s design in the third notebook entry, it is the artist who defends the young woman’s renunciation when his mistress mocks at it.

‘She calls *that*,’ she says, ‘a romance. But how, where? A romance is a *relation*. Well- like yours and *mine*. Where is- for *her*-the relation? There *is* none.’ The artist turns it over, ponders, feels it. ‘A relation-yes. But mayn’t it be, after all, also a (sort of) *consciousness*?’ ‘How? What is there in that? What does it do for her?’ *He* must say *he* has one too. ‘Well then--constituted as she is-what does *yours* do for her?’ He has to take this. ‘I see. It only does-awhat it *can* do-for ME!’ *That* I see as the climax. (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 177)

In articulating that the consciousness of the relation exercises an effect on his heart, the artist voices his approval of the young woman. Such a design suggests James’s acknowledgement of the superiority of a relation that heeds moral consciousness from the male perspective. However, in the story, it is Blessingbourne rather than Voyt who exemplifies the impact of individual moral agency. Though there is no explanation from James for such a change, the theme of the honest woman’s qualification for a story receives prominent treatment. And this significance is reinforced when Mrs. Dyott is observed to reflect on her moral behavior and later to be supportive of Blessingbourne in appreciating her righteousness.

4. Blessingbourne’s Moral Impact

Mrs. Dyott, different from Voyt, is impacted to enact a self-examination. At first, she manifests her willingness to mend her behavior.

It was said in a manner that made Mrs. Dyott, with a visible mixture of impressions, suddenly turn away. She indulged in a vague movement or two, as if to look for something; then again found herself near her friend, on whom with the same abruptness, in fact with a strange sharpness, she conferred a kiss that might have represented either her tribute to exalted consistency or her idea of a graceful close of the discussion. “You deserve that one should speak *for* you!” (James, 1996, p. 417)

Blessingbourne understands that individual moral improvement can only be achieved when self-reflection occurs, and so she clarifies her stance of not assuming any moral responsibility for others. Instead of posing as exemplary, Blessingbourne makes it explicit that she is merely responsible for her own moral behavior. Mrs. Dyott’s sudden turning away and consequent behavior demonstrate her relief at realizing Blessingbourne’s attitude. What ensues during Blessingbourne’s stay proves to be a series of harmonious activities shared by both women. “There were drives to be taken, calls made, objects of interest seen, at a distance; with the effect of much easy talk and still more easy silence” (James, 1996, p. 418). The repeated use of the modifier “easy” signifies an improved relationship between the two female protagonists. They are represented as sharing a more tacit relationship, accomplishing a better mutual understanding, the detail of which is absent in James’s third notebook entry. Such a dramatic change highlights the theme of whether an honest woman can constitute a story.

Blessingbourne’s moral impact on Mrs. Dyott is perceptible when the latter is represented as meeting Voyt by the end of the story. When Voyt wonders whether Blessingbourne has discovered their relationship, Mrs. Dyott conceals the truth by reassuring him of Blessingbourne’s ignorance. And she advises Voyt not to betray his knowledge of

Blessingbourne's secret passion for him, "Which is much the best way for it. For you to know it would be to end it" (James, 1996, p. 419). Voyt's reaction, however, betrays his vanity, and his description of Blessingbourne as "charming" (James, 1996, p. 419) enables Mrs. Dyott to reflect on her relation with Voyt. "Voyt's last word, however, was that there was just enough in it-in the theory-for them to allow that she had not shown herself, on the occasion of their talk, wholly bereft of sense" (James, 1996, p. 419)/ Mrs. Dyott perhaps has recalled Blessingbourne's earlier remarks about not losing her sense while reading novels, and Blessingbourne's influence on her relearning about Voyt's character can be evidently felt. Blessingbourne's self-restraint manifests her freedom not only to define herself but also to provide a sense of direction for Mrs. Dyott. And the shift of the narrative focalization to Voyt by the end of the story serves to affirm such an interpretation.

Not surprisingly, Voyt does not acknowledge the value of Blessingbourne's sense of romance. According to Voyt's understanding, his romance (with Mrs. Dyott), which is a good topic for a novel, would appeal to the reading public and benefit authors and publishers. He defines Blessingbourne's romance as "but a small, scared, starved, subjective satisfaction that would do her no harm and nobody else any good. Who but a duffer-he stuck to his contention-would see the shadow of a 'story' in it?" (James, 1996, p. 420) The narrative focalized on Voyt dominates in the last paragraph of the story, reinforcing his obsession with material benefits. He denigrates Blessingbourne's self-discipline as "morbid conscience" (James, 1996, p. 419), and he believes that Blessingbourne's story is incapable of reaching any audience and those few readers attracted by it would be stupid ones. Though Mrs. Dyott's remarks are no longer heard by the end of the story, her emotional distance from Voyt underscores Blessingbourne's moral impact. To some extent, what is represented about the development of the relation in the story subverts Voyt's belief in the invincibility of relation as the essence of a story or one's life.

Blessingbourne's allusion to Annunzio in the story serves as a significant clue for decoding James's denigration of the obsessive concern with sense experience and the culture of consumption in popular novels as represented in his essay on Gabriele D'Annunzio's works. "The other is the whole category of the phenomena of 'passion,' as passion prevails between his men and his women- and scarcely anything else prevails; the states of feeling, of ecstasy and suffering engendered, the play of sensibility from end to end of the scale" (James, 1984d, p. 915). The utilitarian pursuit of material success on the part of some novelists tends to sacrifice the more meaningful aspects that reveal the process of one's developing sensibilities. It is more valuable to extract something instructive from life. As James writes,

It is this absence of anything finely contributive in themselves, on the part of the various couples here concerned, that is the open door to the trivial. I have said, with all appreciation, that they present the great 'relation,' for intimacy, as we shall nowhere else find it presented; but to see it related, in its own turn, to nothing in the heaven above or the earth beneath, this undermines, we definitely learn, the charm of that achievement. (James, 1984d, p. 943)

As presented above, the couples in D'Annunzio's novels are incapable of contributing anything sublime, and what makes these novels marketable is nothing but their meeting the general readers' demand for vulgar interest. Neither novelists nor publishers can disengage themselves from pursuing material benefits. And this leads to a vicious circle, which is similar to Darcy's observation of the American literary culture, "The booksellers made money, and the public only asked if there wasn't more- it asked no other questions." (James, 1984a, p. 76) As James writes about those types of writing that the public demand, "Shut out from the rest of life, shut out from all fruition and assimilation, it has no more dignity than- to use a homely image- the

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boots and shoes that we see, in the corridors of promiscuous hotels, standing, often in double pairs, at the doors of rooms” (James, 1984d, p. 942). In the earlier stage of James’s story, Mrs. Dyott and Voyt are represented as such images that lack significance or dignity. And the representation of such practice would be considered ignoble by Blessingbourne, so a stark contrast between Blessingbourne’s (James’s) concept of romance and that of Voyt’s (D’Annunzio’s) is illuminated.

James’s essay on Gabriele D’Annunzio condemns the erotic nature evident in the latter’s six novels published between 1898 and 1902. In the beginning of the essay, James voices his concern for the pernicious influence of the overseas novels that bring agitation instead of peace. It is the unwholesome content of the novels that threatens the development of the general intellectual and moral condition. The publication of the translations of D’Annunzio’s novels is a case in point: “the only ideas he urges upon us are the erotic and the plastic, which have for him about an equal intensity, or of which it would be doubtless more correct to say that he makes them interchangeable faces of the same figure” (James, 1984d, p. 910). That the translations of such novels were published in London testifies to the consumer tastes of the British culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. And it is a small wonder that James laments about the popular novelistic treatment of the relation between men and women: “I see it London thing” (Edel and Powers, 1987, p. 177). Adorno rightly detects the flaws of the aestheticism represented in “the sensations of Wilde, d’Annunzio, and Maeterlinck, who served as preludes to the culture industry.” (Adorno, 2002, p. 239) Evidently, James is critical of the trend that commodifies art for the sake of personal interests in the high aesthetic movement of the 1880s and early 1890s both in Europe and the U. S.

It is significant to examine the reception of James’s story which conveys his principle of freedom based on sincerity in fiction writing and his criticism of consumer tastes. “The Story in It” was not published until after some years by a friend who was about to “start a magazine” (James, 1984e, p. 1285), and it was not received warmly by the publisher. Furthermore, the magazine that carried the story in the first issue stopped issuing after its publication. The destiny of both the story and the magazine seems to echo Voyt’s prediction that no reader would want to read “The Story in It”. Nevertheless, James expresses his belief in the value of the story by writing that “I like perhaps ‘morbidly’ to think that the Story in it may have been more than the magazine could carry” (James, 1984e, p. 1285). James’s poignant tone is an implication of the harsh reality of the publishing business that took the “story” as the touchstone to the success of any literary work. However, ethical considerations on the part of novelists or readers who are potential novelists are essential in shaping popular tastes.

It is important to note that the story originates from James’s novelist friend who was asked once by a reader why “the adventures he imputed to his heroines were so perversely and persistently but of a type impossible to ladies respecting themselves” (James, 1984e, p. 1285). James’s friend offered the reply that “ladies who respected themselves took particular care never to have adventures; not the least little adventure that would be worth (worth any self-respecting novelist’s) speaking of” (James, 1984e, p. 1285). James’s friend also blamed women without adventures for making literature suffer from the lack of “beauty,” “interest” and “tone.” (James, 1984e, p. 1285) Clearly, one needs to expound the definitions of such terms as the protagonists do in “The Story in It”. The reader’s response to the novelist’s such accusation is not provided in the notebook entry, yet it may be inferred that Blessingbourne could represent the reader in questioning the obsessive literary representations of indecent women. And this in return illustrates James’s would-be response to his novelist friend. Furthermore, James declares the necessity to contextualize the commonly-used terms.

It is, not surprisingly, one of the rudiments of criticism that a human, a personal ‘adventure’

is no *a priori*, no positive and absolute and inelastic thing, but just a matter of relation and appreciation—a name we conveniently give, after the fact, to any passage, to any situation, that has added the sharp taste of uncertainty to a quickened sense of life. (James, 1984e, p. 1285)

In the story, it is Blessingbourne who challenges Voyt to define such terms as “interest,” “passion,” “behavior,” “adventure,” “romance” and “relation” before he commented on the value of a story. Interestingly, there is a sharp edge of irony in James’s estimate of the so-called adventures. “Therefore, the thing is, all beautifully, a matter of interpretation and of the particular conditions; without a view of which latter some of the most prodigious adventures, as one has often had occasion to say, may vulgarly show for nothing” (James, 1984e, pp. 1285-86). For James, adventures of emptiness do not deserve its name. The vagueness of such definitive terms, in most cases, merely reveals the irresponsibility of literary criticism. James’s response to the issue forms the subject for “The Story in It”, which interweaves the act of living, reading, writing, and publishing that engages both genders and their conceptualizations of the sense of responsibility on the part of novelists and the reading public.

Conclusion

James’s conceptualization of novelists’ responsibility displays itself in his faith in the interconnection between the future of the novel and that of society. “There is nothing to prevent our taking for granted all sorts of happy symptoms and splendid promises—so long, of course, I mean, as we keep before us the general truth that the future of fiction is intimately bound up with the future of the society that produces and consumes it” (James, 1984c, p. 106). It is where the ethical dimension is integrated with that of the artistic one. It may be argued that James has exerted a perceptible influence on British aestheticism as shown in his literary endeavor of this tale that highlights the value of art. And such efforts by him “helped accomplish the full delineation of a zone of ‘high culture’, the creation of a separate niche amidst a complex market economy for the earnest production and avid consumption of austere, self-regarding, art” (Freedman, 1990, pp. xxvi-xxvii). “The Story in It” reveals the potential impact of social forces on gender relations, the writing of fiction, and individual moral condition, and it also celebrates the personal potential to negotiate with such forces, implying the individual agency in interrogating the hedonistic life characterized by the patriarchal confining of women within rigid stereotypes. “James presents them as the fully historical result of that powerful product and ally of social formations and especially of bourgeois capitalism, ideology” (Izzo, 2010, p. 383). The story in “The Story in It” lies in the individual construction of her identity when exposed to pernicious moral and intellectual conditions. Blessingbourne’s engagement with the relation between Mrs. Dyott and Mr. Voyt does not necessarily follow that she would sacrifice her morality. It is precisely Blessingbourne’s distinct qualities and their impact that subvert the professionalization of the concept of “relation” and “story”. As Freedman notes, James is “alternately critical and celebratory, antagonistic and obsessed, and finally deeply, powerfully assimilative” (Freedman, 1990, p. xvii). Notably, it is always the novelist’s quality of mind that can speak volumes about the quality of his or her product. As James writes, “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 the mind of the producer” (James, 1984b, pp. 63-64).

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Bio-note

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