

The James Bond: Psychology and Fiction

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Abstract

This paper looks at the work of two famous American brothers: William and Henry James. The purpose of this research is to identify and discuss the nature of the relationship between the two brothers. This has been done by examining the psychological essays of William James and the critical essays of his brother, Henry James, as well as the correspondence between them. The bond between the novelist (Henry James) and the psychologist (William James) grew into the creation of the James literary and psychological heritage.

Key words: *psychology, experience, consciousness, perceptions, emotions, stream of consciousness.*

Family is the main social unit where the members actively cooperate with each other. The James, a clan-like family, whose members were not always educated in accordance with high social standards and values of the nineteenth century America (morality, freedom and schooling), though, demonstrate a close and fruitful collaboration between one another. Henry James Senior was an esteemed American theologian, journalist, and social activist, as well as the father of the psychologist William James, the novelist Henry James, and the diarist Alice James. As mentioned by Jennifer Eimers, "New York offered a cultural education, which the James children were allowed to experience fully. [...] the family often went to the theatre, art shows, and Barnum's American Museum. The James children were also surrounded by books, and allowed to read nearly anything that came into view" (2008: 278). Throughout their life, although William was older and more confident, Henry, however, proved to be more determined than his brother. He began his career as a writer and critic much earlier than William, and was devoted to it. William, on the other hand, was at first seriously interested in painting, then in medicine, and finally decided to commit himself to philosophy and psychology (Edel 1963; Putnam 1997: 1). The link between the James brothers draws a special attention, though there is nothing new in reading Henry through William's perspective. Careful attention was also paid to the correspondence between the brothers, as their letters constitute a generous source of information about

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the state of their relationship. In the connection between the two brothers were interested many scholars and biographers, such as Leon Edel, Percy Lubbock, Kristin Bourdeau, Collin Meissner, Greg W. Zacharias, Wendy Graham, and Ross Posnock, among others.

The table below presents a parallel chronology of both brothers' works and activities during their life.

A William James Chronology		A Henry James Chronology	
11 January 1842	Is born in New York City, first child of Henry James, Sr. and Mary Robertson Walsh	15 April 1843	Is born at 21 Washington Place, New York City, United States. Second child of Henry James, Sr. and Mary Robertson Walsh
1858	Interested in painting with William Morris Hunt	1858	Attends Berkeley Institute under the direction of Reverend W. C. Leverett.
1859	John La Farge comes to Newport in the summer to study with Hunt. Becomes friends with William and Henry.	1859	Henry attends the Institution Rochette and continues to write.
1864	Enters Harvard Medical School	1861	Attends Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard
1867-8	Travels to Europe. Studies physiology at Berlin University, reads philosophy, psychology and physiology.	1862	Enters Harvard Law School.
1869	Receives M. D. degree, but never practices.	1864	First tale, 'A Tragedy of Error,' published, unsigned, in <i>Continental Monthly</i> . Begins writing book reviews for <i>North American Review (NAR)</i> .

1872	Accepts the offer to teach undergraduate course in comparative physiology at Harvard	1865	'The Story of a Year,' his first signed story, published in the <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> .
1874-5	Begins teaching psychology; establishes first American psychology laboratory.	1867	Writes reviews for <i>The Nation</i> and <i>NAR</i> .
1878	Publishes 'Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence' in <i>Journal of Speculative Philosophy</i> .	1869	Sails for Europe to travel and improve his health. Writes extensively to his family members and friends at home.
1879	Publishes 'The Sentiment of Rationality' in <i>Mind</i> .	1871	<i>Watch and Ward</i> (his first novel) is serialized in <i>Atlantic</i> .
1880	Appointed Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. Continues to teach psychology.	1875	<i>Roderick Hudson</i> is serialized in the <i>Atlantic</i> . Writes articles on Parisian life and culture for <i>New York Tribune</i> . Meets Turgenev, Flaubert, Zola, Goncourt, Maupassant, and Daudet.
1884	Lectures on 'The Dilemma of Determinism'. Publishes 'On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology' in <i>Mind</i> .	1878	Publishes 'Daisy Miller' and <i>The Europeans</i>
1885-92	Teaches psychology and philosophy at Harvard: logic, ethics, English empirical philosophy, psychological research.	1880	Publishes <i>Washington Square</i> , writes and publishes <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> in <i>Macmillan's Magazine</i> .
1890	Publishes <i>The Principles of Psychology</i>	1882	Publishes 'The Point of View'

1897	Publishes <i>The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy</i> .	1884	Publishes 'The Art of Fiction' in <i>Longman's Magazine</i> .
1899	Publishes <i>Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals</i> (including 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings' and 'What Makes Life Worth Living?').	1885 1886	<i>The Bostonians</i> serialized in <i>Century</i> . Travels to Florence.
1904-4	Publishes 'Does 'Consciousness' Exist?,' 'A World of Pure Experience,' 'How Two Minds Can Know the Same Thing,' 'Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?' and "The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience" in <i>Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods</i> .	1887 1897 1899	Stays for a long period in Italy. Writes <i>The Aspern Papers</i> and begins <i>The Tragic Muse</i> . Settles at Lamb House in Rye, Sussex. Publishes 'The Future of the Novel'
1907	Publishes <i>Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking</i> .	1900	Publishes stories while working on <i>The Wings of the Dove</i> and <i>The Ambassadors</i> .
1909	Publishes <i>A Pluralistic Universe</i> .	1902 1903 1907-9	<i>The Wings of the Dove</i> is published. <i>The Ambassadors</i> is published. Writes the prefaces to his novels.

1910 Publishes 'A Pluralistic Mystic' in <i>Hibbert Journal</i> . Dies in August of heart failure at summer home in Chocorua, New Hampshire.		1910 Publishes 'Is There a Life after Death' in <i>Harper's Bazar</i> (January-February). 1913 Publishes <i>A Small Boy and Others</i> and 1914 <i>Notes of a Son and Brother</i> . February 28 dies in 1916 London.	
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(Edel 1975; Simon 1998)

The table allows one to compare and understand how and when did William and Henry influence one another, while also telling about their accomplishments in the professional field. For instance, the acquaintance with John La Farge with the James brothers in the summer of 1859 played a very important role in their intellectual and moral growth. Henry Adams states that La Farge “soon took on the role of the intellectual mentor to the James brothers, introducing them to French literature, discoursing with them on philosophical questions, and going on painting excursions with them” (1985: 60). This idea has been extended by Linda Simon (1998); she emphasises the importance of the collaboration of the James brothers with William Morris Hunt and John La Farge, stating that William “was learning something more than drawing and painting. He learned that artists were subject to the whims, preferences, and dislikes of their audience” (1998: 81). This was the reason why William started pondering over the idea of continuing his career as a painter or shift to the study of science. On the other hand, Adams believes that the three young men, William, Henry and La Farge, were influenced by the writings of the Anglo-Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) and therefore all of them became interested in a new philosophical viewpoint, and “shifted the focus of attention in their work from the object itself to the perception of the object in the field of consciousness” (1985: 60). That is to say, the perception of reality was also altered, considering that it was based on “an awareness of the ambiguities of sensation” (1985: 60). Consequently, the further writings of the artists reflected a similar point of view of reality:

La Farge converted the painter’s canvas from a representation of the external world to a depiction of visual sensations; Henry James

transformed narration from a description of revealed events to an account of the narrator's perceptions and interpretations; William James rejected materialism and idealism to develop radical empiricism, a philosophy founded upon the primacy of sensations and mental entities over material realities (Adams 1985: 60).

This belief is evident later in William's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) when he speaks of impressions and sensations. Not only did William cite Berkeley while speaking of perceptions, but he also agreed with his affirmation that one receives accurate information "by association merely"; James concludes that "perception differs from sensation by the consciousness of farther facts associated with the object of the sensation. [...] Sensational and reproductive brain-processes combined are, then, what give us the content of our perceptions" (2008: 76).

In comparison, Henry James appears to also have knowledge about the concept of impressions and sensations, if one takes into account his correspondence with his sister Alice James. In his letter addressed to her in 1869, while visiting London, he writes about the impression that the magnificent city of London produced upon him, concluding that "this feeling is owing to the singular permanence of the impressions of childhood, to which any present experience joins itself on, without a broken link in the chain of sensation" (James 1975: 90).

Although different, the James brothers supported and encouraged each other throughout life. They wrote each other letters for almost half a century. If there to be traced any similitudes of ideas and beliefs between William and Henry's works, one must look through their correspondence. The correspondence demonstrates their close relationship through a wide variety of topics, as they discussed not only family issues, but historical, economic, social, professional and personal matters as well. The editors of *William and Henry James: Selected Letters* (1997) claim that there were written more than 740 letters and postcards; besides, they mention that the tone and atmosphere of the correspondence were almost always official, as the brothers were aware of the fact that the letters will constitute later a family archive (Scrupskelis and Berkeley 1997: xxx). On November 14th, 1878, in his letter addressed to William, Henry expresses his gratefulness towards his brother appreciating his objective receptiveness and constructive criticism:

I hope you will continue to give me, when you can, your free impression of my performances. It is a great thing to have some one write to one of one's things as if one were a third person, and you are the only

individual who will do this. I don't think however you are always right, by any means (H. James 1975: 193).

The lines of this letter speak about a true and interactive relationship between the aesthete and the philosopher. In his letters, Henry is always very attentive and respectful to his brother; in addition, they seem to be inspirations and critics for each other seeing that a thorough reading of their letters demonstrates their mutual and constructive feedback on almost every essay or book published, as for example in the following lines of the letter addressed to William in 1878:

I was much depressed on reading your letter by your painful reflections on *The Europeans*; but now, an hour having elapsed, I am beginning to hold up my head a little; the more so as I think I myself estimate the book very justly and am aware of its extreme slightness. I think you take these things too rigidly and unimaginatively — too much as if an artistic experiment were a piece of conduct, to which one's life were somehow committed; but I think also that you're quite right in pronouncing the book 'thin' and empty. I don't at all despair, yet, of doing something fat. [...] As for instance in your objection to the closing paragraph of *Daisy Miller*, which seems to me queer and narrow, and as regards which I don't seize your point of view. J'en appelle to the sentiment of any other story-teller whatsoever; I am sure none such would wish the paragraph away (H. James 1975: 193).

Speaking of the interconnection of ideas in their works, there are various empirical and pragmatic ideas in William's writings that might be actually applied to Henry's theory of fiction. To thoroughly investigate certain psychological and philosophical aspects of Henry and William relationship there will be considered William's essays on psychology, namely *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Pragmatism* (1907), as well as Henry's essays on the theory of fiction: *The Art of Fiction* (1884) and *The Future of the Novel* (1899).

Even though the James brothers had a very strong friendship, "their relationship reflects the rivalry and secrecy that characterized all relationships in the James family" (Zacharias 2008: 371). Notwithstanding, as Peter Rawlings puts it, William James "exercised a significant impact on James's theory and practice of fiction" (2006: 4). Indeed, the understanding of various concepts as: perception, experience, consciousness, multiple perspectives, and other concepts as well, is very similar for both of them. For instance, in *The Future of the Novel* Henry James asserts that the novel had come to "self-consciousness" (Edel 1984: 100), what in William's

perspective is the tendency to progress and perfection. Therefore, James notices that the novel had done its best “to make up for lost opportunities” (Edel 1984: 100).

In his seminal essay on the theory of novel, *The Art of Fiction*, Henry James marks out that a novel “is a personal impression of life” (Edel 1984: 48), that is to say, it reproduces the impressions, perceptions, and association of life of the novelist through his/her characters; similarly, for William, life is made up of impressions, strong or weak, influential or, on the contrary, insignificant, that have an impact on human’s perception of life. According to William James, it appears that “Pure sensations can only be realized in the earliest days of life. They are all but impossible to adults with memories and stories of associations acquired” (2008: 7). Therefore, a person’s perception of life, once contaminated by impressions and associations, becomes biased. Thus, when Henry James asserts that the reader rejoices at the mere fact of reading about and, as a consequence, living other people’s life, he then agrees with his brother that associations influence the reader’s perception of the novel; while speaking of the reader, he assumes that:

He likes to live the life of others, yet is well aware of the points at which it may too intolerable resemble his own. The vivid fable, more than anything else, gives him this satisfaction on easy terms, gives him knowledge abundant yet vicarious. It enables him to select, to take, to leave; so that to feel he can afford to neglect it he must have a rare faculty, or great opportunities, for the extension of experience – by thought, by emotion, by energy – at first hand (James in Edel 1984: 103).

Henry James is aware, due to his brother, that life constitutes a series of impressions and associations that are in fact, experience. To this extent, in *The Future of the Novel*, he infers that a good novelist should know that he/she has to give his/her reader a representation of life, as he calls it - a “picture” - that will satisfy the reader’s “general appetite for a picture” (Edel 1984:102). In his novels, Henry James pays much attention to the character, in other words to the “subject” of the novel (Edel 1984: 102). It appears that the subject for him is “the whole human consciousness” (Edel 1984: 102). In comparison, William’s idea about human consciousness in his chapter on ‘The Stream of Thought’ may be explained as follows: personal consciousness consists of thoughts; the thoughts are in constant change and continuity; moreover, they are cognitive and selective (2006: 224-91). This implies that Henry James, taking as the subject for his novels the human consciousness, has an amassment of ideas and thoughts to deal with, while

creating his characters. Virginia Woolf will later have a similar attitude with reference to character, specifically, she will argue that:

all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved [...] The great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character. Otherwise they would not be novelists (2000: 749-50).

At this point, it is important to appraise the idea of *the stream of consciousness* in both brothers' works. William James was the one who coined the term *stream of consciousness* in his highly respected work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). To William James, considering that the state of mind is in constant change and ceaseless flow, consciousness appears as a "river or stream" (2006: 239); moreover, he does not completely agree with the earlier connotation of this concept as "chain or train", because he believes it to be incomplete. To contrast the previous description, he encourages everyone to call it "the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (2006: 239). Henceforward, the term *stream of consciousness* was successfully used both in psychology and fiction. Henry James, in a letter to his friend Grace Norton, writes about consciousness, and refers to it in almost the same words:

consciousness is an illimitable power, [...] yet in the way it propagates itself from wave to wave, so that we never cease to feel, and though at moments we appear to, try to, pray to, there is something that holds one in one's place, makes it a standpoint in the universe which it is probably good not to forsake (H. James 1975: 424).

The novelist reinforces the idea that consciousness is constantly moving and is alternately engaged in a continuous process. Regarding the work of both brothers in parallel, it is worthy to notice that while William James is trying to explain and give an accurate account of consciousness in quite general psychological terms, Henry James in his novels passes consciousness through the mind of his characters. For example, William James confirms that "the only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousness, minds, selves" (2006: 225); Henry, on the contrary, offers the readers the opportunity to 'experience' in a way, somebody else's consciousness and state of mind. As stated by William E. Cain, both writers conjointly, the philosopher and the novelist, "provide a moment of intersection between philosophy and literature

through their investigations, both theoretical and aesthetic, of the concept of consciousness. Consciousness is that fund of self-knowledge, protected like a treasure" (2002: 62).

On the assumption that human consciousness is a flow of subjective life, as stated by William, the novel, in Henry's perspective is "the most immediate and [...] *treacherous* picture of actual manners - indirectly as well as directly" (Edel 1984: 107) that reflects all the changes in society; it is therefore, a subjective representation of life. Henry's biographer, Leon Edel, refers to the novelist as a prolific writer, and one of the finest critics and theorists (1963: 5). Besides, Edel confirms once over the assumption that Henry James embraced the empirical ideas of experience and sensation, that is, the novel for Henry was a "great repository of life; and he believed that if the novel is a mirror in a roadway, it reflects not only the panorama of existence, but the countenance of the artist in the very act of experiencing the world around him" (1963: 6). Beyond doubt, Henry's fount of experience came from heavy reading and extensive travelling.

In his chapter on 'Consciousness of Self' the psychologist explains what the Empirical self of each of us is, referring to it as a person's "inner or subjective being"; and presents the constituents of the Self: the material self, the social self, spiritual self and the pure Ego, pointing out that the spiritual self may be regarded from various perspectives and, on the top of that, a person may have many social selves (2006: 292-99). This very concern, namely the rivalry and conflict of the different selves, will represent a part of Henry James's novels, too.

As to the matter of experience, again, some affinities can be noticed. In his last chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* dedicated to experience, William James attempts to define experience explaining that it is "a particular sort of natural agency, alongside of which other more recondite natural agencies may perfectly well exist" (2008: 625); and eventually, experience is a cumulative process, whereas he narrows the definition of experience "to processes which influence the mind by the front-door-way of simple habits and association" (2008: 628). Moreover, the process of experience is infinite; it is a time process that is influenced by impressions, emotions, perceptions and associations:

Experience means experience of something foreign supposed to impress us, whether spontaneously or in consequence of our own exertions and acts. Impressions, as we well know, affect certain orders of sequence and coexistence, and the mind's habits copy the habits of the impressions, so

that our images of things assume a time- and space-arrangement which resembles the time- and space-arrangements outside (2008: 619).

The likeness at this point between William and Henry lies in their attempt to comprehend experience as a cumulative and illimitable process. While discussing experience in his essay *The Art of Fiction*, Henry James is repetitive, as he remarks that “experience consists of impressions”, yet complementary; for him experience is “never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility”; besides, he sees experience as a wonderful faculty, a “power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life” (Edel 1984: 52). Therefore, Henry James promotes the idea of fictional experience to novelists and readers alike: “[w]rite from experience, and experience only” (Edel 1984: 52), thus offering the possibility to openness and wideness of knowledge and indirect experience through fiction.

In conclusion, the parallel reading of the famous James brothers proves a strong and close bond between them and shows a set of similitudes of ideas in their works and semblance in their philosophical outlook on life; furthermore, it seems that Henry formulated his theory of fiction being strongly influenced by his brother’s theories in psychology.

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