

Mind over Matter: Making the Most of Henry James' Endings

The Mental Strength of Reconciling the Life Not Lived with the One That Is

Spending most of his writing career in Europe, Henry James often pondered the life he did not live; his friends wondered what kind of novelist he would have become in America, and these musings occupied James' thoughts enough to materialize in his fiction. In short stories such as "The Middle Years," "The Beast in the Jungle," and "The Jolly Corner," James' characters explicitly retrospect their lives and consider the alternative paths they might have followed had their younger selves made different choices. Moreover, in James' literature, this *life not lived* comprises not only lamentable past decisions but also closing doors: missed opportunities, fleeting suitors or lovers, irreparable relationships, wounded feelings, changing minds, diminishing health, irrecoverable wealth, fading hopes, and unrealized potential. In most cases, the passage of time and transience of relationships preclude reliving and re-choosing, so speculating on the past usually brings only sorrow and dissatisfaction. Indeed, many of James' tales end unhappily because protagonists seem unfulfilled as a result of both misfortune and their own indiscreet choices. However, as suffocating as social circumstances and uncontrollable factors may be, fate seldom has the final word in James' fiction.

Even choosing – and choosing *wrongly* – is not ultimately damning; James' characters often reclaim hope by loving the life they have chosen rather than regretting the ones they forwent. In consonance with James' belief that mental poignancy and peace of mind are as consequential as – if not more influential than – physical action, the individual in James' literature experiences happiness hardly ever from external windfall but rather in one's personal choices, and, most importantly, in one's internal acceptance of those choices. The characters who continue to lament what could have been suffer endlessly, whereas those who attain a sense of inner mental fulfillment despite material loss or societal failures find that, even as they "attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards," loving the life they *do* live makes the game much more playable than conceding it to past

mistakes. By exacerbating the misery of those who dwell deeply on the *life not lived* and redeeming characters who embrace their fates, however unfair or self-inflicted they might be, Henry James highlights the importance of finding solace and satisfaction in one's choice once it is made; he encourages us *not* to lament the *life not lived* in the past, but rather to celebrate the one that *is* lived in the present.

The *life not lived* assumes many guises in Henry James' literature: the choices that confront protagonists inevitably lead to disparate outcomes, but it is the irretrievability of missed opportunities that accentuates the pain of looking back.

One of the most irrecoverable forms of the *life not lived* is lost or rebuffed love. For example, once Catherine Sloper of *Washington Square* mentally commits to leaving her cold, tyrannical father for Morris, she is unable to recover any sense of love for another man or any warmth for her father. "From her own point of view the great facts of her career were that Morris Townsend had trifled with her affection, and that her father had broken its spring... Nothing could ever undo the wrong or cure the pain that Morris had inflicted on her, and nothing could ever make her feel towards her father as she felt in her younger years." Even though they never marry, Catherine *chose* Morris, and the depth of her former affection for him, however fruitless, drains her of any capacity for loving another man; the pain and totality of her choice cement her desire to remain single and avoid further disappointment. She refuses to cede her dying father a promise to abstain from ever marrying Morris, and she resists even the genial Mr. Macalister and the love-struck John Ludlow when they come courting. An obedient life with her father's fortune, a house full of happy children with Mr. Macalister, and another chance at social status and passion with John Ludlow all represent alternative lives into which she may physically escape, but Catherine has mentally chosen Morris, and the wholehearted authenticity of her past feelings for him render her emotionally incapable of accepting any surrogate.

Likewise, Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady* confronts a choice of suitors: the noble Lord Warburton, the passionate American Caspar Goodwood, the tender Ralph Touchett, and the artistic Gilbert Osmond. Isabel chooses Osmond, but, as their marriage collapses, she must constantly face the lives she rejected. Mired in a loveless union, with Warburton trying to move closer to Isabel through Pansy, Caspar Goodwood offering her a shameless escape, and Ralph and Henrietta urging her to remain in England, Isabel must revisit and reconcile the lives she never lived with the one she chose. Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Ralph Touchett each represent *aspects* of the singular life that Isabel envisioned: a life with Warburton's carefree demeanor and ambitious dreams, Caspar's care and understanding, and Ralph's appreciation for freedom and new ideas. As each of her old suitors resurfaces in her final visit to Gardencourt, Isabel sees how they have changed – Warburton's marriage, Caspar's tactless insistence, and Ralph's illness – and recognizes the impossibility of returning to the happy freedom they all enjoyed during her maiden stay at Gardencourt.

Similarly, in *The Spoils of Poynton*, Fleda Vetch has her chance to marry Owen Gereth when the two confess their love together, but she chooses moral passivity over aggressive passion, instead instructing him to “keep faith” in his love for Mona; although she hopes to marry Owen if his former affair disintegrates, sending him back to Mona ultimately dooms the life they could have lived together at Poynton.

Finally, John Marcher of “The Beast in the Jungle” also receives a choice – the indeterminate Beast – in who he would like to be or what he would like to accomplish, but, in all his focus on avoiding disaster and suffering, he misses his chance to requite May Bartram's love when it flourishes before him one April afternoon: “‘The door isn't shut. The door's open,’ said May Bartram... She stood nearer to him, close to him, a minute, as if still charged with the unspoken... She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only **waited**... her face shining at him, her contact

imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind but **all expectant**. The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to come to him.” Instead of embracing May and reciprocating her intimation of love, Marcher only *waits*, choosing forever the life of a passive observer over that of an active lover. Only after seeing the ravaged face of a mourning man does Marcher later recognize the life he failed to live: “The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived.” In brief, James’ protagonists must often deal with the *life not lived* in the form of lost lovers that they fail to embrace or fully appreciate when they still have the chance.

In addition to presenting missed chances in the form of lost love, Henry James’ writing also frames the *life not lived* in terms of unfulfilled career opportunities and unrealized potential. For instance, “The Real Thing” storybook artist must ultimately abandon the fascinating Monarchs in favor of more conventional models so he can continue his career as an artist of the “Rutland Ramsay” series; he must sacrifice personal interest for mainstream tastes in order to remain economically afloat.

Likewise, Dencombe of “The Middle Years” laments not fulfilling the potential he spent too many years honing in a life that “took flight” only as it was nearing its end: “It had taken too much of his life to produce too little of his art. The art had come, but it had come after everything else. At such a rate a first existence was too short – long enough only to collect material; so that to fructify, to use the material, one must have a second age, an extension. This extension was what poor Dencombe sighed for.” Dencombe’s unfulfilled life was not so much a choice he consciously made, but rather “a movement without a direction. He had ripened too late and was so clumsily constituted that he had had to teach himself by mistakes.” Dencombe’s *life not lived* is a life of producing the memorable works he spent years preparing himself to write, as a master of his craft; he regrets consuming so much time gathering the “material” and learning from mistakes that he had little life left to apply them to his writing.

Finally, Spencer Brydon of “The Jolly Corner” returns to America questioning the life he squandered hedonistically in Europe: “*Not* to have followed my perverse young course... not to have kept it up, so, ‘over there,’ from that day to this, without a doubt or a pang; not, above all, to have liked it, to have loved it, so much, loved it, no doubt, with such an abysmal conceit of my own preference: some variation from *that*, I say, must have produced some different effect for my life and for my ‘form.’ I should have stuck here.” Afraid that he has not realized his life’s potential and that an opportunity at wealth in the rapidly growing American industry has passed him by, Spencer Brydon spends considerable time and energy tracking his spectral alter ego in an attempt to ascertain its quality. For “The Real Thing” artist, Dencombe, and Spencer Brydon, the *life not lived* is a concept that brings considerable anxiety when considered, for they cannot help but wonder how their careers could have flourished had they spent their lives and careers differently.

Even though the temptation to ponder the possibilities may arise in the wake of unfulfilling choices, Henry James characterizes consideration of the *life not lived* as a painful and fruitless exercise; the characters that end James’ tales in the calmest state of mind are those who discover a new sense of personal fulfillment in spite of poor decisions and unfortunate outcomes. For example, instead of “brooding and moping,” Catherine Sloper “fill[ed] the void... mingled freely in the usual gaieties” and “was greatly liked.” Ending her tale with “her morsel of fancywork,” Catherine has found solace in her solitary life and satisfaction with her decisions. She may have chosen the wrong man, but she has come to terms with and staunchly adheres to that choice by refusing to marry another.

Isabel, too, acknowledges her mistake but refuses to consider the life she did not live – the life with her other potential husbands. She declares to Mrs. Touchett that she has never regretted rejecting Lord Warburton, and her repudiation of Caspar’s final proposal further reaffirms her acceptance of the path she has chosen for herself: that of Osmond’s wife. Even as Ralph and Henrietta urge her to stay at Gardencourt, Isabel returns to Rome, eager to right whatever wrongs

she can – to stand by her values and keep her promise to Pansy. As Ralph passes away, Isabel tearfully confesses to her “brother” that she is happy to have shared such intimacy and understanding with someone; even though her marriage no longer brings her joy, Isabel finds inner peace knowing that she no longer hides anything from her beloved cousin, who will forever be close to her heart. As for Pansy, Isabel applies what Ralph tells her: “in life there is love,” and Isabel and Pansy are still young for “love” to exist.

On a similarly bittersweet note, Mrs. Gereth responds to her crushing material loss of the spoils by embracing Fleda, whom Mrs. Gereth appreciates and finally cherishes as “one of my best finds.” Although she briefly laments Fleda’s passivity in juxtaposition with Mona’s resolution, Mrs. Gereth has, at least and at last, found a similar taste to share the visions her son could never appreciate. Ironically, it takes the loss of her things for her to fully treasure Fleda, who can survive Mrs. Gereth’s aesthetic life beyond Poynton.

In “The Real Thing,” another art connoisseur, Jack Hawley, laments that wasted efforts with the Monarchs dealt the artist “a permanent harm,” but, instead of dwelling on what might have been – either in a total mainstream existence free of the Monarchs, or in an absolute vacuum devoid of economic obligations – the artist instead declares that he is “content to have paid the price – for the memory.” He cannot sacrifice his trade – the mainstream satisfaction of his series commissioners – but he nevertheless comes to terms with his experience with the Monarchs; despite their inutility, the artist appreciates the absolute constancy of their form and identity, to such a degree that he singularly calls them “The Real Thing.”

Likewise, Dencombe cannot cure himself and alter fate, but he ends his life on an epiphanic positive note: “A second chance – *that’s* the delusion. There never was to be but one. We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art... We’ve done something or other.” Before he succumbs,

Dencombe “concedes” to the optimistic Doctor Hugh that, in spite of the desire to produce more, he has given what he has. Having witnessed the appreciation and promise of the young doctor, Dencombe no longer doubts the effect he has had and the life he leaves behind. Before, “he dreaded the idea that his reputation should stand on the unfinished,” but, on his deathbed, Dencombe rests in peace knowing that his reputation survives in the clever minds and skilled hands of readers like Doctor Hugh, on the solid foundation of the masterful “Middle Years.” Like the continual editing that Dencombe always enjoys, his work is never finished, even after death; readers will forever carry it forth, observing it from new perspectives, “extending” its magnificence, and immortalizing its author.

Finally, Spencer Brydon of “The Jolly Corner” also abandons his regrets after meeting the grotesque horror of his wealthy double. More than ever, Brydon attains mental peace with the knowledge that Alice Staverton would have embraced him no matter which country’s life he chose; instead of obsessing further with his lost chance at the wealthier life he did not live in America, Brydon accepts who he is and appreciates Alice for the constancy of her unconditional support. “He has a million a year... But he hasn’t you,” he declares to her, confident that he has never lost the most cherished piece of his past. Alice’s sympathetic remarks about even the dark doppelganger and her admission that she “could have liked him...accepted him” reflect the positive attitude that resonates throughout otherwise negative endings: It matters little *which* life one lives, as long as one lives it in resolution. It is only when *no* choice is made – when life is spent in limbo or lamentation of a crossroads long past – that one truly suffers.

The most sorrowful of Henry James’ endings belong to the characters that spend the most time reflecting on their past mistakes. For example, John Marcher of “The Beast in the Jungle” suffers infinitely when he realizes exactly what he has missed in life. After he fails to requite her final attempt at love, May tries valiantly to shield Marcher from the pain of living in a lost,

irrecoverable past, mercifully urging him, “Don’t know – when you needn’t... No – it’s **too much**... You’ll never know now [what you could have been], and I think you ought to be content” with the life without May to which he has resigned himself. She has seen what the Beast is *not* – a lifelong union of the two companions; however, doing her best to turn his attention forward to the life still in front of him, she consoles him that the worst has happened – that he shall “never!” consciously suffer – and begs him to begin living without reservation or doubt, to look forward to a life no longer taut with fearful anticipation but rather rife with new opportunity. In other words, even after relinquishing her original vision of a life with Marcher, May reassures him that the Beast has sprung, hoping to relieve him of the worry that has “made [Marcher] all its own.” Marcher, however, fails to heed her warning, reflecting later only on “the truth, vivid and monstrous, that all the while he had waited the wait was itself his portion.” Unlike Dencombe, who, at last, relishes that he has “given what he has” in “The Middle Years,” Marcher finds only regret. All in all, the characters that suffer the most in James’ tales expend their time and energy lamenting the *life not lived*, whereas those that make the most of their dismal outcomes find glimmers of hope and morsels of duty in even the darkest fates.

In the game of life, fate often forces one to play with an incomplete deck of cards. A child born with deficiencies must overcome physical limitations, much like “The Pupil” Morgan Moreen and Maisie Farange must overcome irresponsible parenting. Like Pemberton of “The Pupil,” “The Real Thing” artist must also balance personal interest with fiscal needs. As Dencombe painfully admits, the cards may not even all be present at the game’s outset, requiring experience to gather; Isabel realizes Madame Merle’s true identity too late, lamenting that Merle’s misleading appearances “had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards.” Despite the seeming unfairness of such games, Henry James takes no mercy on the victims of fate and society; instead of considering what might have been, we must play the game with the cards we are dealt, and

make the best of the choices we have. James' message resembles one of Henry David Thoreau, who famously wrote in *Walden*, "Love your life, poor as it is." James' characters exemplify this belief; the most satisfied of them settle with their choices, salvaging solace from the chosen road rather than wondering where the path not taken could have led. As Spencer Brydon put it, "Oh to have this consciousness was to *think* – and to think...was, with the lapsing moments, not to have acted! Not to have acted – that was the misery and the pang." Instead of trying to recover what never was – the *life not lived* – James' exemplars embrace what they have, whether it is a "morsel of fancywork," a stepdaughter in a convent, or the understanding smile of Alice Staverton. For those like unmarried Catherine and unhappily married Isabel, to have chosen and chosen wrong is better than not to have chosen at all. Ultimately, while fate and fortune – bad parenting, poor timing, ill health – seem to reign macroscopically in both reality and fiction, James shows that, microscopically, mental pacification and internal peace command much more influence over one's happiness than any physical entity; even after battling the longest odds and committing the costliest errors, one's life's game is ever lost only when the mind concedes.