

Not Merely Child's Play

A Study of Gameplay as a Window into Character in Henry James' Fiction

Pemberton of Henry James' *The Pupil* wonders whether the moment of passage between childhood and adolescence can ever be defined: "He perceived that it was never fixed, never arrested, that ignorance, at the instant one touched it, was already flushing faintly into knowledge, that there was nothing that at a given moment you could say a clever child didn't know." Pemberton's realization is threefold: (1.) that the "morning twilight" of childhood has no clear endpoint; (2.) that ignorance and cognizance are not Boolean variables but rather continuous functions; and (3.) that clever children are seemingly omniscient. Maturation never transpires overnight; it is a gradual process with no distinct beginning – and, perhaps, no distinct end. However, children and adults alike play and master games, and one way to monitor their maturation is to study the variation in both the types of games played and the styles of play employed. As a child's knowledge and awareness burgeon, games adopt new names, the number of players fluctuates, and the rules and objectives lose precise definition, but the essence and essentiality of competition, strategy, and mastery remain. Through childhood and adolescence, we all play games; as time passes, we even master some. Juxtaposing the games we master with those we fumble, and the values we embrace with those we discard, we open a window into social and cerebral growth, the development of character. Henry James often communicates his characters' struggles, intentions, and growth in the language of gameplay. His metaphor reveals that, even as children age, they never stop playing "games," continuing in adulthood to partake in competitive pursuits that require skill, endurance, and adherence to rules. Furthermore, the way people game – their style of play – reflects who they are, how they behave, and the values they are most and least willing to compromise.

Games generally teach children about the world, but the games played and the aptitude with which children play them in Henry James' stories teach us more about the characters themselves. In

particular, varying skill levels reveal not only initial immaturity but also eventual growth and precocity.

For example, Maisie's growth in *What Maisie Knew* manifests itself through her increasing familiarity with the games that adults around her play. Initially, Maisie is dependent; when Sir Claude brings Maisie "ever so many games in boxes, with printed directions," Maisie and Mrs. Wix "had earnest discussions as to whether they hadn't better appeal to him frankly for aid to understand them." Despite "printed directions," Maisie and the maladroit Mrs. Wix cannot "understand" the rules; their idea of consulting Sir Claude shows both their tendency to depend on the giving man – in life as well as games – and the difficulty our two heroines encounter in conforming to the standard, well-defined lifestyle that the printed rulebook represents. Maisie and Mrs. Wix lean on Sir Claude all the way to Europe, hoping to begin a life with him abroad despite its unconventionality; forsaken by both her parents and made the conduit for an indiscreet tryst between Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude, Maisie lives and breathes a life that no rulebook can possibly characterize, and her inability to read explicit rules reflects her unfamiliarity with clearly defined roles. However, Maisie's increasingly precocious understanding of human relations soon emerges through references to gameplay; after hearing Sir Claude curse her mother at Kensington Gardens, "Mrs. Wix's original account of Sir Claude's affection seemed as empty now as the chorus in a children's game," something that Maisie rapidly outgrows as she learns to see through Sir Claude and his "frank pretension to play fair" with her. If anything, it is old Mrs. Wix – not Maisie – who retains her naïve belief that Sir Claude will escape with them, while Maisie learns from her experiences and develops a savvy for the game her parents and stepparents play. "By the time she had grown sharper...she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable – images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play." Before the series of separations and surrogate parents, Maisie cannot

distinguish friend from foe, but, once she comes to understand the rules of the game and the strategies that Beale and Ida employ, she finally matures enough to excavate her closet of images, open the high drawers, and recognize the pattern of a new yet strangely familiar game developing between Miss Overmore and Sir Claude. In short, Henry James characterizes Maisie's cognitive and social maturation through an increased proficiency in playing – and recognizing – games.

As Henry James illustrates in *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, both adults and children exposed to reality must play – or be played in – the game of *society*, and the fashion in which players interact with their allies and opponents speaks volumes about personalities and priorities. We can often distinguish fully matured adults from their younger counterparts by the tenacity and consistency of their gameplay tactics; whereas budding children like Maisie often change and develop their strategy as they develop their identity and experiment with unfamiliar games, adults who have firmly established or stagnant personalities have found and mastered an effective strategy, and their “game” comprises its repeated application.

In *The Spoils of Poynton*, Henry James captures the essence of each character's personality and central struggle through the metaphor of the game. Owen Gereth, seemingly simple-minded and naïve, has “child's eyes” that importune Fleda “as desperately as a rush at some violent game.” When they finally confess their love, he speaks like “a great boy at a great game,” someone who not only knows what he wants but has also mastered expressing his desires in utmost simplicity. Meanwhile, Owen's mother plays the game of marrying her son to the suitor she prefers, and the extremities to which she resorts expose her as a willful, uncompromising woman who sees the vice in everybody. Despite promising not to interfere directly with Fleda's relations with Owen, Mrs. Gereth shatters the rules of the game by revealing the location of Fleda's London home to Owen. As the Brigstocks' resolve appears to weaken, Mrs. Gereth makes the boldest move by sending all of her spoils back to Poynton to expedite checkmate; following the move, Fleda remarks, “To have

played such a card would be thus, for so grand a gambler, practically to have won the game.” Mrs. Gereth’s audacity and disregard for rules and laws manifest themselves both in her sweeping actions – swift and sudden moves between Poynton and Ricks – and her impropriety in dealing with Fleda and Owen. Meanwhile, Fleda must juggle the “game of her definite vow” to represent Owen truthfully to his mother and the “game of her little gagged and blinded desire” to marry Owen herself, and her hesitation to make bold, decisive moves reflects Fleda’s moral sense of right and wrong as well as her still-nascent sexual identity and inchoate romantic feelings; she abhors the “double game” that Mrs. Gereth compliments her for playing, and she feels violated upon Owen’s unexpected visit to her father’s home. For Fleda, victory in the game of love must come fairly or not come at all; unlike Mrs. Gereth, she refuses to break the rules. Even Owen and Mona’s precautionary Registry-office marriage is “some stroke of diplomacy, some move in the game, some outwitting of [Mrs. Gereth],” as Mona moves silently but speedily to safeguard the status of her marriage with Owen. Her style of playing the game parallels her attitude: she knows her objective and pursues it relentlessly, exuding authority not through speech but through the action of her fleet foot. Though she is indelicate and philistine, she has mastered the craft of seduction and the art of timing her moves with aplomb.

Even more so than Mrs. Gereth and Mona, the adults in *What Maisie Knew* have honed their skills at the game of manipulation in the social arena. Ida – an expert at billiards, presumably from her frequent play at bars and clubs – and Beale play the game of making Maisie “a burden to the other – a sort of game in which a fond mother clearly wouldn’t show to advantage.” After this game of Hot Potato, James presents the series of forming new acquaintances and conveniently discarding old ones as a game, where the use of pawns (like Maisie) and messengers (like Mrs. Wix) distinguishes the veteran players from the naïve novices. From the start, gameplay style reflects players’ selfishness and shamelessness. Ida’s new marriage with Sir Claude and subsequent desire to

delay and discard Maisie's presence "was a game like another, and Mrs. Wix's visit [to announce the marriage] was clearly the first move in it." As Ida begins to tire of Sir Claude, she begins a new game in which each waits for the other to break first and shoulder the loss of face. Even under Ida's duress, Mrs. Wix "wouldn't leave for mere outrage. That would be to play her ladyship's game." Before long, everybody participates in some game. Ida accuses Sir Claude of playing kind to Maisie to force Ida to leave first; Beale calls Maisie "a jolly pretext...for [Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude's] game"; Sir Claude wonders "what game [Ida] was playing in turning to Mrs. Wix" (presumably to place Mrs. Wix between Claude and Miss Overmore); Mrs. Wix calls Miss Overmore's grasp on Sir Claude as "not a moral sense... [But] a game! He has fought. But she has won"; and even Maisie recognizes that Miss Overmore's sudden kindness to Mrs. Wix in France is a "move that could put on a strategic air" in the game of commanding the situation. With almost no exception in *What Maisie Knew*, Henry James formulates social interactions and sleights in the language of gameplay, revealing that the tenacity of adults at gaining some advantage or winning the game at all costs separates them from children, who are still experimenting with various strategies. Some people, like Ida and Beale, are more proficient than others, but, in all cases, the techniques they use and the tricks and loopholes they exploit in playing the game inform their character and true intentions. Even Maisie, who could scarcely understand the "printed rules" of a child's game at the start of the novel, eventually reads the adults' styles of play and ultimately removes her piece – the pawn – from their chessboard. In *What Maisie Knew* as in *The Spoils of Poynton*, the true colors of not only growing children but also seasoned adults emerge from gameplay.

The prevalence of Henry James' analogy throughout his stories attests to the ubiquity of gaming. Beyond their most common guises – children's play, shipwreck, Indians, cards, billiards – games can assume any form in the adult world, from Juliana Bordereau's concealment of suspicion to Miss Overmore's manipulation of others. As James reveals, one can formulate any competitive

activity as a game, complete with socially defined rules and threatening opponents; however, it is not the designer's formulation that matters most, but rather the ways in which the players play the game. Just as "one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps" all express some aspect of personality, the approach one takes to playing games likewise sheds light on the "dim closet" of characters' personalities, offering yet another view of a person's order of priorities. Often, the qualities most loosely embraced and most superficially held are the first sacrifices made in the struggle of a game: common decency and familial warmth are the first conveniences that stubborn Mrs. Gereth discards; honesty and directness are readily compromised for the Aspern papers narrator; and a costly, only superficially loved daughter is the initial casualty dispensed in selfish Ida and Beale's never-ending game for lust and luxury. Similarly, Fleda's morality, Maisie's growing perceptiveness, and Morgan Moreen's boyish imagination all shine through how they play their games and how they respond as unwilling participants in others' games. The game is a powerful medium, not only for the development it inspires but also for the expression it enables, and Henry James taps it as much for its revelation of character as for its metaphorical strength.