

Henry James and the New Woman: A Feminist Reading of *The Bostonians*

PYEAAM ABBASI

English department

Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan,

Hezar Jerib St., Isfahan, Iran.

Pyeaam77@yahoo.co.uk.

ABSTRACT

The Bostonians (1886) is known as Henry James's lesbian novel in which the writer's ambivalent look towards the New Woman can be explored. James was a subject/product of the complex discursive web of his time when such ideologies of the superiority of men over women were strictly observed. In that time the idea of same-sex bond was regarded as a threat to the traditional concept of heterosexual bonding. This study is an attempt to conclude James as the contributor to the notion of the New Woman since locating the issue in his novel is enough to make readers put many long-held conventions in question. In this study three important misspeaks are referred to: firstly, James shows the uniqueness of the relation between the two women of the novel; secondly, the writer shows Verena (Basil's wife) changed into property; and finally James shows America's potential for such big changes in attitude regarding women. Although James cannot remain untouched by certain ideologies of his time, he makes his readers think about a different possibility and future for both America and her modern woman.

Keywords: Henry James; *The Bostonians*; the New Woman; America; Lesbianism

INTRODUCTION

In his novels, Henry James (1843-1916), as an observer of minds, explores the inner feelings of women, and the responses of his characters' minds to different events. Scofield believes that a recurring theme in James is "the changing nature of the modern (usually American) woman and the social attitudes that surrounded her" (2006, p. 80). *The Bostonians* (1886) has received less critical attention comparing it with such a work as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) that puts gender fixities of characters into question—the reader may be reminded of Isobel and the economic independence the author provides her with. As a matter of fact each Jamesian novel is a good site for exploring relationships as well as a new America, and peculiar to *The Bostonians* is the idea of reform and challenging the angelic roles of women as wife and mother.

The Bostonians is a typical realist, American novel of character that, being circumstantial with its habitual language, gives a picture of the 1870 Boston and America getting ready for a new look at man and particularly at the New Woman and the world. The novel seems like a challenge to the Bildungsroman as a male-centered form. It is well-known for its anti-feminism—Victorian feminism was "an extension of liberal individualism" (Stubbs 1979, p. 157)—and generally known as James's lesbian novel, for according to Innes, most critics agree on two points regarding a lesbian novel: "the author must be a lesbian," or "the central character or characters must be lesbian" (2002, p. 524). Alfred Habegger in his *Henry James, and the 'Woman Business'* refers to "a more enlightened sexual politics" (as cited in Taylor 2002, p.159) in the novel. James was concerned with women, especially young women who had considerable places in the eighteenth and

nineteenth century novels. In *The Bostonians* female characters have been given considerable place to express their freedom with the Victorian society and try to assert their independency. Critics believe that the novel also tries to show the destructive power of lesbianism, for James was against the idea of public woman: “don’t let us have women like that ... in the names of our homes, our children, our national honour” (as cited in Levander 1995, p. 490).

James’s ambiguous and ambivalent look towards the subject implies that it is very challenging to confirm James’s traditional view regarding the ideologically-established relationship between man and woman since he raises a challenging issue in his novel and that is the relationship between the Bostonians—Olive and Verena. The idea of Boston marriage implies his different look at the free woman though feminism is not explicit in the novel. James may not seem to be sincere regarding the status of the New Woman however, by making the reader think about the idea of the New Woman that he has located in the novel, he is definitely a pioneer of modernity and a contributor to the New Woman with a new sexual identity.

For Henry James, psychological matters were more important than socio-historical or even feminist ones. Kaye states that James remained “indifferent to the deeper origins of social conflicts and narrowed all such conflicts to the arena of individual character” (1999, p. 184) and “like E. M. Foster, James viewed character as the keystone of fiction” (Ibid., p.177). As a matter of fact, James does not delve into the social aspect of feminism, and deals mostly with the analysis of his characters, their inner conflicts as well as minds and emotions. James’s female characters are important for their inner consciousness that becomes superior to their outer lives. This study is an attempt to show if James was more on the traditional side of the argument or offered a novel way of looking at women. The following part provides the reader with a brief note on how women were viewed at James’s time, and the exploration of Olive’s, Verena’s and Basil’s characters will hopefully enrich the discussion.

James was a writer interested in both experimenting with artistic aspects of the novel and saying something about the American modern woman. By comparing Boston—associated with Olive—with New York in the novel, James introduces cultural differences. The American Boston represented by James is shown to be capable of new perspectives while keeping her traditional status. Whether the novel is a response to the emergence of lesbianism and the related physical-spiritual relations or not, James’s negative look at America is not difficult to be noticed: Boston was a hellish place for women; it was a “feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age” (*Bostonians*, p. 318). James’s Boston has the potential for a drastic change regarding women while James does not seem sure about the outcome. His view of women was shaped by sexist ideologies of his time as well as personal experiences. However, James recreates women’s image in his fiction by suggesting other roles women can play.

The nineteenth century had defined the respectable and modest woman as being not knowledgeable regarding sexual matters, thus ‘the New Woman’ was coined and was used for describing “women who had either won or were fighting for, a degree of equality and personal freedom” (Stubbs 1979, p. 54). Educated men would consider “female homosexual” as “threatening or deserving of punishment” (Gilbert and Gubar 1989, p. 222) and would fear women’s economic independence. Beard also suggests that “new female power produces male hysteria” (as cited in Tambling 2000, p. 118). Lesbianism or woman-woman friendship in which “the need for closeness and support merged with more intense demands for a love that was at the same time both emotional and sensual” (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, p. 14) was considered to be a kind of self-love, self-expression and revolt against men (patriarchy) or the traditional kind of love. James shows homosexuality to be typically American, and by

showing Basil's victory at the end seems to retain his conservatism and prefer a middle ground, and suggests that Olive's "desire is a threat to the heterosexual order" (Gilbert and Gubar 1988, p. 26).

However, suggestively, James shows a broken picture of the angel in the house which does not seem to be dominant in all his novels as Stubbs offers. James knew that women had the potential to be influential, and by showing both feminism and lesbianism in Olive's character conveys uneasiness to his readers. It is said that James was under the influence of his father's favouring sexual sociability for whom "the dissimilarity of the sexes was essential, a belief based on his reading of the biblical Eden story in which the fall was necessary for the gaining of spiritual maturity, and in which Eve, far from being demonized as the temptress responsible for Adam's expulsion from the garden, is man's savior" (Taylor 2002, p. 158). At that time feminism was associated with free woman and free sex and this kind of removal of boundary was what men feared. James's fictional contribution was to produce "distortions and caricatures of feminism" and try to "boost the old images of virgin, wife and mother" (Stubbs 1979, p. 141), for James could not remain untouched by the ideologies of his time.

Women's education and position in society were important and controversial topics at James's time. Not only James, but many others, under the influence of the Civil War, were afraid of whatsoever that would disrupt the order. That is why feminism was looked at as a threat to cultural and national identity, and James wanted to remain conservative in his anti-feminism. Lesbianism was regarded a challenge to phallogocentrism, and an indirect reference to insufficiency of men's authority and language. By showing lesbianism to be negative, men would prevent women from education since women's getting close to each other could mean an increase in their knowledge as well as weakening of heterosexuality.

Men were generally afraid of sex entering literature. By 1770 the act of reading novels had changed into "a fashion almost a mania—with 'upper-class' women." Rees names Miss Lydia in Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775) spending much time reading novels. Rees refers to Sir Anthony Absolute stating "a circulating library in a town is an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge" (1973, p. 106). The novel was women's preferable discourse as history was men's. Larzer Ziff states that James believed that "women, with their free use of leisure, were the chief consumers of novels and therefore were increasingly becoming producers of them." He continues that "the feminine attitude, now disengaging itself from that of men, was in point of fact coming to be all that the novel was" (1966, p. 275). The independent New Woman could cause literary impotency for men as she was changing from victim of social conditions to "victim of the universal passion for learning and 'culture'" (Stutfield 1895, p. 840). Although James was an appreciator of a writer like Edith Wharton, he considered literature that was associated with female readers and writers as a threat to "the standards of excellence associated with a traditional literary order" (Gilbert and Gubar 1988, p. 134). Miller believes that "no openly fictional form has ever sought to 'make a difference' in the world than the Victorian novel" which "confirm[s] the novel-reader in his identity as a 'liberal subject'" (1988, p. x). James's reply is noteworthy after receiving a copy of *The Troll Garden*: James expressed his abhorrence of "promiscuous fiction" coming from "the innocent hands of young females, young American females perhaps above all" (as cited in Sergeant 1963, p. 69).

James would also look at feminism as a complex and ambiguous phenomenon that would make some women manipulate others. It seemed more an excuse for women to express themselves not knowing what they are exactly after. Mrs. Farrinder is different from Olive and Verena—she emphasises equality, delivers speeches but is cold—which shows the

complexity of feminism and also being a threat for the sexist concept of the great chain of being. A look at how James has portrayed Olive, Verena and Basil will be insightful.

OLIVE THE NEW WOMAN OF THE NOVEL

The Bostonians is the story of a man and a woman's—Olive's—love for another woman. The New Woman of the novel is said to be a hater of men and the first lesbian protagonist in modern novels about whose responses the writer was not sure. The feminist Olive Chancellor is associated with the city of Boston and its new modes of living. Blair describes Olive as “a newly heroic figure of feminist passion through the agency of Ransome's perspective, itself derived from cultural models that insist on firm distinctions between high and low cultural forms” (Blair 2000, p. 165). Richardson believes a typical Jamesian fictional hero to be “universally sensitive ... to the sensuous impressions of life—to colors and odors and forms, and the myriad ineffable refinements and enticements of beauty” (1941, p. 14). Although James shows the strangeness of this revolutionary figure from others' perspective to guarantee reliability, Olive remains an unstable and complex figure who “had no figure” (*Bostonians*, p.17) and was morbid and pale. Olive is not sure about the cause she is following, and very generally feels concerned with the idea of unhappiness of women which results in a comic picture of her throughout the novel. James has provided her with financial security so that money has no significant role in her movements and decisions. Olive and Verena read history with the idea of “finding confirmation in it for this idea that their sex had suffered inexpressibly, and that at any moment in the course of human affairs the state of the world would have been so much less horrible (history seemed to them in every way horrible), if women had been able to press down the scale” (*Bostonians*, p. 153).

Olive feels incomplete which is why she is after another woman to compensate this lack. Together with Verena they form “a collective identity” (Mizruchi 1985, p. 202) hoping that they may challenge the Lacanian law of the father. Olive, the content, needs Verena to act as form/body and give her wholeness by acting as an alter ego. The unmarried Olive intends to find a voice through Verena, and make a new identity in a patriarchal society. Their same-sex bond puts conventional order in question and has a resisting potential to challenge isolation of women in a patriarchal society. Olive is not skillful at making speeches (she quivers when she intends to speak) and is not willing to speak herself. She says “oh dear, no, I can't speak; I have none of that sort of talent.” She continues “I have no self-possession, no eloquence; I can't put three words together. But I do want to contribute” (*Bostonians*, p. 36). James, by confirming women's place in phallogocentrism (lack of speech, silence, lack of voice and identity), shows himself a product of the ideological web of his time, for depriving Olive of voice means depriving her of strength, body and identity. Although James tries to show the ordinariness of the relation, he cannot evade the misspeak of the unique relation between the two women; a relation not found anywhere in the novel.

If the relation seems unreasonable it is because of the envy towards Verena's parents, and Olive's desire to dominate her both sexually and politically. James has tried to show Olive's interest in Verena to be an act of selfishness for promoting her cause. This implies that Olive is not really after women's cause but seems to be more after satisfying her dominating fantasy, as well as expressing herself through Verena. Olive's seeking lesbian bond with Verena is an attempt to challenge the male establishment by creating a new identity, union and a pure female body. From a Cixousist point of view Olive wants to put

herself “into the text [...] into the world and into history [...] by her own movement” (Warhol and Herndl 1997, p. 347).

Olive goes to extreme in her bond, however, it is her isolation that is emphasised by James. It seems that James portrays Olive’s and Verena’s love and interaction (that forms a new American identity) as a threat to the order and the traditional meaning of love. Despite this fact, it is noteworthy that James has introduced the idea of Bostonian marriage and has made his readers think about love between woman and woman. While critics like Nina Auerbach and Judith Fetterley in *Communities of Women: An idea in fiction* (1978) and *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1977) respectively believe that James’s view towards Olive is not really negative, a critic like Joyce Rowe believes that “Olive’s diatribes against male oppression prevent us from recognising the measure of truth they contain” (1998, p. 177). Olive’s contradictory nature is shown in her dislike of marriage, and her desire to have a relation with Verena. Olive tries to purchase Verena which signifies Olive’s consumer look at Verena (and perhaps women): Olive “wrote Mr. Tarrant a cheque for a very considerable amount. ‘Leave us alone—entirely alone—for a year, and then I’ll write you another’” (*Bostonians*, p. 154) and, not surprisingly, Mr. Tarrant who is different from Verena prefers the money. Selah Tarrant thinks of publicity and fame, and wishes to get into the newspapers. He, certainly, represents the discursively downward look at women shaped by other men of the age. James’s ironic tone provides the reader with the chance to evaluate the man-woman relationship.

VERENA: THE DEFENDER OF FEMINISM

Verena, the passionate character of the novel and representative of the American soul, is under Olive’s charm and has become like “a newly enlisted platform speaker for women’s rights” (Gilbert and Gubar 1988, p. 25). James shows her contradictory and complex, and she becomes the spokesperson of the feminist cause and lover of a man who disregards her feminist beliefs. This implies how much Verena who “has a singular hollowness of character” (*Bostonians*, p. 57) is the victim of social conventions.

Verena cannot remain untouched by the consumer gaze of the society where her body and beauty are more of attention than her speeches. She is submissive to the domineering Olive (and later on to Basil) and becomes a means in the hands of both Olive and Basil by whom each desires to manipulate and conquer the other in a battle of sexes. She becomes, in Stubbs’s words, “the centre of a tug-of-war between Olive and Basil” (1979, p. 169). Mrs. Luna, Olive’s sister, who is delightfully personal says “they don’t care a fig about poor Olive’s ideas; it’s only because Verena had strange hair, and shiny eyes, and gets herself up like a prestidigitator’s assistant” (*Bostonians*, p. 239). Cixous’s words are related: “Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering [...] she doesn’t “speak,” she throws her trembling body forward.” Cixous continues that “she lets go of herself. She flies; all of her passes into her voice and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the “logic” of her speech” (Warhol and Herndl 1997, p. 351).

Flannery in his book *Henry James: A Certain Illusion* mentions some views regarding the Verena-Olive relationship: “Verena is a tabula rasa figure distinguished by her capacity to please others.” Verena is said to be the “embodiment of caritas, of a complete and selfless love.” She is an innocent figure, a ““princess of fairy tale,’ as void of any cultural tradition” and Olive is “destroyed by Basil Ransome’s capture of Verena at the end” (2000, p. 64). Verena who becomes Olive’s political victory is also manipulated by her, and James’s

biographers have confirmed his dislike of manipulated women. He seemed worried about women finding power the result of which would be disruption of order and exploitation of other women. Verena wants to prove that “a woman could live persistently ... without the help of a man” (*Bostonians*, p. 39) and James shows the failure when Verena changes into a property in the hands of Basil. Again a misspeak appears and that is when the narrator tells the reader that “with the union [Basil and Verena’s marriage] into which she was about to enter, these were not the last tears she was destined to shed” (*Bostonians*, p. 433).

BASIL AND ANTI-FEMINISM

The anti-feminist Basil who seems to be James’s spokesman speaks for masculinity and represents an age dominated by a figure like Olive Chancellor in “a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age” (*Bostonians*, p. 318). Basil who represents nineteenth century view of gender roles and relations hates women’s ability and tendency for public life, and supports the domestically charming angel-in-the-house role of women. In Basil one can feel the anxiety regarding loss of power, identity, order and Eden. That is why Basil dislikes modernism and an age that diminishes masculinity, and prefers the ideologically-defined sexual oppression. As a “crazy character of the age” (*Bostonians*, p. 269), Basil is the revolutionary figure against democracy, modern conditions and specifically gender sameness.

Basil’s traditionalist look at gender roles is a Rousseauist look. He is after fame, power, identity and conquering women, which means that he needs to confirm his Rousseauist active role and, of course, Verena’s Rousseauist passivity and weakness. From his point of view women’s “business was simply to be provided for, practice the domestic virtues, and be charmingly grateful” (*Bostonians*, p. 186). Basil’s “boldness did not prevent him from thinking that women were essentially inferior to men” (*Bostonians*, p. 179). Basil’s Rousseauist look at women confirms them “in the realm of family life and the domestic affections” as “perfectly weak and second-rate” in a public role (*Bostonians*, p. 332). Basil’s hatred of women is obvious in the following line: “for our four fearful years of slaughter of course, you won’t deny that there the ladies were the great motive power” (*Bostonians*, p. 111). George Moor’s statement is also insightful that “every woman knows deep down in her heart that all her existence is comprised in man’s love of her” (Gilbert and Gubar 1989, pp. 221-22).

The conservative Basil who wishes to win Verena and confirm her identity as an angel in the house starts his battle with Olive which is a kind of cultural battle for America’s future and look at the New Woman. Basil’s desire is to have Verena for his wife as well as destroy Olive’s influence over her. Olive’s desire for Verena is her desire for “a voice,” and Basil’s is “bodily desire” that “aims to silence her voice” (Flannery 2000, p. 68). Basil also, like Olive, intends to become complete with Verena and confirm his masculine identity. That is the reason he envies Verena’s success, desires to have dominance over her, and dislikes her promotion as Judith Fetterley discusses in her *The Resisting Reader* (1977). This changes Basil’s look at Verena—she has been compared with Mme de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*—as a woman to a sexual object or commodity. Throughout the novel Verena’s power and ability are referred to however, she is manipulated by Basil who is the archetype of masculinity and “represents a powerful force” (Taylor 2002, p. 173).

Not surprisingly, Basil who is mesmerized by Verena’s spiritual and hidden powers falls in love with Verena Tarrant. It is noteworthy that Basil is coaxed toward social success, fame and profit. He desires to suppress Verena’s voice, and, by encouraging her domesticity,

confirm his identity in the hierarchy and, finally, win over Olive. The manipulative and self-confident Basil desires to find “a way to strike her [Verena] dumb” (*Bostonians*, p. 306) so that he can have her “for something divinely different—for privacy, for him, for love” (*Bostonians*, p. 249). For Basil “Verena’s ideas” are “alienable from Verena’s body” (Thomas 1992, p. 725).

Symbolically, the victorious Basil who favours the traditional concept of marriage becomes the hero who saves or rescues Verena by marrying her. Taylor (2002) refers to Charles R. Anderson’s reading of the novel as a ‘fable championing the institution of marriage’ and lauding “Basil’s decisive final action” (p. 162). The realist James prevents disorder by putting everything back in its right place and associating order with heterosexuality. Although James restores order, he, ironically, makes his readers think about a different type of human bond which seems a drastic change in look and opinion. This resistance to convention is enough to make James a pioneer in helping readers imagine America’s New Woman.

By knowing Olive, Basil intends to keep certain binaries like voice/silence, male/female, subject/object, active/passive, freedom/slavery and South/North. His project is “the displacement of his lost authority as a Southern man over the slave on the New England woman” (Taylor 2002, p. 160). Basil’s confrontation with Verena is the confrontation between South and North. Moreover, Basil’s war with Olive is the war between South and North, thus he can best be described as “Southern hostility to Feminism [...] a reactionary object to feminist goals” (Davis 1979, p. 574). The Jamesian look in Basil confirms the idea that an educated man must stand against “an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy,” (*Bostonians*, p. 318) for Basil associates femininity with emptiness, evil and false sensibility. A misspeak appears here. The reader may be reminded of Rosa Coldfield one of the narrators in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom* who associates Thomas Sutpen with South, slavery and immorality: “It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—[...] came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land [...]” (Faulkner 1990, p. 5). Rosa concludes that the decline of the South was due to its system of enslaving another race. Rosa sees the decline as the result of the cruelty of such immoral men as Sutpen: “know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth” (*Absalom*, p. 6). This implies that although James sticks to his traditionalist beliefs, he cannot evade the misspeaks that appear in the novel. James, on the one hand, does not seem certain about the future of such long-held beliefs and on the other sees America’s potentiality for big changes in attitude. As a writer who has probably presented lesbianism in his novel, James has provided his readers with the chance to think about different and sometimes strange alternatives.

CONCLUSION

The ironic tone, habitual language and lexical precision in James have made the style of his writings unique. Pizer states that James’s novels are known for “striking patterns of symbolic imagery and structure and currents of irony and ambiguity that make them suitable for formalistic analyses” (1999, p. 11). *The Bostonians* is not merely the story of Olive or Basil but a worldly one made on James’s return of the repressed regarding the fate and future of America as well as the destructive influence of socio-political issues on human bonding. James is an innovator for having projected a new identity or a new American identity. By the way he concludes the novel, by leaving Olive in isolation, and by showing Basil with no

answer for what women that are not wives or mothers should tend to do, James proves himself a product of the complex discursive web of his times.

The novel explores James's anxiety over excessiveness by showing the three characters in extreme: Olive in winning Verena; Verena the real victim of American excessiveness in speaking for feminism; and Basil in conquering Olive and winning Verena which would "represent his own success" and "symbolise his victory" (*Bostonians*, p. 382). James's reaction to feminism is "prompted not only by masculine fear but also by an anxiety that the United States, already divided in two, is on the point of splintering into hundreds of tiny pieces" (Morse 1989, p. 139). As a social construction, James shows his fear of the destructive nature of women; however, this does not keep him from showing his resistance which comes in the form of his contribution to the notion of the New Woman.

James adopts an anti-feminist stance in the novel and ends it with the peaceful orthodoxical reunion of a male and a female which can be read as a warning against American life becoming feminine. James does not show himself to be as much interested in women's rights as in their inner feelings. In the novel feminism is not as important as public life and this implies that women are not precisely aware of what they need. James called the feminist cause the "disinterested tradition" of Boston (1907, p. 255), nevertheless, what seems modern in James is that women can challenge nineteenth century patriarchal expectations of women though not in an organised and systematic way. Perhaps James wanted to promote their cause and imply that if women were not aware of all the aspects of the cause, they would remain victims of patriarchy. This does not mean that James intended to write a lesbian novel but an American one where he could lament a more heroic and ordered past and show his concern about an age in decline as well as changes that may not end in happiness, or show change for a better economic status for women. James's ambiguity is kept in both Basil's and Olive's dissatisfaction with the age: they "both see [...] a lack of masculinity" (Tambling 2000, p. 60). Nevertheless James's experiences turned into fiction throw significant influences upon minds that are ready to imagine a different America.

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