

Henry James

The author and his work



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Henry James was born in America, but lived much of his life in Europe. He was always very aware of being an outsider – a person living outside his own country. Many of his major novels and stories contain American characters in a European setting. James was fascinated by the differences in behaviour between people from America (the New World) and Europe (the Old World). So he often wrote about their relationships, and how they interacted with each other.

James was born on April 15th, 1843, in New York City into a wealthy family. Much of his childhood was spent travelling with his family between America and Europe. He studied with tutors in Geneva, London, Paris and Bonn. At the age of nineteen, he attended Harvard Law School for a short time, but he soon left. He much preferred writing fiction and reading to studying law. In 1864, he published his first short story, *A Tragedy of Error*, and from then on became a professional writer. James wrote a huge number of works, including novels, short stories, plays, travel books, non-fiction essays, biographies and autobiographies. He wrote 22 novels and 112 stories. His two most famous stories are *The Portrait of a Lady* and the shorter novel, *The Turn of the Screw*.

James never married. He seemed to be attracted equally to men and women, and had friends of both sexes. In 1899 James met the American sculptor Hendrik Christian Anderson in Rome. At the time of their meeting, James was fifty-six and Anderson was twenty-seven. James and wrote many loving letters to Anderson. James loved writing letters, and wrote letters of great affection to both his male and female friends. Many of his close friendships lasted for many years. He was a sociable person who enjoyed the company of other people. Although he was not rich himself, he was often invited to stay at the homes of the rich and famous.

James moved permanently to England in 1876. He lived in London for a number of years, then moved to the small town of Rye, on the east Sussex coast. He lived in a beautiful historic house called Lamb House, situated on the top of a hill, with a lovely garden. James was very happy living in Lamb House. However, he continued to go back to America from time to time. When the First World War broke out in 1914, James was very shocked. At that time, America did not want to support Britain in the war. But James wanted to show his loyalty to Britain, so in 1915 he became a British subject. However, shortly after this he died, on December 2nd, 1915.

James's first serious novel, *Roderick Hudson*, was published in 1875. As in *Daisy Miller*, most of the characters in the story are Americans in Europe. James's next book, *The American*, (1877) follows a similar theme. It is about the adventures of an American businessman in Europe. However, James did not set all his novels in Europe. In 1880, his novel *Washington Square* was published, which is set in New York and is about the relationship between a father and daughter. The daughter has found the man of her dreams, but her father is against the marriage. This was followed by *The Portrait of a Lady*, in 1881. James set this novel mostly in the Italian city of Venice. It is about a young American woman who suddenly becomes very rich, and travels to Europe to learn more about herself. In the story, James again focuses on the differences between people in the New World and the Old.

In the 1880s, James started writing stories with political themes, like *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). At the same time, he started writing plays. He very much wanted to be a playwright, but he was never successful. He wrote about twelve plays, but most of them were never produced. After 1895, when one of his plays failed in its opening night, James returned to writing fiction. He wrote three major novels, which were published just after the beginning of the twentieth century. The first was *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). It is about a rich young American girl who has a serious illness, and a young British woman who is hoping to make money so that she and her journalist boyfriend can become rich. The second major novel was *The Ambassadors* (1903), which again follows the theme of an American in Europe. The third major novel was *The Golden Bowl* (1904), which is about marriage, and the relationships of a father and his daughter.

James wrote a large number of shorter stories, which some people find easier to read than his long novels. The most famous is *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). This is a ghost story about a governess in charge

of two young children, who keeps seeing the ghost of the previous governess in the house where she works. James also wrote works of non-fiction like the essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884). He was one of the great letter-writers of his age, and wrote over ten thousand personal letters. Some of the people he wrote to were other famous writers, such as Robert Louis Stevenson (author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*) and Joseph Conrad (author of *Heart of Darkness*).

James's work has not always been popular with literary critics. After his death, some critics said that James's style of writing was very difficult. They thought that his sentences were too long and his language was too formal. Other critics, like the writer E. M. Forster, thought that James did not deal openly enough with writing about sex. But James is a great writer because he analyses situations very well. He creates very strong plots and can make us believe in his characters. Many films have been made of James's novels because of his ability to create excellent stories.

A selection of works by Henry James

Novels

- 1875 *Roderick Hudson*
- 1877 *The American*
- 1878 *Daisy Miller*
- 1878 *The Europeans*
- 1880 *Washington Square*
- 1881 *The Portrait of a Lady*
- 1886 *The Bostonians*
- 1886 *The Princess Casamassima*
- 1902 *The Wings of the Dove*
- 1903 *The Ambassadors*
- 1904 *The Golden Bowl*
- 1917 *The Ivory Tower* (unfinished)
- 1917 *The Sense of the Past* (unfinished)

Novellas (short novels)

- 1888 *The Aspern Papers*
- 1888 *A London Life*
- 1898 *The Turn of the Screw*
- 1900 *Mrs Medwin*
- 1903 *The Beast in the Jungle*
- 1908 *The Jolly Corner*

Travel writings

- 1884 *A Little Tour in France*
- 1905 *English Hours*
- 1907 *The American Scene*
- 1909 *Italian Hours*

Literary criticism

- 1878 *French Poets and Novelists*
- 1879 *Hawthorne*
- 1888 *Partial Portraits*
- 1893 *Essays in London and Elsewhere*

Autobiography

- 1913 *A Small Boy and Others*
- 1914 *Notes of a Son and Brother*
- 1917 *The Middle Years* (unfinished)

Films and TV films

- 1996 *The Portrait of a Lady*
Directed by Jane Campion
Starring Nicole Kidman, John Malkovich and Viggo Mortensen
- 1997 *The Wings of the Dove*
Directed by Iain Softley
Starring Helena Bonham-Carter, Linus Roache and Alison Elliott
- 1997 *Washington Square*
Directed by Agnieszka Holland
Starring Jennifer Jason Leigh, Albert Finney, Maggie Smith and Ben Chaplin
- 1999 (TV) *The Turn of the Screw*
Directed by Ben Bolt
Starring Jodhi May, Pam Ferris and Colin Firth

(For a list of Henry James's stories that have been simplified for the Macmillan Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)