Epistemological Purity and the Experience of Vision in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*

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Abstract
It is stating the obvious that What Maisie Knew *is considered one of Henry James's least successful undertakings as a novel, but it is undeniable that his novel is a fascinating experiment with form, symmetry, narrative voices, and focalization. This paper claims that despite Maisie's role of being a victim because of her parents' divorce, she eventually manages to surmount the complexities of the epistemological and moral confusion with which she is grappling as a young child. In support of this argument, the paper concludes that Maisie's moral vision expands as she experiences the world around her and builds her own individualistic way of seeing the confluence of egoistic and uncaring human attitudes. One thing that she learns as the novel comes to its end is that the child's loss of "epistemological purity" (Bell, 1991, p. 248) will not prevent her from becoming an independent agent capable of making her own moral choice. The novel's open-endedness is not uncharacteristic of James, who always found a suitable (non)resolution for his characters to embark upon a journey of a new understanding in quest of self-expression, and moral and epistemological growth. In his novel, James experiments with form, symmetry, modes of expression, narrative voices, perspectives, and focalization, all of which can only be fully comprehended if Maisie's vision represents much more than her longing to fly out of her suffocating parental nest.*

Keywords: vision, epistemology, innocence, narrative voices, focalization.

Henry James gained creative inspiration to commit himself to the writing of *What Maisie Knew* (1897) after his ponderous religious play *Guy Domville* (1895) had evolved into a gargantuan fiasco at its premiere. In spite of the failure that James suffered as a playwright that night (so much so that he even fled his own play to watch Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* only to return to his curtain call to be painfully jeered), the author's interest in performance and theatricality rose to prominence in many of his novels to follow (Haralson & Johnson 2009: 461). Understandably, he managed to turn his flopperoo around into the well-deserved success which he continued discovering as a novelist, or as Conrad (1916) referred to him, a supreme "historian of fine consciences" (589). Theatricality, though often left unnoticed by critics in the Jamesian scholarship, serves as an important structuring principle in *What Maisie Knew*, a novel which helps trace the eponymous hero's evolution from a powerless and impressionable child, subservient to the whims and fancies of her oppressive environment, to an all-knowing free moral agent. Once the reader is informed that the "child has been provided for," Maisie is perched in her stall as if "the whole performance had been given for her — a mite of a half-sacred infant in a great dim theatre" (21)[1], and she is instantaneously defined as the novel's central eye.

This paper will argue that despite Maisie's role of being "the little feathered shuttlecock […] flying between" (24) her divorced parents from one situation into another, she eventually succeeds in orienting herself amidst the epistemological and moral confusions with which she is grappling as a young child. In support of my argument, I shall claim that Maisie's moral vision expands as she experiences the world around her and builds her own idiosyncratic way of seeing the confluence of egoistic and uncaring human attitudes. One thing that she learns as the novel comes to its end is that the child's loss of "epistemological purity" (Bell 1991: 248) will not prevent her from becoming an independent agent capable of making her own moral choice. Vision, through Maisie as the novel's central consciousness, is a thematic principle that provides a coherent framework for the novel, the meanings of which none other than the child is able to assemble into an organic whole from a multitude of impressions her mind receives through the jumbled interpersonal relations surrounding her.

1

Maisie's evolution is what the title intimates with its spurious use of the past tense, leading the reader down the garden path by raising a spark of hope that one is presented with an answerable epistemological problem found elsewhere of the great tradition of coming-of-age novel, practitioners of which were Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and many others. Yet, the title promises more than it can undertake, and the puzzling thinness of its action, narrated in thirty-one lengthy chapters, provides neither fulfilment nor solace for those searching for an answer to what Maisie actually knew at the novel's nonresolution that is so typical of the realist James.[2] The novel, disguised as an emblematic example of a Bildungsroman at the outset, deviates from the conventions of the subgenre in that its goal is to give Maisie the maturity she yearns to accomplish; however, just before she makes her decisive choice to stay with Mrs. Wix, one might only speculate whether the girl's future remains precarious or she succeeds in exercising her willpower as an autonomous human being, early traits of which emerge in the crucial closing chapter. In his introduction to the novel, Adrian Poole (1996) calls attention to the scope and extent of how Maisie's story varies from the generic attributes of the Bildungsroman:

> The child travels towards the adult but does not cross the frontier. In this respect the novel bears comparison with the masterpiece of James's slightly older contemporary, Mark Twain, *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and even with that other class of boy's story a younger contemporary, Kipling's *Kim* (1901).
>
> (viii)

Contrary to the hallmarks of the coming-of-age novel, Maisie, who is at the cusp of her parents' divorce, is neither ready to espouse the values of her decayed society, represented by a cohort of bickering and insensible characters, such as her biological parents, a hysterical Ida and a conniving Beale, nor is she ultimately accepted into her society as an individual with a life of her own. As the novel closes and Mrs. Wix expresses her continued "wonder at what Maisie knew" (248), the child, who has become somewhat older and wiser since the beginning, is no longer regarded as someone only experiencing the vices of the ruthless world of adults and all its paraphernalia that she had been unable to comprehend as a child. Maisie's only responsibility

throughout the novel is degraded to that of a mere catalyst and a repository of animosity and invectives between her divorced parents. In James's long preface to the novel, he acknowledges that Maisie is but a "ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed" (6). Adrian Poole (1996) locates metaphorical value in Maisie as he garners further designations which are used in reference to the child. In Chapter 2, the narrator comments how Ida unleashes her vituperations on her former husband through Maisie:

> The objurgation for instance launched in the carriage by her mother after she had at her father's bidding punctually performed was a missive that *dropped into her memory with the dry rattle of a letter falling into a pillar-box*.
>
> (24, emphasis added)

This association of Maisie with empty vessels at a metaphorical level (as interpreted by cognitive linguists in particular) also shows that the child is capable of receiving all the impressions through careful observation and meticulous attention to her nearest surroundings. Akin to the preponderating part of his oeuvre, James attempts to make Maisie function as a representation of life through her own experiences, which implies that the child must progress her *internal vision* before reaching a new phase of understanding, leading to the impairment of what Millicent Bell (1991) calls "epistemological purity" (248). However, this understanding comes at a price: as Maisie develops her awareness by "see[ing] much more than she at first understood" (21), she feels increasingly inclined to build "a protective armor against the thoughtless cruelty of the adult world" (Shine 1969: 110). James's interest to make Maisie a sophisticated observer, whose ability to create her own reality from the material of lived experience, does more justice to the novel than any verbal representation could ever achieve. Galbraith (1989) makes a compelling point when she contends that instead of "reproducing a character's language," James resorts to the "metaphorical representation of speech" to capture the "force of a character's argument" (200). Such a "force" can be sensed when something nearly revelatory or hard-to-grasp from a child's perspective occurs in the novel. In this context, it seems pertinent at this juncture to quote what Walter Pater denotes as "beatific vision" in his philosophical novel, *Marius the Epicurean*:

> From that maxim of *Life as the end of life*, followed, as a practical consequence, the desirableness of refining all the instruments of inward and outward intuition, of developing all their capacities, of testing and exercising one's self in them, till one's whole nature became *one complex medium of reception*, towards the vision-the "beatific vision," if we really cared to make it such-of our actual experience in the world.
>
> (1973: 142, italics in the original)

To my mind, Maisie is not only a recipient of novel impressions due to her dysfunctional familial relations, which she only strives to comprehend with the faculty of a child, but she also functions (both literally and figuratively) as "one complex medium of reception" (Pater 1973: 140). Muriel Shine (1969) assumes that the child's consciousness to become the novel's "unmediated center" (110) is of vital importance as regards the aesthetic form, that is to say, how the story is narrated and what the reader can make of it. In his seminal essay, "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James writes that "a novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct

impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression" (James 1956: 50). What this means is that the quality of a novel depends on the acuteness of the observer; as a result, the novelist's task is to search the length and breadth of his work of art for lived experience. To James, what best defines fiction is its ability to have "a conscious moral purpose" (1956: 52), and only experience and observation as creative tools can surpass imagination. Aladár Sarbu (2006) innovatively reads James as Pater's steadfast disciple by asserting that "Pater's sensualism and solipsism are clearly at work in Henry James's concept of the novel" (165). Sarbu's claim that "there is no way of reliably comparing our sense-impressions with those of other people" can be read as an implication that Pater's "epistemological premises" anticipate ideas of phenomenological theory (2006: 165). Maisie serves as an illustrative example of being "confined to the prison of self" (165), an idea that has been extensively elaborated by Paul B. Armstrong in his analyses of James's moral vision.

2

James is often identified as a purveyor of a unique trend of psychological realism which Maisie and most other main characters possess. James's pursuit is always to look behind the material surface of reality by evincing a keen interest in psychological and aesthetic depths (Bollobás 2006: 236, my translation). This fittingly applies to *What Maisie Knew*, where the child's vision is utilized as an ideal medium to collect all the self-impressions in her morally, epistemologically, and existentially expanding world, which is capable of accommodating "two fathers, two mothers and two homes, six protections in all" (78); similarly, she is saddled with a faculty to find her way out of an endless maze with no apparent exits. It seems obvious to the reader after the first ten or so chapters that Maisie's name evokes a labyrinthine, or rather, *mazy* structure, which is congruous with James's convoluted yet suggestive syntax. The novel itself offers the author the opportunity to experiment with representations of consciousness, something that anticipates his much bolder later style. Indeed, Maisie's psychological depth — inconsistent and spontaneous as it is in a child's ever-changing modes of perception — allows the author to make his heroine stand at the "ironic centre" (7) of the Jamesian novel. His descriptions of manors, gardens, social gatherings, and natural sceneries generally function as ideal backdrops to help him represent his characters' minds. Instead of opting for one single scene that projects Maisie's trains of thoughts, it is the novel as a whole that produces a similar effect. Poole (1996) writes that "*Maisie* is a novel that keeps changing its rules as it goes along. One kind of scene meets into something quite different; characters imagined in one idiom give way to characters created in another" (xi). As scenes morph into one another with the same juggernaut force as Maisie is thrown as a "tennis ball" (8) among parents, governesses, and stepparents, the assumption gains immediate "currency" that the "suppleness in the play of voices, the sequence of tones, the shuffling of space and time" (Poole 1996: vii) are intrinsically modernist techniques used extravagantly later in twentieth-century Anglo-American literature.[3] While Poole is a vigilant observer in arguing that Maisie's mind is analogous to how the text is constructed, James's innovations in the novel, most evidently in his stylistic prose experiments, clearly register an effect on later modernist art, especially on how the story is recounted from a narratological point of view. And it is James's ingenious mode of narrating the story of a divorce

through a “young intelligence” (21) that also allows the reader to extract more (in terms of knowledge) from the novel than the child through her limited prism of understanding.

In earlier works of criticism, focalization stood out as one of the most fundamental elements of the Jamesian oeuvre. In *What Maisie Knew*, James uses a limited omniscient narrator, whose position is fixed in the novel; in other words, “one and the same character provides the focus throughout” (Sarbu 2006: 249). The focalizer here is Maisie, who is lost, victimized, and objectified by her cruel environment which renders her a speechless observer: her sustained “exchange of silences” (6) just before leaving for England in Chapter 33 signifies that her attainment of knowledge leaves her moral purity unscathed amidst the immoral machinations of the adult world, where corruption is best defined as a synonym for verbal language. It might be stating the obvious that the novel’s narration is left completely at the mercy of “a narrator, who is superior to the action, who is typically witty, quick with a paradox, and frequently arch” (Klein 2006: 139). Having a narrator in control of the story straightaway answers the question of “who speaks?” but leaves the reader in the novel’s ill-lit foyer, where Maisie’s blurred vision conceals more than it reveals. Let us not forget that Maisie’s role, as it is set out in the opening chapter, is primarily to act as the spectator of a confusing domestic theater, which she *sees* and *registers* but fails to *understand*. Armstrong (1978) remarks in his phenomenological reading of the novel that Maisie’s “unsettling unpredictability” is what makes her “construction of meaning seem futile without assurances about continuity with the future” (519). In grappling with her own limitations as a seer, Maisie finds herself entrapped in “the prison of ambiguity” (Armstrong 1978: 520), which she occupies as an epistemologically pure child. In registering sense-impressions, Maisie is shown to share some affinities with James’s real-life amanuenses—his preferred word for a secretary or a literary assistant—who would typewrite the author’s dictation of the story with the help of a melodiously clicking Remington (Schilleman 2013: 14).

It is through Maisie’s limited narrative focus that readers learn about the gradually unfolding events. Central as her seeing eye might be in digesting (or rather, ingesting) the course of actions, one must not be misled by the impression that the novel’s third-person narration establishes her role differently from the speaking voice, which, as Marcia Jacobson (1983) claims, clearly belongs to James. In her reading of innocence as an object of historical interest, the commentator points out that “James blurs [Maisie’s] vision with his own” (114). Evidently, any adult reader has the edge on Maisie’s limited perception in terms of knowing what is happening around her. Where Maisie only notices a strange gesture between the characters, the reader’s sharpened awareness that the gesture is an erotic innuendo would be a sobering experience for a child. On a side note, it stands to reason to identify James’s novel as a typical example of what Roland Barthes (1970) famously calls a “writerly” text, which makes demands on the reader, who must work hard to extract meaning from the text as a producer. In his excellent analysis of narrative voices in the Jamesian novel, Richard Aczel (1998) highlights that James’s text “draw[s] attention to [its] self-consciously writerly character […] foregrounding the narrator not as an abstracting, interpreting, or communicatively subversive function, but as manifest stylist, orator, or *ethos* in the Aristotelian sense of the term” (472). On a different register, however, it would be a misconception to classify Maisie as an emblematic “consumer” of the events, as she painstakingly aims at congealing the fragments of her vision into an organic

whole. One of the alluring effects that the novel creates is owing to the distinction between the child's vision and the interpretation provided by adults. The narrator's erudition, choice of words, linguistic bravura, and convoluted syntax are a clear indication that the narrator is not a child.[4] In making all these observations, one might not be amiss to consider James at his most radical in his attempts to prove that mistaking the narrator and the focalizer is indeed a mistake—and an unpardonable one at that. Aladár Sarbu (1981) correctly points out that "[t]he narrator and the focalizer, Maisie, represent varying degrees of experience as well as mental and psychological development" (118). He adds that Maisie does not occupy an active role in the novel. This also implies that the romance between Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale, the initiation of which ("You brought us together!" exclaims Sir Claude in joy) is attributed to Maisie as an executor. In reality, however, Sir Claude's interjection only suggests that Maisie served as a pretext for the two adults to meet. As far as the novel's narration is concerned, it would have been unlikely for James to create a character who is noticeably different from him (Bollobás 2006: 246).[5]

Granting pardon to her uncaring environment proves to be challenging for Maisie, as it is the "death of her childhood" (7) that indirectly led to her maturation, which is coreferential to the developed moral vision she eventually attains. Throughout the novel, Maisie is subjected to malicious name-calling by nearly everyone who thinks of her as a powerless child without the fundamental ability to speak for herself. This is one of the faculties she should learn to possess in order to process the overwhelming number of impressions in a world of nonchalant adults. Robert B. Pippin (2008) is correct in pointing out that "the five adults in charge of her care are each speaking rather grotesquely only for themselves" (121). Every time she utters her ubiquitous "I don't know," Maisie leaves room for her environment to use and abuse her by assuming vehicular role in a series of malicious adult games: "She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, *she began to be called a little idiot*, she tasted a pleasure new and keen" (25).

Even Mrs. Wix, with whom Maisie chooses to stay at the novel's closure, talks to her with condescension by calling her a "[p]oor little monkey" (18). Name-calling must have been one of the novel's most noticeable aspects for contemporary readers, who were used to the widespread idolization of children in literary works during the Victorian era. Marcus Klein (2006) asserts that "[w]ith its little heroine, forefronted by the giving of her nice name to the title, the novel promises to be an episode in what was at the time the immensely popular mode of children's literature" (135). Yet, Klein is wide of the mark by demoting Maisie to what he calls a "type" with her contemporaries emerging in the novel as "implied shades" (137). To my mind, Maisie is the novel's only genuine character whose constant exposure to the moral squalor of adulthood sends her off on a quest of self-knowledge and an existence of its own right. Her silence and feigned acquiescence to her incessant ill-treatment make her occupy a vantage point whence she can launch her fearful campaign of "wordless knowing" (Bell 1991: 245) on a nefarious world dominated by the verbal language of adults. On a side note, it might be interesting to note that James, who either satirized the topic of marriage or offered contemptuous critique of it in light of the blatant social problems of his time, used the notion of marriage in *What Maisie Knew* as a denunciation of the Victorian family's obsession with social hierarchy rather than genuine emotions.

3

Maisie's oppressive environment is composed of mere rhetoricians who are as static and insensible as theatrical props on a stage. It is the exceptional value of silence in her tawdry milieu of a loud mother, a calculating father, and a holier-than-thou governess that allows her to intratextually join forces with other Jamesian female heroes, the most silent of whom is *Washington Square*'s Catherine Sloper, who challenges male authority by serving vengeance on a world of rhetoric *not* with the weapon of audible utterances but with her weapon of frustrating silence. In one way or another, it is the female protagonist of this early short novel that may have anticipated a series of other characters in James's forthcoming works of his late period. While Maisie's tongue is literally tied in the hurly-burly of *fin-de-siècle* London, she comes across as a dreamer with a vivid imagination, which she uses to channel her vision of self-knowledge and morality in a world marred by hostility and anger (no wonder her family name, Far*ange* carries a bit of this anger). W. A. Merle (1993) correctly posits that "the novel gives prominence to the individual […], while society functions largely as a contextualizing backdrop" (33): it features the child's dysfunctional family consisting of hackneyed "flat" characters according to E. M. Forster's designation. Maisie's wonderment of her surroundings is portrayed in a similar vein to that of a story-book world. It seems worthwhile at this point to quote a lengthy passage of the innocence and awe with which Maisie captures images and echoes of her (nightmarish) fairy-tale:

> Preoccupied, however, as Maisie was with the idea of the sentiment Sir Claude had inspired, and familiar, in addition, by Mrs. Wix's anecdotes, with the ravages that in general such a sentiment could produce, she was able to make allowances for her ladyship's remarkable appearance, her violent splendour, the wonderful colour of her lips and even the hard stare, *the stare of some gorgeous idol described in a story-book*, that had come into her eyes in consequence of a curious thickening of their already rich circumference.
>
> (62, emphasis added)

Maisie relies on her "imaginative agility" to make sense of the world around her, and by doing so, she is able to engage in the constructive act of a young genius, whose silent rhetoric is inextricably linked to her faculty to "reflect on the unreflected" (Armstrong 1978: 520). James notes in the preface that Maisie's mind works in mysterious ways because whenever she starts wondering, "they [the objects] begin to have meanings, aspects, solidities, connexions — connexions with the "universal!" (8). The child's unbridled imagination functions at its best when she talks to Lisette, her doll, so as to search for a moment of lucidity if her circumstances outgrow her general understanding:

> Little by little, however, she understood more, for it befell that she was enlightened by. Lisette's questions, which reproduced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in

> the very darkness of Lisette. Was she not herself convulsed by such innocence? In the presence of it she often imitated the shrieking ladies.
>
> (37)

It seems sound to posit that James's narrator routes his vision through Maisie in a similar way to how she attempts to project her ambiguity, fears, and anxiety onto the doll. James's inclusion of the story-book element is the result of careful methodical planning. On the one hand, readers devoured the fairy tales of Ruskin, Thackeray, Wilde, and Charles Kingsley during the Victorian era which also positioned the author on the threshold of literary modernism with a slight inclination toward the more conventional Victorian systems of motifs and topoi. On the other hand, James enables Maisie to espouse the art of world construction which can only be achieved through her creative gift of "exploiting her apparent safety by constructing a bridge between her world with Sir Claude and her world with the Captain" (Armstrong 1978: 522). It gradually transpires that both Maisie and Mrs. Wix are storytellers in their own humble ways. In Chapter 19, just as Maisie is leaving the house after her encounter with the Countess, the narrator says that

> the sound was commanding: the cab rattled off. Maisie sat there with her hand full of coin. All that for a cab? As they passed a street-lamp she bent to see how much. What she saw was a cluster of sovereigns. There *must* then have been great interests in America. *It was still at any rate the Arabian Nights*.
>
> (141, emphasis added)

In this passage, the Arabesque reference to the fairy-tale, Maisie figures that the lady who lives in such a luxury must be radiantly beautiful. Upon meeting the repulsive Countess, she is abysmally confused and frightened by such a repugnant companion to the man who had earlier married two beautiful women. Here, the narrator's allusion to the *Arabian Nights* allows the reader to sense that this version of the *Arabian Nights* abounds in heated eroticism, lust, deceptiveness and greed. It seems improbable that Maisie's otherwise fine mind was able to capture the full essence of the text's Arabesque innuendo. For her, the fairy-tale aspects of the tale must have lain in her preconceived idea of beauty and its complete absence in the case of the unappealing Countess.

Albeit a daydreaming romantic at heart, Maisie is amorously attached to Sir Claude and possesses the perspicacity of a poor fairy-tale heroine, whose traditional role is to use her charms to conquer the heart of her coveted prince. And Maisie realizes in the cold light of day that she is *also* capable of responding to her devious parents with a considerable degree of sharpness. Chapter 19 sheds light on Maisie's exceptional wit: Beale informs her that he plans to move to America with the Countess and inquires with Maisie if she is willing to join them. Halfway through their conversation, Maisie realizes that her father is in fact trying to dissuade her from going with them while still having the deceptive countenance of a caring father. When Maisie confirms her readiness to travel with them (in fact, a clever gimmick on her part), Beale makes a grimace and leaves the discussion uninterpreted. Maisie clearly understands that her father would not like her to go with them, and upon the Countess's arrival she has a growing desire to leave.

Her impetuous reaction is seen as a sign of coming to terms with the novel's harrowing reality by presenting "a sharpened sense of latent meanings" (170).

Klein (2006) claims that Maisie's victimizers are "stock figures" (141), whose self-indulging and hedonistic behaviors introduce them as bearers of an assortment of deplorable modern values. As such, it is not incorrect to see them through a postmodernist lens as largely interchangeable characters with cotton-padded bodies who refuse to evince even a modicum of interest in Maisie's pathos. Aladár Sarbu (1981) convincingly argues that Maisie's gradual intellectual development sets the novel's direction as Maisie (mingling with adults who play their own roles) learns how to wear a mask and be a hypocrite (117). He refers to one important scene where Maisie, who has by now acquired the art of playing make-believe, is confronted with her mother's alleged sickness and responds to it in a manner that clearly resembles an artistic performance. I agree with Sarbu (1981) that "the girl is mature enough not to take the lies of the adult world for granted, but she is still a child in her ability to voice her independence" (116). The passage in which Maisie's hypocrisy takes central stage is worth quoting:

> This for a minute struck Maisie as but a part of the conversation; at the end of which time she became aware that it ought to strike her — though it apparently didn't strike Sir Claude — as a part of something graver. It helped her to twist nearer. "*Ill, mamma—really ill*?"
> (152, emphasis added)

It would be hard to dismiss the fact that Maisie's role-play runs counter to her romanticized and fictitious way of imagining events and interpersonal relationships. James's reference to a "story-book world" (59) in Chapter 9 discloses more than Maisie's fascination with tales of the imagination and their projections with real-life scenarios. The fact that she learns how to resort to her world-constructing ability whenever she is confronted with a confounding situation makes her occupy a place similar to the intradiegetic locus of a focalizer who is engaged in the telling of an embedded narrative. These inner workings of Maisie's imagination within her narratives reveal much about Maisie's continuously broadening mind, but they also have a symbolic and psychological significance for the characters in the outer story, or rather, the light in which the reader sees them. Certainly, less valiant, moral, caring or charismatic than Maisie portrays them in the distorted mirror she holds up to their objective reality. Armstrong (1978) notes that "Maisie makes a guess about hidden sides in her extravagant, imaginative interpretation of the Captain as her mother's knight in shining armor" (521). Furthermore, Maisie derives creative inspiration of weaving her own story when she draws a parallel between how the Captain is saving Ida and Sir Claude is rescuing her in a scene that resembles the fearless act of Prince Charming. In a similar vein, Maisie is literally charmed by catching sight of Sir Claude's photo before physically encountering him. The scene that unfolds is nearly phantasmagoric, but fable-like at best, in providing *vision* of Sir Claude-as-Prince that further awakens the child's interest in the young man:

> Mrs. Farange, in the candour of new-found happiness, had enclosed a "cabinet" photograph of Sir Claude, and Maisie lost herself in admiration of the fair smooth face, the regular features, the kind eyes, the amiable air, the general glossiness and smartness of her

> prospective stepfather—only vaguely puzzled to suppose herself now with two fathers at once.
>
> (46)

Here, James gives Maisie a fragmentary vision of what is yet to come, but he also uses irony to affix in Maisie's mind the image of this charming man as her prospective stepfather. Her ability to travel mentally through imagined landscapes and scenarios ensures that the "hidden sides of her interpersonal world stay hidden, if only it is more pleasant to dwell in fantasies than to face a disillusioning reality" (Armstrong 1978: 523). Additionally, I believe that Maisie's dreamlike reflection on events and her attempt at building worlds and fathoming out their related meaning provide her with the opportunity to exercise her artistic freedom as though she were re-creating the fantastic world of *The Arabian Nights*. Yet, as opposed to the endless possibilities of love, care, and solace that any fantasy world could proffer, Maisie's fictional castles and hiding places only make her realize that the world of negligence she inhabits is in fact the reversal of a fairy tale.

4

The real world, where her role as a "socially constructed entity" (Galbraith 1989: 201) limits her freedom, throws her into an epistemologically and existentially precarious position. Mary Galbraith (1989) appositely explicates the epistemology of the novel's prologue by stating that Maisie appears in the text as "the child" (a legal entity) and "the bone of contention" (in her parents' battle), which render her an entity who "does not yet exist as a live, experiencing subject" (201). While Galbraith's analysis stands to reason in her close phenomenological reading of the text, it seems to me that divesting Maisie of her status as an individual and identifying this status with her being a non-entity categorically assigs the female protagonist a fixed position. Instead of reading Maisie's usual appellation as "the child" as opposed to calling her on a first name basis, a phenomenon that Galbraith considers to be a phenomenon of "social defamiliarization" (202), I believe that the notion of liminality, used widely in cultural anthropology and literary theory, can be adequately applied to the consciousness Maisie represents. In the novel, the qualities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and becomingness, which are key features of liminality as formulated by Arnold Van Gennep (2013) and later by Victor Turner (1995), are easily detectable at a textual level and unmistakably refer to Maisie's boundless and in-between existential position. The following two quotes exemplify how "dawn" and "dusk" hold liminal positions between night and day (a usual set of examples to define liminality). However, more importantly, Maisie's *exilic position* as a cultural phenomenon of modernity correlates to liminality in more than just a subtle fashion:

> Every single thing he had prophesied came so true that it was after all no more than fair to expect quite as much for what he had as good as promised. His pledges they could verify to the letter, down to his very guarantee that a way would be found with Miss Ash. *Roused in the summer dawn and vehemently squeezed by that interesting exile*, Maisie fell back upon her couch with a renewed appreciation of his policy.
>
> (184)

The scene in which Maisie sits down on a bench bears more than a passing resemblance to a decisive scene in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Isabel Archer occupies a rustic bench as darkness gathers under the oaks at Gardencourt.

> After she had disappeared, *Maisie dropped upon the bench again* and for some time, in the empty garden and the deeper dusk, sat and stared at the image her flight had still left standing.
>
> (160, italics added)

The fact that her "fortune will be never to grow up and never to be young again" (Poole 1996: v) positions Maisie in a liminal space, which Turner (1995) uses to denote "an interior state — a projection of creative power, a metaphor of the imagination" (qtd. in Joseph 2011: 139). It is this transitional, in-between state of the child's rite of initiation into a later stage of adolescence that helps her come to the realization that she alone is capable of exonerating herself from the shackles her family forces her to wear and define her own being.[6] This is not to mean that she ever succeeds in freeing herself from the liminal position that keeps her trapped. In his analysis on liminality in children's literature, Michael Joseph (2011) proffers an idiosyncratic way of describing liminal characters (such as Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, whose coming-of-age story — despite its inconclusiveness — is often compared to James's novel). The following line of argumentation is germane to our analysis of Maisie as a liminal character:

> Someone whose personhood is liminal lives beyond the pale of society, or structure. For such persons, liminality is neither ritual nor transitional, but *an open-ended way of life* qualified by sets of cultural demands, ethical systems, and processes that are irreconcilable.
>
> (140, emphasis added)

Regardless of how Maisie's liminal position is read, the self-knowledge she gradually comes to possess makes her realize that her quest for care will never come to fruition unless her own caring nature toward others is not taken into account as a genuine and most likely unpronounced fulfilment of her desires. However harsh her realization might seem, Maisie knows—though she is no doubt epistemologically naïve—that she can put faith in no one to rush to her rescue. Such a desperate call for help recurs in several of James's works, most notably "The Turn of the Screw" (1898), highlighting the helpless plasticity of childhood through sensitive and vulnerable children. Armstrong's (1978) interpretation of the novel's ending is at variance with Joseph's (2011) take on how the story comes to an end. While the latter destabilizes Maisie's position by casting her among a cohort of liminal characters, Armstrong (1978) claims that "[f]or Maisie, knowing the worst with certainty is the epistemological triumph that found her existence more securely than ever before" (533). I believe that Maisie's triumph lies in the fact that she opts for an "open-ended way of life" (Joseph 2011: 140), which allows her to further develop her moral vision after arriving at a conclusion in the city of Boulogne—now as an individualized moral agent.

When Maisie naively suggests in Chapter 25 "Why shouldn't we be four?" (188), referring the possibility of cohabitation in adultery, she is still facing the epistemological

confusion which prevents her from being able to come to terms with the baffling circumstances. One of the novel's most memorable scenes further complicates, or rather, violates, Maisie's epistemological horizon in a way that James's syntactical density, typical of his mature style, becomes a parody of itself. Klein's (2006) observation is especially pertinent in his otherwise scantily developed analysis of the following sentence, which does not only burlesque authorial style (and, by extension, authorial control) but also momentarily decentralizes Maisie's position as the novel's fixed focalizer.

> The immensity didn't include *them*; but if he had an idea at the back of his head she had also one in a recess as deep, and for a time, while they sat together, there was *an extraordinary mute passage between her vision of this vision of his, his vision of her vision, and her vision of his vision of her vision*. What there was no effective record of indeed was the small strange pathos on the child's part of an innocence so saturated with knowledge and so directed to diplomacy.
>
> (132, emphasis added)

In more simplified terms, Beale is looking at Maisie, Maisie is seeing Beale looking at her, Beale is seeing Maisie seeing Beale looking at her, and finally Maisie is seeing Beale seeing Maisie seeing Beale looking at her. Here, all the different visions coalesce at one unitary moment of time, generating a sense of fullness akin to Pater's beatific vision, Eliot's epiphanies, or Nabokov's cosmic synchronization. The only difference is that in *What Maisie Knew* this sense of fullness offers a moment of fear and confusion in the company of a cunning father. At the level of content, Mrs. Wix's ubiquitous "straighteners" and "the full force of [Ida's] huge painted eyes" (31, 106) indicate the importance of personal vision throughout the novel. When Maisie is described in the same passage, sitting on Beale's lap, who is lighting a cigarette and puffing the smoke into her face, she experiences an extraordinary cognition which can be associated with the girl's own vision of arriving at a crucial phase of maturation in a manner that, for Maisie, is more nauseating than enlightening. Some commentators suspect the infiltration of forbidden and heated eroticism in this scene (Hugh Stevens, Arthur Marotti, Alfred Habegger, and John Carlos Rowe). It goes without saying that the scene presents a fundamental ambiguity of this odd familial intermezzo; it is then not accidental that Klein (2006) considers the novel as "James's most devious" one with its "sheer persistence of its probing behind and below" (135). Vision, therefore, one might suggest, has a malleable and ever-changing quality, and Maisie is not the only one permitted to usurp the acuity to portray her environment from one single point-of-view. The vision long-windedly described in the earlier passage deliberately confounds the child in this rare moment of the multiplication of perspectives only to inform her that the experience of vision is a precursor to understanding, but vision *never* lends itself well to finding one ultimate route to an absolute truth. In one way or another, James's intricate play with the pronouns found in this passage makes him stand out as something of a forerunner of postmodernism, where the ambiguous nature of identity is problematized through unusual syntax.[7] The passage also draws attention to the fact that everyone else around Maisie has the ability to empirically see what is happening, yet no one but Maisie has the faculty to emotionally process the seen (and, to a certain degree, the unseen).

5

When the novel is ferried to Boulogne, Maisie starts to realize that *knowing*, more than anything else, let alone the demoralizing maneuvers within the confines of her family, is a self-liberating process, and the sedulously gained maturity is an eventual tool to understand and manage her interpersonal relationships in life. Taking the boat across the channel to France marks the novel's psychological zenith: when Sir Claude, preoccupied with the posting of some letters, sends Maisie and Miss Ash out for a walk, the girl experiences a sudden revelation, which functions as her final awakening to the fact that her "emotion, at Boulogne, was speedily quenched into others, above all in the great ecstasy of a larger impression of life" (163). The geographical dislocation, emphasizing Maisie's exilic state of peregrinating between childhood innocence and an affirmed perception of the corrupt adult world, literally broadens the girl's vision, and the unfamiliar milieu suddenly metamorphoses into an enchanting and colorful place which she may have only dreamed of during her earlier reveries. Maisie's hitherto obscure world with its ubiquitously dark tonalities, on account of her lack of vision, is counterbalanced by her awakening consciousness as she feels, for the first time in her life, that she is "the guide and not the guided" (Haralson & Johnson 2009: 174).

Maisie takes delight in breathing in "the bright air, before the pink houses, among the bare-legged fishwives and the red-legged soldiers" (163), which introduces France as a symbol of romance and other forms and depths of love absent from England's rigid social climate, which James had described with ruthless realism owing to the wantonness of England *haut monde* (Sarbu 1981: 117). Maisie's outburst of emotions at the early discovery of being abroad for the first time is followed by a moment of subtle intimacy in Sir Claude's company. Armstrong (1978) writes convincingly that "Boulogne is only the threshold and Paris is the goal" (154) in order for Maisie to attain full maturity. To my mind, if England represents childhood and the innocence it entails, and Boulogne — no doubt, a liminal space, which Armstrong leaves unnoticed in his analysis — is the place where Maisie "[l]iterally in the course of an hour […] found her initiation" (163), then Paris stands for fulfilment, which never transpires on the novel's pages but is (perhaps) transported to the author's later novels. James implicitly refers to the fond emotions Maisie is more than likely to nourish for Sir Claude when she inquires with him "if he were prepared as yet to name the moment at which they should start for Paris" (164). This is a crucial scene, for the girl is shown to be in possession of her own will and the exact course her life should take. Her unveiled infatuation is only reinforced by what the narrator later describes as Maisie's "more than filial gaze" (184) toward a confused Sir Claude.

Maisie's going abroad and eventual return to England constitute a launch toward freedom, a mythical trip of awakening. The novel ends on a dramatic yet ambiguous note. Its open-endedness is not atypical of James, who always found a suitable (non)resolution for his characters to embark upon a journey of a new understanding in quest of self-expression, and moral and epistemological growth. In his novel, James experiments with form, symmetry, modes of expression, narrative voices, perspectives, and focalization, all of which can only be fully comprehended if Maisie's vision represents much more than her longing to fly out of her suffocating parental nest. Her vision becomes a foray into the understanding of the dark side of human nature and eventually allows her to cultivate her own ethics. I could not agree more with

Klein (2006), who attaches crucial importance to the role Mrs. Wix occupies in the closing chapter as an escape route for Maisie out of the novel. With the governess's frightened rejection to understand what the little girl knew in the beginning forms a circular narrative structure for the novel. Maisie's awakening state of consciousness and extreme willpower to grow — to learn to fight for an *existence* of her own instead of being buffeted from pillar to post, that is — and to transcend her boundaries, anticipates a series of later figures in the Jamesian universe. Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess of Casamassima*, and Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* may not have come into existence had it not been for Maisie's expanding moral vision beyond the pages of the novel. J. Hillis Miller (2005) aptly claims that Nanda, the heroine of James's next novel, *The Awkward Age* (1899) has already experienced her rite of initiation, and she does not have much more to learn. "James attributes to Nanda a power of intelligence and of penetrating sensitivity not unlike his own" (100). It would not be rash to assert that Maisie, as a precursor, has given Nanda the present tense of the titular *knew* only to bestow upon her successor the knowledge that is more of a curse than a blessing. Further epistemological quests as to what Maisie knew, never knew, or may have known remain the subject of moot discussions. In lieu of an attempted conclusion, I can do no better than to offer Armstrong's (1978) final words: "For James, the pursuit of the moral life is an often ambiguous, always perilous, never ultimately completed activity because it is a constant epistemological and existential challenge" (535).

[1] All references are to this edition: James, H. 1978. *What Maisie Knew*. New York: Penguin

[2] Robert B. Pippin (2008) hypothesizes that the novel's title "could refer to a kind of knowledge and (innocent?) self-knowledge that Maisie had, but lost when she takes up her new 'experienced' position" after leaving England for France (123).

[3] Consider the cacophony of voices and the blending of temporal sequences in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or James Joyce's equally bold enterprise of capturing sense-impressions in Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*. It is also interesting to note how James turns toward Modernism in featuring a handful of characters, all of whom represent modern values through their exercise of authority and denial of any fixed position, such as the sacrosanct nature of family. Marcus Klein (2006) mentions that in the novel James "constructed a pattern of couplings and uncouplings and recouplings—the four characters consisting of the parents and the step-parents who crisscross and redouble" (137). In fact, James's complicated interpersonal relations do not only shed light on the tragicomic nature of Maisie's fate, but also serve as an antecedent of the emergence of the double as a rejuvenated literary theme found in post-modern literature. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, in which Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty act as one another's double characters, insomuch that they become interchangeable through the ingenious jumbling of personal pronouns before the novels ends.

[4] It is worthwhile to note Gorley Putt's remark that presents the following argument: even though Maisie's vocabulary is far from being that of a child, James captures one of the attributes of how a child thinks by continuously allowing her to make judgments over material and emotional phenomena (qtd. in Sarbu 1981: 114).

[5] Bollobás (2006) also notes that the narrator's sexual identity cannot be determined with utmost certainty. It can be only surmised that the narrator is a man, or rather, one might assume that he is a man based on the ideological projection he represents (246). This view is also supported by the queer readings of Alfred Habegger and John Carlos Rowe, who speculate—in relation to James's young and sensitive male characters—that Maisie is the author's reproduction of his own childhood as a fictionalized boyhood (qtd. in Haralson & Johnson 2009: 179).

[6] Examining the concept of liminality in *What Maisie Knew* presents itself—though outside the scope of this paper—as an intriguing and novel subject. The novel abounds in further instances of liminal spaces, among which, the most striking one is how she is constantly portrayed as a child on the outside of doors and windows (Poole 2006: p. ix).
[7] Consider, for example, the final brawl between Humbert and Quilty in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, where the two characters, or rather, identities, are indistinguishable from one another: "He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him" (Nabokov 1995: 287)

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