

Conflict Between Duty and Personal Freedom: A Study of Lambert Strether, the Central Character in *The Ambassadors* by Henry James

Dr. Randeep Singh

Assistant professor of English
Government College Dubaldhan, Jhajjar, Haryana

Abstract:

Lambert Strether is middle - aged man who has assumed the role of an intellectual in the provincial society of New England. He is the editor of a green - covered review, subsidized by a widow, Mrs. Newsome of Woollett, Massachusetts. The main action of the story centers round his mission to bring home Mrs. Newsome's son Chad from Paris. He has been deputed by Mrs. Newsome with the task of saving her son from the clutches of a bad and immoral woman in Paris. As Mrs. Newsome's ambassador, his duty is to bring Chad back to his home and his family business at Woollett. If he accomplishes this mission successfully, he is assured of a secure and comfortable life in New England as Mrs. Newsome will reward him by getting married to him.

Key Words: gratification, appearance, subsidized

Introduction

Dedicated to his mission and imbued with a sense of duty, he proceeds to Paris to retrieve Chad from the corrupting influences of old world. But on reaching Paris, his attitude towards Europe undergoes a sea-change. He feels the irresistible charm and beauty of Paris on his own starved sensibility. When he meets Chad, he is surprised to find him greatly improved in manners and in appearance as a result of the influences he has been absorbing during his stay in Paris. He also comes to know that the woman who has brought about so much change in his personality is, in fact, a married woman, Madame de Vionnet. Instead of condemning her, he starts appreciating her and siding with her. Thinking the attachment between Chad and Madame de Vionnet to be 'virtuous' and captivated by the charm of Paris, he delays his mission. Discovering at last the true character of the relationship between Madame Vionnet and Chad seeing that Mrs. Vionnet, not Chad, has been wronged, Strether advises him not to return to his home but rather urges him to stay in Paris with Madame de Vionnet, knowing full well that persuading Chad to remain faithful to the lady in Paris means that he would lose the chance of marriage with Mrs. Newsome and all the happiness and security this would bring to him in future.

Alongwith his change of loyalties, there is a significant change in his concept of morality. He starts believing that it is not necessary to be puritanically suspicious of the pleasures of the senses in order to be virtuous. He likes the personality of Madame de Vionnet so much that he himself almost falls in love with her. Miss Maria Gostrey, who has been his confidant during his stay in Paris, expresses her wish to marry him. He is tempted for a short while but ultimately rejects her offer with the argument that he

should not seem "out of the whole affair to have got anything for myself?"³ He renounces all claims on her and decides to go back to America where he knows he has already lost all chances of a secure and comfortable life.

By taking this self-abnegating decision, he is turning away from the possibilities and opportunities which life in Paris offers him. He has seen the possibilities offered by both the cultures and his ultimate decision is to renounce both of them. R.P. Blackmur feels that Strether "turns out to have been less an ambassador than a pilgrim: the goods he has achieved are spiritual".⁴ William R. Macnaughton also adopts a positive attitude when he observes: "Strether is not empty, he is full of possibility. And although he will not always be right or successful, when he returns to America he will continue to do what he can - for others and for himself".⁵

Critics like Sally Sears, on the other hand, see Strether as a defeated man who has been alienated from Woollett and Paris and finds himself "left in the end with a lingering distaste ... for both places, a permanent spiritual exile ..."⁶ According to F.O. Matthiessen also the burden of *The Ambassadors* is that Strether has awakened to a wholly new sense of life. Yet he does nothing at all to fulfill that sense. Therefore, fond as James is of him, we cannot help feeling his relative emptiness".⁷ Percy Lubbock thinks that Strether has succeeded in his mission but has lost everything. He says "... there is nothing left for him, no reward and no future".⁸ Quentin Anderson sees in Strether a man who moves between conflicting ideas of righteousness and sensuousness and tells us that he "is no longer an ambassador either from or to Woollett. He vanishes into the limbo of a lonely righteousness".⁹ These opinions of the critics reflect a one-sided and incomplete assessment of Strether's personality.

In the initial stages of his mission, Strether is guided by the Woollett sense of duty and obligation. His conduct is guided by a sternly Puritan concept of morality according to which duty is above everything else, and enjoyment, particularly gratification of the senses, is equated with sin. He believes in the Woollett concept that the woman in Paris who has ensnared Chad is bad and immoral because impelled by sensuality, she has enticed Chad and lives with him on terms of physical intimacy. According to this puritan code Chad, too, is an irresponsible young man who has to be reclaimed. The New England Puritan code, while harshly condemnatory of all acts of sensuality, as we can easily notice here, is gender biased in so far as it takes a comparatively more liberal view of male acts of transgression of chastity than those of a woman.

This view is also excessively suspicious of whatever is agreeable or pleasant to the senses. Strether is accordingly motivated in the beginning to separate Chad from the bad woman in Paris and bring him back to his family business at home. During this earlier stage, he is totally dependent on others for judgement. He is also sexually inhibited and slow and nervous in his dealings with all women. He suppresses his instinctual urges and is apprehensive of beautiful things. Any enjoyment of senses fills him with guilt and shame. While in London "the smallest things so arrested and amused him that he repeatedly almost apologized". Guided by his Woollett philosophy, he is not supposed to enjoy things. He is dominated by the pessimistically stoic belief that his life has been "a perfectly equipped failure". He feels that he has not done anything worthwhile and his life has not been a success. The thing that torments him is that his life has been "the wreck of hopes and ambitions, the refuse-heap of disappointments and failures...". His sense of loss and failure is not confined only to his career and worldly success but in his family life also he has suffered irreparable losses. The action of the novel is used by James to make Strether aware of the limitedness of this narrow, unimaginative and excessively distrustful outlook on life.

Strether is a man of fine perceptions and high intelligence. As we know from our study of the novel he was "burdened ... with the oddity of a double consciousness" and "There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference". Once he arrives at Chaster, he meets Maria Gostrey, a Europeanised American woman who leads him to the beauties of European culture. She is not a romantic figure for Strether but she introduces him to pleasant small things which he has not known in his own native place. Maria quickly discerns the Woollett influence on him. While walking with him she perceives that he is extremely conscious of time and is so tense that he cannot enjoy himself. Strether feels awkward when he is forced to acknowledge this. Miss Gostrey's comment is that "the failure of Woollett is the failure to enjoy". This remark reverberates in Strether's mind and touches the deepest chords of his personality. In a way, she has opened up with this remark the possibility of adopting an approach to life under which life is there to be enjoyed rather than to be suffered as an ordeal. She exposes him to the world of variety and beauty. When she comes to know about his mission, she is surprised to see that he has based his judgement on the opinion of others. When Strether tells her that the woman who has kept Chad in Paris is a wicked woman and Chad is a wretched boy, she quickly forewarns him by saying that "one can only judge on the facts". She also hints that that Chad may have been refined by her company. Strether really likes her company and is benefited by her wisdom. Later when he dines with her, he is quick to perceive that her company is more exciting than that of Mrs. Newsome. Her dress was "cut down... in respect to shoulders and bosom, in a manner quite other than Mrs. Newsome's ...". He finds Maria Gostrey, too, sexually more attractive than Mrs. Newsome. We can see that Strether is slowly coming under the influence of European culture and beauty.

In fact, as soon as Strether arrives in Paris, he is captivated and enthralled by the beauty and charm of the city. Paris becomes a symbol of everything that is lacking in his life - youth, beauty, energy and vivacity. It reminds him of his youth and all that he longed to get in his life but could not get. An uneasy thought comes to his mind that he was supposed to do his duty and not to enjoy life in Paris but he tries to counter it by raising the question, "was it all possible for instance to like Paris enough without liking it too much?". He realizes that it was a bliss to be young and happy at such a beautiful place. While standing in front of Chad's house, he has to recognize the truth that "wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it". In a way, he cannot resist the temptation of yielding to the charm of Paris but he is also aware of his mission and his obligations towards Mrs. Newsome as he reflects: "He wasn't there to dip, to consume he was there to reconstruct. He wasn't there for his own profit...".

Little Bilham, Chad's friend who was living in Chad's apartment in his absence, also tells Strether in unmistakable terms that Chad has changed for the better. He informs him that the lady who is supposed to have kept him here is Mrs. Vionnet and that the attachment between them is virtuous. When Strether meets Chad, he himself is impressed by his polished behaviour and fineness of taste. He finds him altered in manners and also his demeanour. Strether is quick to realize that it was "a case of transformation unsurpassed". Later on when he apprises him of his mission of taking him back to his home he finds him cool and unperturbed. He is impressed by his ability to control any situation with fine delicacy and morality. It seems that from a coarse youngman, he had been transformed turned successfully out". Soon he perceives that Chad was a "Youngman marked out by women; and for a concentrated minute the dignity, the comparative austerity, as he funnily fancied it, of this character affected him almost with awe". Strether asks him in the context of his refusal to go back to his home, "Who has kept you?" To this Chad's quick reply is: "Do you think one's kept only by women?" . He fires

an embarrassing counter question at Strether when he asks him whether people in Woollett believe that he has been staying in Paris because of some woman and whether he also shares this belief. This leaves Strether in a state of confusion and bewilderment. He starts realizing even more acutely than before that Chad certainly changed for the better and he was not as bad as people in Woollett thought and he had certainly not been corrupted by the influence of a bad woman. When Strether meets Madame de Vionnet, he finds her quite dignified and exceedingly beautiful. The contrast between the actual personality of this lady and the Woollett preconception of her is really staggering.

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