

SOCIAL IMAGE TRANSFORMATION IN *THE AMBASSADORS* BY HENRY JAMES

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Abstract

The purpose of the current paper has been to analyse, in parallel, the Social Self represented in the works of two brothers, William and Henry James. The Consciousness of Self is a very controversial and subtle concept. It differs from culture to culture, and in some of them it does not even exist. This section deals with the depiction of the Social Self as a constituent component of the Consciousness of Self in Henry James's novel "The Ambassadors" (1903). It is considered one of the best novels of his last period of literary achievements and it offers a fascinating journey into the world of human passions, intricate situations, and deep feelings. "The Ambassadors" is a novel that shows what impact society and experience can have on one's Social Self. The fixed focalization in "The Ambassadors" allows one to perceive the Social Selves of the secondary characters from the point of view of the protagonist, Lambert Strether. Thus, the paper attempts at examining Henry James's focus on the nature of selfhood by means of reflector character and the brilliant portrayal of the full complexity of the Social Self of his characters.

Keywords: *the Social Self, centre of consciousness*

I am not what I think I am, and
I am not what you think I am.
I am what I think you think I am.
(C. H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the
Social Order*
in Preves 2005: 21)

The present paper argues that one's Social Self is the most flexible type of Self, one that the various masks are subsequently moulded on. The Social Self of a person is

formed due to the recognition of his personality by other people. William James, the American psychologist, emphasizes that a person, in general, has several Social Selves. In the novel *The Ambassadors*, Henry James shows the transformation of the Social Selves of his characters, a transformation which has cost some of them their honour and their aspirations. The masks that his characters wear in society are very different from what they wear at home. Some of them tend to appear strong and independent, others of the contrary, delicate and friendly. In reality, they all prove to be strikingly different.

As stated by William James in his theoretical work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), a person's Social Self is "the recognition which he gets from his mates" (2006: 294). This recognition is in fact the impression one has about a person. The theory of Social Self has been later carried on by C. H. Cooley, G. H. Mead and H. S. Sullivan, among others. C. H. Cooley, for example, promoted the theory of the 'looking-glass self' (2009: 184). Continuing W. James's idea, Cooley (2009) called the most important sign of a Social Self the ability to distinguish him/herself from the social group and to realize his own Self. This happens through the communication with other people and the perception of their opinions about that person. Cooley suggested that the Self consist of Self-feelings, which are formed through relationships with others. One sees oneself through the reflection of one's feelings in the realities of others and that their opinion has a significant role in one's behaviour (2009: 170-189). They are, in Cooley's viewpoint, the mirror for one's Social Self.

The Ambassadors is the novel where impressions and perceptions overflow (considering that it is narrated in a free indirect style and one cannot say for sure where the narrator's thoughts end and Strether's begin). The *reflector* character that James refers to in the preface to *The Wings of the Dove* appears gradually but persists throughout the narrative (1998: xlii). Henry James favours this type of character to make the novel more entertaining for the reader and to achieve the overall unity of his third person narrative. James actually admits that he picks "showing" over "telling" because he does not want to "equip him with the double privilege of subject and object" (1998: xlii). This makes the reading more interesting, with the novel only gaining from this on the account of the fact that the reader is bewildered, amazed, dazzled, astonished or shocked simultaneously with the major character. The major character (Lambert Strether) becomes, indeed, as Henry James intended, the "centre of consciousness" in the novel. Practically, the entire novel is narrated from the major character's perspective. There are, however, sections involving change in point of view, like the case of the subjective narrator stepping in, or that at the beginning of the novel, when Maria Gostrey first sees Lambert Strether and the reader receives the clear and detailed image of Strether's appearance through her eyes:

the lean, the slightly loose figure of a man of the middle height and something more perhaps than the middle age – a man of five-and-fifty, whose most immediate signs were a marked bloodless brownness of face, a thick dark moustache, of characteristically American cut, growing strong and falling low, a head of hair still abundant but irregularly streaked with grey, and a

nose of bold free prominence, the even line, the high finish, as it might have been called, of which, had a certain effect of mitigation. A perpetual pair of glasses astride of this fine ridge, and a line, unusually deep and drawn, the prolonged pen-stroke of time, accompanying the curve of the moustache from nostril to chin, did something to complete the facial furniture (James 1998: 4).

In the same chapter, the reader receives the image of Maria Gostrey as well, but in this case, through Strether's perspective: "[s]he affected him as almost insolently young; [s]he was, however, like himself marked and wan" (James 1998: 6). The striking resemblance between the two characters and the narrator's observation that the two are like "brother and sister" seems to be ironic since, at the end of the novel, Maria falls in love with Strether and he rejects her. Throughout the novel, Maria Gostrey has a very good and positive Social image and the fact that she does not want to be involved in the affair of Chad and Madame de Vionnet says that she cares about her public image and the social norms. When she finds out who Chad's girlfriend is, she quietly withdraws from the city and stays away for almost a month.

Lambert Strether's need to serve his Social Self at the beginning of the novel, when he just arrives in Europe from America, is very strong. The reader can clearly understand his firm position about social norms and standards. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he has low self-esteem because he constantly plumes himself on his career and high status which he has in Woollet and at the same time admits to Maria Gostrey that he has done nothing extraordinary and has not succeeded in his life: "I [...] have never made anything. I'm a perfectly equipped failure" (James 1998: 30). Strether's distrust in his own forces and luck seems to be his weak point, and the clever Marie de Vionnet knows how to play on this.

Another person whose recognition Strether carries in his mind is the image of Marie de Vionnet; for him, she is "one of the rare women he had so often heard of, read of, thought of, but never met, whose very presence, look, voice, the mere contemporaneous *fact* of whom [...] made a relation of mere recognition" (James 1998: 178). Not only does Strether express his good impression about her Social Self though; there are other characters (John Bilham, Miss Barrace, Gloriani) from the Parisian society who also have an agreeable opinion about Madame de Vionnet, or at least, this is what they tell Strether, and their opinion, in turn, might have influenced his own. Sarah Pocock, on the other hand, does not see Marie de Vionnet the same way Strether does. Although the reader is not allowed the privilege of reading her thoughts too, Sarah's behaviour and words speak for themselves. This discovery is only possible when, in Chapter 10, Sarah finally comes to speak to Strether. Her tone and attitude are different from what Strether expected; one can see that she is resentful with the situation that has occurred, and very mad at Strether. She does not like Madame de Vionnet, she does not consider her a "decent woman"; moreover, she does not think that Marie has somehow positively influenced Chad (349). To Strether's desperate question if she has not realized "Chad's fortunate development" she bluntly cuts in: "Fortunate? [...] I call it hideous" (352).

The real conflict in the novel is, apparently, the battle for Chad's Social Self, which, as stated by William James, is the image one can work on and, according to the social norms, must do so. W. James mentions that the "code of honor of fashionable society has been, throughout history, full of permissions as well as of vetoes, the only reason for following either of which is that so we best serve one of our social selves" (James 2006: 296). The 'social veto' in *The Ambassadors* is the amoral relation between a young man (Chad Newsome) and a married woman (Madame de Vionnet), who is older than her lover. All the characters in the novel, with Strether's exception, know about their relation and all of them try to keep the Social image of Chad and Marie de Vionnet spotless. A good example of this is the continuous attempt of Chad's friends, Mr. Bilham and Miss Barrace, to convince Strether that Chad is much better than he once was; "[t]hey spoke of him repeatedly, invoking his good name and good nature, and the worst confusion of mind for Strether was that all their mention of him was of a kind to do him honour" (James 1998: 82). Moreover, all the incidents and everything that happens to Strether is, apparently, a show thoughtfully set by Chad and Madame de Vionnet. He is tricked by them as a little boy who watches the skilful magician, while the assistants are changing the scenes. Actually, Chad has improved, and the process is not a question of perseverance, but one of time and motivation; he has really changed due to his love for Madame de Vionnet. Now he is a very respectful and prospering gentleman, with good manners and friendly attitude to everyone.

The situation becomes interesting thanks to this discrepancy of Chad's Social Selves: the one which Strether has in his mind about Chad and that of the new Chad which he has grown into during his stay in Paris. Strether does not even recognise Chad from the beginning, and has thought of him as of a "[s]olid stranger" who has a striking air of "good confidence" (James 1998: 95). The impression which "the young man's identity" (95) produces on Strether is a very strong one and he has even thought that "Chad should not *be* Chad" (96); finally, Strether admits that it was "a case of transformation unsurpassed" (96-97). The transformed young man has affected him as a gentleman who knows how to present and behave himself in society and who has acquired the sophisticated Parisian lustre.

Chad behaved, looked and spoke as if he were rather heavily, perhaps even a trifle gloomily, but none the less fundamentally and comfortably free. He made no crude profession of eagerness to yield, but he asked the most intelligent questions, probed, at moments, abruptly, even deeper than his friend's layer of information, justified by these touches the native estimate of his latent stuff, and had in every way the air of trying to live, reflectively, into the square bright picture (James 1998: 116).

Obviously, Chad's new look (Social Self) has a powerful and extremely positive effect on Lambert Strether and from this very moment he decides to throw himself at the mercy of Paris and see how it will revolutionize him as well. Strether assumes that it is under the spell of the city that Chad has improved so much and that it is "perhaps a speciality of Paris". He too, wants to become free, reckless and happy and to feel

young again. What actually happens in the end is that Paris and its inhabitants change Strether's Spiritual Self more than his Social Self. He feels free and young just for a period of time; he even turns into a rebel and refuses to return to America, but this is only until Sarah Pocock, Chad's sister, comes to Europe to 'save' them both. When the Pococks arrive, Strether immediately awakens and understands that his situation is in fact critical. Their arrival has even aroused the feeling of nostalgia and a glimpse of hope has flickered in his mind: "Strether *was* then as much as ever the valued friend of her family; it was something he could at all events go on with" (James 1998: 255).

Through Strether, the novelist shows the reader how a person can change under the influence of different people and environments. Strether does not care about his Social Self anymore; he understands that life is short and one should take everything he can from it. He now accepts relations of all possible kinds and his last actions in the ending of the novel prove this change in attitude. Under the influence of circumstances and new people he has changed and has accepted the shameful relation between Chad and Marie de Vionnet; besides, the new people and environment have made Strether understand the real meaning of life.

To sum up, both William and Henry James valued the importance of the Social Self. William James mentioned, in *The Principles of Psychology* that a person lives and activates in society and for this reason he/she has to abide to the rules and norms of the society he lives in in order to serve his Social Self. This idea is incorporated in Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors*. The major character at the beginning of the novel sides with the social norms and behaves accordingly; the ending of the novel shows, however, that Strether does not care anymore, in the course of events, so much about the rules, but follows the call of the heart. So, it is his Social Self that makes him cross the Atlantic and try to bring Chad back, and it is the Spiritual Self that makes him abandon his initial goal and become happy.

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