

Lesson Plan on Reading (and Writing) Henry James

John Weir, Queens College, English
English 751: Fiction Workshop (M.A. level)

Lesson objective(s): Specifically: to help students hear the distinctive tone, rhythm, diction, syntax, etc., of some of Henry James's sentences; generally: to help them think about how James makes narrative choices.

Total estimated time: 25 minutes

Additional outcome(s): Helps students to enter, as writers, into an ongoing investigation of "style"; to ask what constitutes a writer's "style"; and to consider the specific writerly strategies and techniques that contribute to the way (or various ways) a writer sounds (or *makes* sounds).

Course work or assignment underway: It's late in a semester in which students have already read Henry James's *The American*, *Daisy Miller*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*; they have also read two books by French novelists whose narrative strategies influenced James, Honore de Balzac (*Eugenie Grandet*) and Emile Zola (*Therese Raquin*).

Work and/or reading completed before class: The final 200 pages of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Sequence of Classroom Activities

1. Give students an in-class writing assignment: "What If You Were Henry James?" Ask students to imagine that each of them writes in a Jamesian style, and that they have all been commissioned by their professor to write a brief narrative that uses, as its focus and inspiration, a real-life event.
2. Give them the specific real-life event. It can be anything that seems crude or egregiously mundane. In this case, it was something that happened to me the day before: My toilet clogged and overflowed. I was at school, in my office, preparing for class; my prickly downstairs neighbor Courtney, an aspiring rock star, called me and complained that water was leaking from my apartment into her bathroom; I grabbed a friend of mine, a co-worker, to run interference with Courtney (he's cute and she's single), and convinced another co-worker to give us a ride in his car from Queens to Manhattan, where I live; when I got home, Courtney was downstairs screaming in English at the Superintendent, who speaks Spanish, and at the guy who owns the restaurant in the bottom of the building, and speaks French; they were yelling in several languages; we all went upstairs to my apartment; the water in the entire building had been turned off, because of Courtney's complaints; the Super, the restaurant-owner, Courtney, my friend from school, and two guys I'd never seen – Carlos and a guy named Omar who also called himself Ron – crowded into my bathroom, and there it was: an overflowing toilet. We fixed it, I jumped on the train and raced back to school, and I was ½ late for my class. I mentioned also that I am

subletting my apartment illegally; that I have leaked on Courtney before; that my apartment is a pig sty: anything to add flavor.

2. Allow them 15 minutes to do the writing.
3. Ask selected students to read their work out loud.
4. Discuss student writing.

Reflection on the lesson's success or alternative approaches: In fact I gave this assignment very near the end of the semester; I was frustrated that my students seemed to hate Henry James, and I wanted to find a way to help them to enter into his sentences. I should say that it was his diction, his style, his tone, his word choices that seemed most to alienate them, though most of my students could not articulate their objections in exactly this manner at the beginning of the semester. They didn't have a vocabulary for talking about James's sentences, and they generally condemned James's style as "19th century," "old school," "the way they wrote back in the day." To fight their sense that all writing before 1914 sounds the same, I had earlier given them a paragraph from Walter Scott and one very over-the-top purplish prose paragraph from Matthew Monk Lewis, and we talked about word choice, tone, point of view, etc., in each passage. It wasn't just James's style that bugged them, however. Some of them hated what they saw as his elitism. "Why don't these people have jobs?" one of the students asked about the characters in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Perhaps the real-life event I narrated for them was tawdry and overly detailed, but I wanted to encourage them to think how James's social and psychological realism might be adapted to "toilet bowl realism" – to get them to think about different kinds of realism, in other words, and to explore how a particular subject matter might alter a writer's style – and I wanted to provide them with a lot of narrative options, a lot of places in the story where their interest could land. After all, a fiction writer's goal is to be selective, to "gather impressions," as James says (*impressions*: what you learn through your five senses, what you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch; and also, whatever you glean from your inner landscape, what you think and feel), and to pick and choose among those impressions in constructing a narrative. So I wanted to give my students a real-life event that was almost too packed with action and observation, with characters and relationships. Happily, the assignment seemed to do some useful work. Well, there were various results. One student wrote three pages in imitation of Henry James's circumambulatory sentences. Different students began their narratives at different moments in the story, telling its events backwards or forwards or in random order. Some students isolated a single instant from the larger story, and explored it more fully. Several students rejected "the professor" as the main character, and put Courtney's sensibility and impressions at the center of the narrative. I asked each student to explain his or her narrative choices and to tell us how they seemed in some way "Jamesian." It seemed to me that students were reflecting quite usefully on James's narrative strategies, and that, after all, and despite their resistance to James, they had been noticing and absorbing, all along, several of his distinctive stylistic and narrative strategies and moves.