

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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James, “The Figure in the Carpet.”

getting *Portrait*

- ▶ best case: bookstore miracle
- ▶ also great: you got a library copy OR you already received your order from another bookstore
- ▶ okay: order the Penguin Classics edition, ISBN 9780142437346
- ▶ meanwhile: print out chapter I PDF on Canvas for next time, refer to explanatory notes in digital version

review: what happened 1890–1950? (I)

Answer 1: modernism

- ▶ break with literary traditions
- ▶ aesthetic disruptions and shock effects
- ▶ interpretive difficulty

review: what happened 1890–1950? (2)

Answer 2: literary modernity

- ▶ fiction becomes a mass entertainment industry
 - ▶ thousands of titles, millions of copies
 - ▶ “She had had published at the age of nineteen a novel in three volumes, ‘Deep Down’ ” (5); “she published in a single volume her second novel” (54)
- ▶ new reading publics (“reading culture”)
- ▶ diversity of writers
- ▶ multiple transformations, not just one

“pop” quiz

- ▶ Make sure to turn this in for attendance for today.

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Discussion

Is the ending satisfying? Cite textual evidence to demonstrate what is or is not satisfactorily resolved.

his undiscovered, not to say undiscoverable, secret

I accounted for my confusion—perversely, I confess, by the idea that Vereker had made a fool of me. The buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous *pose*. (23)

I pass rapidly over the question of this unmitigated tragedy, of what the loss of my best friend meant for me (49)

The poor man's state is almost my consolation; there are indeed moments when I feel it to be almost my revenge. (66)

nothing happens, or, aesthetic autonomy



Henry James, halftone print, 1898,
[Library of Congress](#).

The “ending” of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddlesome doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes.

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it.

Henry James, “The Art of Fiction” (1884), in *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1894), 382, 394–95, [Internet Archive](#).

distraction and surplus

There was almost rapture in hearing it proposed to me to prepare for *The Middle*, the organ of our lucubrations, so called from the position in the week of its day of appearance, an article for which he had made himself responsible and of which, tied up with a stout string, he laid on my table the subject. (3)

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lucubration, n. The product of nocturnal study and meditation; hence, a literary work showing signs of careful elaboration. Now somewhat derisive or playful, suggesting the notion of something pedantic or over-elaborate.

OED, s.v. "lucubration, n.," [oed.com](https://www.oed.com), 2025.

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He wasn't of course popular, but I judged one of the sources of his good humour to be precisely that his success was independent of that. (8)

1843	b. New York, wealthy family raised Paris, London, Geneva
1862–63	goes to law school, doesn't finish invalid, doesn't fight in Civil War
1875	in Paris, crucial year
1876	moves permanently to London
1878	"Daisy Miller" makes him famous in US and UK
1895	disastrous attempt at drama
1896	"The Figure in the Carpet," <i>Cosmopolis</i> I, no. 1 "Figure," in <i>Embarrassments</i> (London: Heinemann)
1900–	"Major Phase" (so called by F.O. Matthiessen)
1907–18	deluxe revised "New York Edition" of his work
1915	becomes British citizen
1916	dies

not for everyone

I asked Corvick what he meant by his own supersubtlety, and, unmistakably kindled, he replied: “It isn’t for the vulgar—it isn’t for the vulgar!”
(23–24)

There wasn’t, so far as I could discover, a line of his writing in the house.
(21)

the art of fiction

“Isn’t there for every writer a particular thing of that sort, the thing that most makes him apply himself, the thing without the effort to achieve which he wouldn’t write at all, the very passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the **flame of art** burns most intensely? Well, it’s *that!*” (15)

“The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it.” (16)

It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet. He highly approved of this image when I used it, and he used another himself. “It’s the very string,” he said, “that my pearls are strung on!” (27)



The Ardabil Carpet, artist unknown (Iran, Safavid dynasty), 1539–1540, [Victoria and Albert Museum](#), London (acquired 1893).



Ibid., detail.

no hurry

There was no hurry, Corvick said—the future was before them and the fascination could only grow; they would take him page by page, as they would take one of the classics, inhale him in slow draughts and let him sink deep in. I doubt whether they would have got so wound up if they had not been in love. (29)

“Just seen Vereker—not a note wrong. Pressed me to bosom—keeps me a month.”.... We pictured the whole scene at Rapallo, where he would have written, mentioning my name, for permission to call; that is I pictured it, having more material than my companion, whom I felt hang on my lips as we stopped on purpose before shop-windows we didn't look into. (41–42)

what kind of thing are we talking about here?

The opening pages [of Corvick's essay] were all that existed; they were striking, they were promising, but they didn't unveil the idol....This was above all what I wanted to know: had *she* seen the idol unveiled? Had there been a private ceremony for a palpitating audience of one? For what else but that ceremony had the previous ceremony been encated? (49)

Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives—for lovers supremely united? (52)

The widow and wife would have broken by the rekindled hearth the silence that only a widow and wife might break, and Deane would be as aflame with the knowledge as Corvick in his own hour, as Gwendolen in hers had been. (59–60)

- What does reading someone's books have to do with relationships among people in this story?

“text” is related to “textile”

CN + Vereker $\rightarrow$ Vereker + Corvick $\rightarrow$

Corvick + Gwendolen $\rightarrow$ Gwendolen + Deane $\rightarrow$ Deane + CN $\rightarrow$...?

the figure in the carpet is...the friends you made along the way

I had liked the man still better than I had liked the books. (33)

I may say that to-day as victims of unappeased desire there isn't a pin to choose between us. (66)

next: once upon a time...

- ▶ Joyce, *Portrait*, chap. I
 - ▶ think: what kind of story is this?