

## Psychological and Aesthetic Emphasis in Henry James and Murasaki Shikibu

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### SUMMARY

*When the famous novelist and critic, E.M. Forster, criticized the novels of Henry James, I was struck by the fact that his criticism applied equally well to Murasaki Shikibu. That these two novelists shared similarities seemed remarkable in as much as they are separated by almost a thousand years, as well as by nationality, gender, culture, and so on. I found that James, in his novel *The Ambassadors*, and Murasaki, in *The Tale of Genji*, both emphasize psychological and aesthetic aspects and that this emphasis accounts for the similarities and the greatness of James and Murasaki*

E.M. Forster, in his most famous critical work, *Aspects of the Novel*, takes up the concept of patterns that occur in novels. When he turns to the subject of Henry James he is withering in his judgement. Forster has found that in James, the pattern of unity has triumphed, the pattern of focusing on one point and embellishing that point to the nth degree. Such embellishing is done "for the sake of a particular aesthetic effect, which is certainly gained, but at this heavy price." The "heavy price" that Forster is referring to had been mentioned earlier. They are characters that:

are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and nine-tenths of heroism. Their clothes will not take off, the diseases that ravage them are anonymous, like the sources of their income...there are no stupid people in their world, no barriers of language, and no poor. Even their sensations are limited. They can land in Europe and look at works of art and at each other, but that is all. Maimed creatures can alone breathe in Henry James's pages-- maimed yet specialized. They remain one of the exquisite deformities who haunted Egyptian art in the reign of Akhenaton--huge heads and tiny legs, but nevertheless charming. In the following reign they disappear. (Forster, p.427)

Forster has been referring to James's novel *The Ambassadors*, but what struck me instantly was that such criticism could well be applied also to *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu. Almost every detail, the lack of poor people, the incapacity for fun, the absence of rapid motion or heroism, and on and on. Almost every detail mentioned as a criticism of James applies to Murasaki

also. I began wondering how that could be. After all, almost a thousand years separate these two writers, not to mention the difference of nationality, gender, background, etc.

Still, such similarity in details between Murasaki and James implies some sort of link. I thought that the answer might be found in examining the values of the two writers; in other words, what the two novelists valued might be detected through the actions and thoughts of the novelists' main characters. These values then might answer the question of why Forester's criticism of James applies so well to Murasaki.

Both *The Tale of Genji* and *The Ambassadors* are thought of as "psychological" novels in as much as they focus on the interior workings of the heroes' minds and motivations. Both novels are also highly aesthetic in the attention paid to language, to form, and to the arts in general. The psychological approach of the two novels and their aesthetic nature were possible keys to understanding their similarities.

Haruo Shirane notices in *The Tale of Genji*:

a process of self-reflection and self-scrutiny, and in particular, an increasingly ironic treatment of earlier sequences, ideals, and attitudes.  
(Shirane, p. xvii)

Maud Ellman observes that *The Ambassadors*:

seems to have evolved out of a process of purgation, eliminating action, character, and author to focus more intensely on interiority of consciousness.  
(Ellman, p. 502)

Both novels, then, are characterized by a psychological approach with a focus on the interiority of the heroes' actions.

The second emphasis of the two novels is on the aesthetic. William J. Puette, in his *Guide to The Tale of Genji*, examines the critical concept of "miyabe" (courtliness) that dominates much of the novel:

In all things, therefore, a sensitivity to the delicacy and subtlety of beauty was most admired. Not only was a courtier expected to compose delicate poetry, but the way each poem was written, the shading of the ink, the selection of the paper, and more were also meticulously scrutinized for evidence of courtly sensibility. (Puette, p. 49)

Leon Edel notes that:

It is seeing that is the subject of the novel(*The Ambassadors*)...."Awareness

is made by James the very essence of life itself...James wrote *The Ambassadors* for the attentive reader, and a reader capable of seeing with him--and accepting his paintersense, his brush-work, his devotion to picture and to scene and above all to his need to render this in a highly colored and elaborate style, so as to capture the nuances of his perceptions. (Edel, p.441)

Keeping our gaze fixed on these two poles of psychology and the aesthetic, let us return once more to the opening quotation of Forster. He first notes that James's characters are "incapable of fun, of rapid motion, or carnality, and nine-tenths of heroism. Forster is, of course, objecting to the lack of normality or simple humanity in the characters of *The Ambassadors*. Although the concept of "fun" certainly doesn't apply comfortably to the main character, Strether, he is very witty and even humorous in a more reserved, Bostonian sense. Rapid motion too is little in evidence, since most of the action takes place in Paris at one or two venues that resemble stage plays in their setting. "Carnality" is certainly absent in the sense of crude sexuality, and even the handling of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionette is highly discreet and painted with the lightest brushstrokes. As far as heroism is concerned, Strether is certainly not the archetype of the hero of a conventional novel who is a man or woman of action and overcomes a series of obstacles to "save the day."

How about the character of Genji? Genji is indeed a very serious protagonist, especially after the death of his wife, Aoi. Rapid motion, too, is absent, much as it is in Noh dramas. Besides being "uncourtly", rapid motion was also essentially impossible given the strictures of transportation and the cumbersomeness of court dress, not to mention the huge number of official retinue necessary for any movement.

The question of carnality is a particularly interesting one. The entire *Tale of Genji* is filled with seductions and abductions and, certainly in today's terminology, forcible rape. Yet for such a term as carnality to be applicable, certain explicit and graphic details must be utilized. Such is not the case in Murasaki. Every sexual scene is highly allusive, so much so that the reader must sift through numerous hints and nuances to finally understand that a sexual liaison has actually taken place:

Genji, when viewed with Western eyes, is scarcely the stuff of heroes. He performs no great actions, is prone to break into tears, and seems excessively delicate and effeminate, besides seeming virtually immoral.  
(Murray, p. 125)

Genji, then, is no typical hero.

The rest of Forster's criticisms of James are true, and these criticisms apply to *The Tale of Genji* also. Almost every character in both books is from the upper class, little or no mention is made of such down-to-earth topics as money or economics, and virtually no one from the poorer

classes exist in these two novelists' worlds. *Genji* and *Strether* do indeed seem like works of ancient Egyptian art. Yet despite all of the points just mentioned, James is known as the "Master" in English criticism, and *The Tale of Genji* has continued to be considered THE great work of Japanese fiction. Philip Fisher has written that:

One of the master texts of a whole generation was Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, perhaps from the academic point of view the most perfect book ever written by an American. (Fisher, p.536)

Ivan Morris, quoting professor Ikeda, has written that:

more than ten thousand books have been written about *The Tale of Genji*, not to mention innumerable essays, monographs, dissertations, and the like. (Morris, p.276)

The greatness and timelessness of both works now seem to be indisputable, even if we grant the truth of Forster's accusations being applicable to both novels. Their depth of psychological penetration and their mastery of the aesthetic more than make up for the lack of the qualities so valued by Forster.

I would like now to quote Mr. Morris one more time, and his observations are astonishingly similar to those previously quoted by Forster in relation to James. Hence Morris writes of *The Tale of Genji*:

Besides, even the aristocratic world is not fully described. Hardly anything is said about affairs of state and politics, let alone about the economic activities that permitted this class to maintain its power. (In exactly what form did they extract income from their land, for instance, and how much did they pay their retainers?) In short, Murasaki's interest is almost exclusively focused on the private, emotional, and aesthetic lives of a select group of aristocrats. (Morris, p. 288)

This fits *The Ambassadors* perfectly. The resemblance, then, between *The Tale of Genji* and *The Ambassadors* is because both novels exclusively focus on psychological and aesthetic topics at the expense of more mundane and prosaic considerations. The psychological and aesthetic emphasis in James and Murasaki explains both the similarity of the two novels, as well as their enduring greatness. I would like to close by slightly expanding the words of Leon Edel:

The reader who is able to give him (her) "attention of perusal" will discover soon enough the particular rewards of this book. When he meets James (Murasaki) on the ground proper to the novelist, and walks with

him (her) over it, he will recognize, after fifty (one thousand) years, that *The Ambassadors (The Tale of Genji)* possesses a singular perfection--the novel converted from mere storytelling to work of art. (Edel, p. 442)

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