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Henry James: The Ambassadors

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Henry James: A Bio-Note

Henry James (1843–1916), one of the greatest advocates of realism in literature, saw human experience as the true basis of all arts. His wide range of experiences as the scion of an affluent family with intellectual leanings and his early acquaintance with the European world cemented his faith in the artistic value of reality.

Born to Henry James Sr and Mary Robertson Walsh, he was the second of five children of which the philosopher and psychologist William James was his elder brother and the diarist Alice James his sister. Henry James Sr, a mystic and a Swedenborgian, had close connections with very distinguished people of his time – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas Carlyle and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow among others. They would have a lasting influence on Henry James as well. The frequent trips to England, France, and Germany from 1843–45, 1855–58 and 1859–60 was the offshoot of the father’s desire for a ‘better sensuous education’ (in a famous letter to Emerson) for his sons, the kind that could only be attained in Europe. James, in fact, learned to walk and talk in England and, as Leon Edel has observed, his exposure to English parks and houses became part of his mental landscape and informed many of his writings.

At Reverend W. C. Leverett’s Berkeley Institute, he formed a long standing friendship with Thomas Sergeant Perry, to whom many of James’s letters were addressed. Perry was a Harvard alumnus scholar, linguist and the husband of the famous

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