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# *What Maisie Knew*

HENRY JAMES



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# WHAT MAISIE KNEW

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Henry James

Introduction and Notes by

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION

*What Maisie Knew* is about the impact of legal reform upon the dynamics of family life, and a portrayal of the effect that adult freedoms have upon a small child. Earlier nineteenth-century novelists such as Trollope and Dickens had traced the lengthy, controlling process of law on individual destinies. Henry James, publishing his novel in 1897, edging towards the new century, shows his characters as still, to some extent, circumscribed by traditional conventions, but also opportunistically getting away with as much as they can in terms of freedom of sexual behaviour. The changed framework of matrimonial law gives them the chance to rewrite the rules. Divorce was uncommon in 1897, although it was becoming more common since the legislation of the 1880s which gave more rights to women.<sup>1</sup> This in itself would be a subject

1 See Note 1 of the Notes to the text of the novel for brief details of legislation.

of great cultural interest and potential for fiction, but James's focus on Maisie, the child of divorced parents, gives everything an incongruous twist, at once more intensely painful and absurd. Legal settlements at this time usually assigned the child to the father, but in the situation outlined in the opening pages which precede Chapter 1, Maisie is divided between her parents, Ida and Beale Farange, because her father has squandered his daughter's maintenance money and cannot repay it. These opening pages are couched in legal language, with terms such as 'litigation', 'appeal' and 'judgment'. Ostensibly ironic and detached from the disreputable pair, it becomes increasingly gossipy and complicit in the pleasures of scandal: 'The many friends of the Faranges drew together to differ about them; contradiction grew young again over teacups and cigars' (p. 13). By the end of the passage, the narrator's legal language is infiltrated by the mercenary and heartless language of the parents in the comment that 'poor Ida, who had run through everything, had now nothing but her carriage and her paralysed uncle' (p. 14) as assets. James has found a narrative voice which is both external to *and* coming from within this dissolute world.

### The narrator and Maisie

It is not until the first chapter itself that the infant Maisie appears, a pawn, a 'shuttlecock' (p. 18) in adult quarrels. She is, at first, literally *infans*, speechless, 'in the thick of the fight' (p. 15) between her parents. Her six-year-old experience is primarily one of physical sensation and her struggles to apprehend are conveyed in nursery images. The narrative of her childhood history is therefore given through the sophisticated urbane discourse of the omniscient narrator whose commentary, in James's words in his Preface to the novel, 'attends and amplifies'<sup>2</sup> her infant sensations. This dual narrative focus of adult and child perception is the interpretative and moral heart of the book. Maisie, a child of great spirit, exists in the gaps between what is said and what is meant. At first, she attempts to decode what language signifies, searching for a meaning which will fix or steady the confusion of reference around her; later, she acquires the art of 'not thinking singly' (p. 137). In terms of her own speech, she learns early on that it is often better not to speak at all. Silence is a survival strategy in a war zone. Rather than be a messenger of hate between her feuding parents, she opts for stupidity, although the

2 For full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

punishment can be pitifully brutal: 'on the stairs, returning from her father's, she had met a fierce question of her mother's with an imbecility as deep and had in consequence been dashed by Mrs Farange almost to the bottom' (p. 99).

If Maisie's infant world is unpredictable and, at times, violent, the stylistic medium in which it is given is largely comic. The incongruity between Maisie's perceptions and the sophistication of the adult narrative voice provides much of the comedy: Maisie, wondering why her father, on the occasion of his second marriage, lacks the aura of honeymoon, concludes that 'it was natural to judge the circumstances in the light of papa's proved disposition to contest the empire of the matrimonial tie' (p. 40). Although Maisie is a candid observer of her father's relationships with women, the language in which this is expressed is not that of a child, but a more knowing worldly vocabulary. Maisie feels that language is the key to the adult world, but finds that it has a baffling relationship to behaviour. She does not have the sexual code to unlock meaning. When her mother, remarking that the new governess, Miss Overmore, is one of eight sisters, comments 'what do they mean', she implies that the parents' sexual procreativity is a thing to be wondered at in the pinched economic circumstances of a clergyman's income. Maisie, of course, has not the slightest idea what her mother means by the remark. It is part of the enigmatic language world in which adults operate. There are, however, some things which do not depend on language which she does apprehend and expresses with a poignant simplicity in which there is no riddling: '“Mamma doesn't care for me . . . Not really,”' is a confidence she shares at an early stage with Sir Claude (p. 57).

As Maisie gets older (she is probably somewhere between eleven and thirteen at the end of the book), she becomes more adept at playing adult games. The games that Sir Claude gives her as a child which she and Mrs Wix cannot figure out are an image of the manoeuvrings of adult behaviour which she subsequently does begin to decipher at considerable emotional cost. As the novel draws to a close she acquires 'a sharpened sense for latent meanings' (p. 148) and is called upon to make moral decisions. As a feminist critic has observed, Maisie 'earns the right to participate in the text rather than to be its victim' (Cross, p. 84).<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, the adult narrator acknowledges that Maisie's 'divinations' are now 'so ample' that he can no longer 'attempt to trace the stages' (p. 125). Having translated

3 For full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

and interpreted her responses for so long, the narrator now more frequently assigns her the dignity of her own voice.

Much debate takes place amongst the characters in the novel, usually in the presence of Maisie herself, as to whether she has a moral sense, is innocent or corrupt, but these interrogations and surmises seem crude and misdirected in the light of the episodes in Boulogne. By this stage, the reader has learnt that the phrase 'moral sense' is not neutral or descriptive, but biased and partisan, carrying with it a subjective agenda. Mrs Wix's questioning seems intrusive and close to bullying. In these concluding chapters, Maisie's feelings are still childlike in some respects, but they are also becoming more messy and volatile like those of the adults around her. As she discovers a sense of her own identity and voice, so she discovers also the painful choices that love involves.

### **The adult world**

Surprisingly, given its subject of child neglect, this is not a depressing novel. The adult characters are of a Dickensian richness and salience: Ida and Beale Farange, Maisie's parents, are boldly and extravagantly drawn in their antagonism, their larger-than-life physical impingement. Indeed they are registered by a few physical attributes – their height, Beale's beard and glittering teeth, Ida's huge eyes and length of billiard-playing arm – as if these elements are their social capital. Existing on the edge both of an upper-class and also a mercantile world, they finance themselves by their opportunistic liaisons. The grotesque elements of their appearance are manifest to their daughter like oversized puppets in some frightening Punch and Judy show: her mother's monogrammed envelopes 'whizz, like dangerous missiles' (p. 15), while her father's friends pinch her calves and light cigarettes in her face. Ida's promiscuity is exquisitely captured in the passage where Maisie and Sir Claude come upon her with a gentleman in Kensington Gardens. Before commencing battle with her husband, Ida gives her lover the benefit of her charm: 'She directed to him the face that was like an illuminated garden, turnstile and all, for the frequentation of which he had his season-ticket' (p. 91). The imagery, figuring sexual availability and allure in terms of an amusement park, is poised between a child's perspective and an adult savouring of the sexual innuendo in the ironic formality of 'frequentation'. Ida and Beale, as a kind of benchmark of selfishness, are not characters for the reader to waste moral disapproval upon; rather, we enjoy their outrageousness. Whatever confusions Maisie is caught up in, she remains appreciative of their physical value. When she realises that

her father is leaving her, she notes that his shoes are 'not the pair she most admired, the laced yellow "uppers" and patent-leather complement' (p. 118). Even at the moment when her mother abandons her, Maisie reflects, admiring the '*éclairage*' of her mother's intensely made up face like 'a lamp set in a window', that 'it was no wonder the gentlemen were guided' (p. 130).

Mrs Wix, 'the old frumpy governess' as James referred to her in the Notebook in which he planned the novel (*Notebooks*, p. 240), contrasts with the exoticism of the other characters. Her spectacles, or 'straighteners', suggest the rather doggedly moral nature of her perception. As a 'dim, crooked little reflector' (*Notebooks*, p. 258) she is in some ways a parody of Maisie in her role as reflector of events. But she is hardly, like her charge, a 'little wonder-working agent' (Preface, p. 5). The occasion when Maisie observes the 'havoc of wonder' (p. 176) on her old governess's face at an unexpected turn of events, says a good deal about their relative mental agility and activity of spirit. Maisie's positive intensities and felicities contrast with Mrs Wix's limitations. Critical admirers have dwelt on her motherliness and loyalty; detractors have noted her narrow morality and intellectual deficiency. Certainly, her adoration of and financial dependence on Sir Claude at critical junctures in Maisie's life influence her morality. But she has been the only person to deliver that 'tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling' (p. 25) in Maisie's childhood. In the later stages of the novel she starts to speak up for her own rights and challenges the motives of other characters, including Maisie who has been ready to abandon her to run away to Paris with Sir Claude. Perhaps one of the unexpected functions of Mrs Wix is to exemplify how her craving for romantic fiction (the main 'subject' she has to teach Maisie) derives from the dingy narrowness of her existence. The modern reader is as likely to feel dismay as relief that Maisie's options are so restricted at the close. Mrs Wix's stuffy decency seems as much a morality based on circumstances as does the sexual opportunism of her counterpart, Miss Overmore. The 'pairing' of the governesses reveals the weaknesses of both.

Mrs Beale, as Miss Overmore, had been a governess, more qualified, much younger and prettier than Mrs Wix, but equally penurious in the job market. Her only real escape was through marriage and by the end of the novel, on the verge of divorcing Beale and netting Sir Claude, she might be regarded as having done well in a highly competitive field. If she secures Sir Claude, then as one of eight daughters brought up in genteel, but abject poverty, she will certainly have married up. She does begin with some good



intentions and affection for Maisie, but these are rapidly subsumed in the complications of her amours. Her moral decisions are led by her straitened circumstances and the powerful sexual and social charisma of Sir Claude. Indeed, Mrs Beale and Sir Claude do represent more complex moral issues, if only because they are step-parents drawn together by parental neglect of the offspring. In some ways, Mrs Beale becomes the most accomplished hypocrite of all the characters, in that she uses Maisie to protect her own good name and to further her affair with Sir Claude, while at the same time loudly declaring the most refined scruples on the subject. But she is also a headstrong yet canny player in the sensual game, as in her bold move, arriving in Boulogne, 'as fresh as the luck and the health that attended her' (p. 174) to lie in wait for Sir Claude. The passage in which Maisie discovers that Sir Claude has arrived during the night is played like a scene in the theatre:

When she entered the salon it was empty, but at the sound of the opened door someone stirred on the balcony, and Sir Claude, stepping straight in, stood before her. He was in light fresh clothes and wore a straw hat with a bright ribbon; these things, besides striking her in themselves as the very promise of the grandest of grand tours, gave him a certain radiance and, as it were, a tropical ease; but such effect only marked rather more his having stopped short and, for a longer minute than had ever at such a juncture elapsed, not opened his arms to her. [p. 190]

Armed with her promised divorce and her dazzling looks, Mrs Beale has ensured that she and Sir Claude are compromised by sleeping together, which also ensures that Mrs Wix will remove Maisie. She trades on their better natures. Despicable it may be, but it is also the force of sexual vitality cutting a swathe through other plans and intentions. The power of James's art is in his simultaneous registration of all these differing imperatives and responses: the sexual sheen of Sir Claude in his 'tropical ease'; Maisie's adolescent emotional loss, and the change in circumstances, the shift in relational dynamics: Maisie 'saw he was different – more so than he knew or designed' (p. 191).

The figure of Sir Claude is one of James's greatest character achievements. Representative of a decaying aristocratic class with the residual codes of a gentleman, of honourable behaviour just sufficiently active to ensure that he will be unable to desert the compromised Mrs Beale, charm is the principle of his being, the

magnet that draws those around him. He is the light man, drifting with insufficient occupation or income: as he says, "There's nothing so ruinous as putting in a cheap week" (p. 143). Foolish, weak, yet sexually attractive, Sir Claude is portrayed without explicit moralising. To James this was the essence of the art of fiction and he criticised his predecessor George Eliot's characterisation in this respect. He felt that her characters did not live, that she evolved her 'figures and situations' from 'her moral consciousness', that, although her characters were 'deeply studied and massively supported', they were 'not *seen* in the irresponsible plastic way' (*Partial Portraits*, p. 51). The creation of Sir Claude is the epitome of the 'irresponsible plastic way': his charm, his aura, his 'native animation' (p. 139) beguile us. This is not to say that his weaknesses are not apparent. Maisie learns that in a tight corner, he lies, and 'dodges' awkward questions. It is one of the ways in which she discovers that she cannot ask more of him than he is capable of giving, just as one of her famous child predecessors in fiction, David Copperfield, similarly learns about his substitute parent figure, Mr Micawber.<sup>4</sup>

Part of Sir Claude's charm is his childlike quality, his pleasure in role-playing with Maisie. She is his escape from the demands of women. Because he is also, of course, 'plastic' in the other sense of pliable, 'poor plastic and dependent male' (p. 159) the narrator calls him at one point. When Maisie plays at being a duchess with him, she has none of the disagreeable aptitude for recrimination which real duchesses might exhibit. Indeed, the malleable Sir Claude is at the mercy of designing females whose capacity to be stricken is matched only by their power to plot their life with him. Sometimes the romantic lead is a tough part. Afraid of Ida and Mrs Beale in turn, Sir Claude is '*clawed* by the Furies' (Rowe, p. 128). Maisie, for her part, loves him with a child's unconditionality and then later, unsurprisingly, with an awakening sexuality, an adolescent passion, entangled with residual elements of their old parent-child feelings. This is a sign, not of corruption, but of the complications which the freedoms of Boulogne bring to their relationship. Maisie's growing up and Sir Claude's changed status combine to separate them. Losing Sir Claude inch by inch, Maisie understands she must let him go. That this demands much more than the 'moral sense' about which adults have crassly speculated, is made very clear. It is a

4 As a small child, James listened to family readings of Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* on its first publication, serialised 1849-50.

'death' which turns the world to ashes and leaves Sir Claude 'free' to be swallowed up by Mrs Beale. The pastoral interlude in Boulogne is over. But the experience has also been one of inward growth, of love and gratitude. As Sir Claude and Maisie part, 'their eyes met as the eyes of those who have done for each other what they can' (p. 216).

### The composition of *What Maisie Knew*: fiction and the theatre

This novel of rampant egoisms and sexual licence, of excess bursting the boundaries of convention, is the most tightly structured of all James's fictions. His Notebook entries of the 1890s in relation to this work are unusually detailed. The first idea came from an anecdote he heard at a dinner party in 1892 about a divorced couple whose child was divided between them. He thought of it initially as a five-thousand-word tale (it was to become a ninety-thousand-word novel). In August 1893 he took up the idea again, but without adding much detail. It was not until two years later that it all came together and he was able to work steadily to completion. The novel was serialised on both sides of the Atlantic in 1897: in bi-weekly parts in the Chicago *Chapbook* from 15 January to 1 August, and in an abridged version in eight monthly parts in the London *New Review* from February to September. In volume form it was published in the same year by Herbert Stone in America and by William Heinemann in England.<sup>5</sup>

There were personal reasons why James, in the mid-1890s, felt the need to renew his fictional powers. He had made an unsuccessful and bruising foray into the theatre which culminated in 1895 with his play *Guy Domville* being booed on the opening night while Oscar Wilde's play *An Ideal Husband* was received with great acclaim. After this humiliating *débâcle*, James returned to novel writing with relief. Yet he also felt that the experience had not been wasted, and that he could transpose the scenic art into his fictional structures: 'the scenic method is my absolute, my imperative' (*Notebooks*, p. 263) he assured himself. In the period 1895-6 he worked out a scenario with great care, finding, in the parallel neatness of the divorced parents remarrying, a compositional logic which would throw into relief the muddled and mixed state of his young protagonist. In a society in which everyone seeks to 'square' everyone else while evading the

5 I am indebted for this information to *A Bibliography of Henry James* (third edition), edited by Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1982.

rules, the 'proper symmetry' (Preface, p. 3) of the plot is like a sexual template which controls the erring couples.

If the symmetry of plot and the scenic successiveness owe much to James's recent entanglement with the disciplines of writing plays, there is also a richer, deeper imaginative endowment from the theatre. The witty deployment of theatrical devices for comic effect is an incomparable element in the meeting of Sir Claude and Ida in Kensington Gardens in Chapter 15. The scene is elaborately stagey: Ida has a histrionic sense of self-performance and of pre-emptive strike: "What are you doing with my daughter?" (p. 91) she demands in melodramatic mode – a mode apt to collapse into burlesque, or indeed into a circus. Maisie's role is that of spectator, and then walk-on part as accomplice, 'equal plotter of sin' with Sir Claude in the lurid spectacle. Sir Claude's earlier humorous plea to Maisie when he arrived to take her out, "don't make me a scene" (p. 87), is followed by this big 'scene' in the Gardens. The word 'scene' is appropriate to marital quarrel, to the way in which Ida projects herself, and, overall, to the novelist's techniques of presentation.

It was not only his recent experience of playwriting that James could call on in creating such a passage. The plays he himself wrote were in a refined comedy-of-manners mode, but he had also experienced in childhood very different kinds of theatrical performance. The autobiographical account of his early years, *A Small Boy and Others*,<sup>6</sup> which he published in 1913 at the age of seventy, reveals him to have been in avid attendance from a tender age, first at the circus and pantomime, then at vaudeville, farce and burlesque, the most lurid forms of popular theatre. American theatre in the 1850s and 1860s was unsophisticated, but the gaslighting, the fantastic gallery of characters, the special effects which might or might not work, made an outing to a New York production an extraordinarily fertile one for a highly imaginative small boy. There is a very robust sense of the theatrical in *What Maisie Knew* which might be surprising in one whose adult attempts at writing for the stage had been drawing-room comedy of manners, but less surprising in a childhood *habitué* of the excesses of the New York popular stage. He described himself in *A Small Boy and Others* as a 'prowling infant' who 'stood long and drank deep at those founts of romance that gushed from the huge placards

6 James's autobiographical writings, including *A Small Boy and Others*, were collected and edited by F. W. Dupee. This edition is hereafter cited as *Autobiography*.

of the theatre' (*Autobiography*, p. 58) and recalled 'the scarce tolerable throb' of waiting for the curtain to rise: 'One's eyes bored into it in vain, and yet one knew it would rise at the named hour, the only question being if one could exist till then' (*Autobiography*, p. 61). A juvenile who had 'crouched' so close as to have his 'nose . . . brushed by the petticoats of . . . a fine fair woman with a great heaving of bosom' (*Autobiography*, p. 67) was unlikely to wince at staging Ida Farange, and could precisely express Maisie's perception of her mother as like an actress 'sweeping down to the footlights as if she would jump them' (p. 90).

*A Small Boy and Others* also reveals that James's own childhood had some of the bewilderments of Maisie's, not in parental disharmony (his parents were very close), but in the frequent changes of scene and disrupted education. Even while resident in New York, James recalls how 'a bevy of educative ladies passes before me' (*Autobiography*, p. 11). But his parents also travelled extensively in Europe subjecting their children to an array of educational methods, teachers and tutors rather like a sequence of flickering images in the theatre. The scenic successiveness of Maisie's existence, of experience as a kind of theatrical show at once remote and alarmingly impinging, stems from James's own childhood which he describes as having been, educationally, of 'dim confusion' and 'bewildered anxiety' (*Autobiography*, p. 111).

The sense of theatre is also evident in the language, which is a language of combative performance. If Oscar Wilde's witty *An Ideal Husband* beat James's rather solemn *Guy Domville* on the stage, James was able to turn the defeat to account. *What Maisie Knew* might be said to inaugurate James's Wildean phase, in its stylishness and zest for the performative value of words and phrases. They are displayed, handed from character to character in a ritualised display of innuendo. The word 'free', for example, in Chapter 25, is sexual, legal or social by turn as it is passed in dialogue from speaker to speaker. The various implications of the verb 'to know' are similarly savoured. Any combinations of the carnal, sexual meanings as well as the informative or educative ones might be in play at any one time. The teasing, puzzling element of the game demands an active interpretative role of the reader and emphasises how language operates as a form of power.

### Cultural languages

Gossip, slang, innuendo, the sentiments of cheap romantic fantasy, all these languages which we might call clichéd, circulate in the novel, each stylised with a degree of exaggeration, a touch of parody. The formal legal language of the opening has already been noted, a professional register incongruously at odds with the more dissolute speech forms which it comes up against. The narrative voice of the novel incorporates within its sophisticated adult register the perceptions and vocabulary of childhood. That culture consists of a number of language zones, different speech communities in negotiation with each other, and that prose fiction expresses this multiplicity of languages has been proposed by the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. This emphasis means that Bakhtin was not so much concerned with identifying and describing the individualised voice of a narrator as in showing that the language of a novel is not a single language but what he termed 'heteroglossia' (*The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 263), the interweaving of a number of cultural voices. Thus, for Bakhtin, fiction was inherently 'dialogic', in dialogue with the pre-existing language world, angled towards the different speech communities of which culture consists. The narrator's discourse is not a single voice, but 'imports' and naturalises the speech of others. The narrative of *What Maisie Knew* seems a particularly potent example of this kind of dialogic complexity. The passage in Chapter 9, describing Sir Claude's effect upon Maisie and Mrs Wix, is an example of the narrator's discourse importing the speech of 'others' (by this Bakhtin means not individuals, but 'voices' in the sense of different networks of beliefs and power relationships). By a slight heightening of the different kinds of speech, almost to the point of parody, attention is drawn to the ideological assumptions and values of the different cultural zones which are internally dialogised within the narrator's speech:

He disappeared at times for days, when his patient friends understood that her ladyship would naturally absorb him; but he always came back with the drollest stories of where he had been, a wonderful picture of society, and even with pretty presents that showed how in absence he thought of his home. Besides giving Mrs Wix by his conversation a sense that they almost themselves 'went out', he gave her a five-pound note and the history of France and an umbrella with a malachite knob, and to Maisie both chocolate-creams and story-books . . . [p. 50]

The ironic shading and heightening of the different language zones is brilliantly achieved in the interaction of the childhood acquisitive 'wonder' register, 'both chocolate-creams and story-books', the language of bourgeois sentimentalism, 'how in absence he thought of his home', the aristocratic vocabulary, 'drollest stories', and even what might be called the cheap novelistic language of 'pretty presents'. To think about James's fictional discourse in Bakhtinian terms is to highlight the active quality of the language, its range and engagement with different ideological class groupings.

### English society in the 1890s

As an American novelist who lived for much of his life from the 1870s in Europe and in England, James, an inveterate diner-out, was in an advantageous position to observe upper-class English society. *What Maisie Knew* is James's most English novel, but one in which he shows traditional stabilities disintegrating. The aristocracy was becoming detached from the land as a source of income and occupation, and Sir Claude's aimless existence is the outcome of that loss of function. In broader terms, too, the class, gender and ethnic stratifications of English society are revealed in process of change. James referred, in a Notebook entry of 1895 to two features of English life of the 1890s: one was the 'masculinization' of women which is reflected in Ida's aggressive foraging for sexual partners; the other was the 'demoralization' (*Notebooks*, p. 192) of the aristocracy evident in the feminised Sir Claude. The modern reader might, of course, respond to Ida's 'masculine' energies and Sir Claude's 'feminine' characteristics differently, finding positives in her entrepreneurialism and in his gentleness and desire for a family. There is no doubt however that Beale Farange, left in 'perpetual Piccadilly', (p. 14) is representative of a subsection of the upper-middle governing class no longer useful, nor self-supporting. The insecurities of the governess and servant class within this volatile economy are also prominent and act as a social reminder of how much time an upper-middle-class child would spend with these often disaffected classes. We see something of the circulation of money in class terms when the Countess gives Maisie a large number of sovereigns for her cab home alone after her father has abandoned her. After a half-crown is bestowed upon 'an unsophisticated cabman' as 'the least he would take', Susan the maidservant induces Maisie to 'devote to the repayment of obligations general as well as particular one of the sovereigns'. When Mrs Beale demands the sovereign from Susan the next morning, Maisie 'had through

Susan's eyes more than one glimpse of the way in which Revolutions are prepared' (p. 123). Both Susan and Mrs Wix, exploited and paid in arrears if at all, stand up to their employers, make demands, drive bargains.

Who 'pays', who lives off whom, is ruthlessly exposed in the novel. But London society, in becoming more cosmopolitan and international, is represented as socially puzzling. The entrepreneurs Mr Perriam and Mr Tischbein gain entrance to society through wealth, as presumably does the mixed race 'Countess' whom Beale intends to live off. Toni Morrison has drawn attention to her role as the 'agency of moral choice' at this stage of the novel (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, p. 13). How she comes to be a Countess (an impossible American title), whether she is a West Indian, a South American, or the widow of a titled European, or a courtesan self-styled as a countess, or a married woman who chooses Beale as an accessory like the ornaments in her drawing-room, James leaves the reader to speculate according to individual prejudice. Maisie's responses are intriguing. She encounters the Countess just after admiring the 'bright brown ladies' in the Flowers of the Forest sideshow at the Exhibition which she is visiting with Mrs Beale in the hope of a rendezvous with Sir Claude. Maisie is doubly disconcerted to discover her father with a lady as brown as those in the sideshow. Later, meeting the Countess in her luxurious home, Maisie thinks of her as a 'human monkey', but discovers that she is kind and friendly. If Maisie exhibits with exceptional candour the racial stereotypes to which she has been exposed, she none the less adds to this her own modifying observations. Given that she only has *The Arabian Nights* and the 'Flowers of the Forest' as reference points, she does not do too badly. Whatever her origins, the Countess is evidently one of the newer features of the London scene which make it more difficult to interpret socially.

James's depiction of the effect of modernity and social change is often to problematise it, as in the Countess episode. There is no delicate side-stepping of ethnic stereotyping, just as there is no delicacy in treating his modern subject, divorce. What he does show is that these alterations of the social fabric impinge, make waves, not all negative. If divorce unleashes spectacularly bad behaviour, it also shows that a stepfather might be an improvement upon a father in some circumstances. And there are, of course, moments in Boulogne when the reader of the twenty-first century responds to the sense of freedom from stuffy conventions, and might feel that Maisie would have a richer, if more turbulent, life with Sir Claude and Mrs Beale



than with Mrs Wix's catechisms. The Channel crossings are part of the breaking up of the insularity of English society, a process which James as an American had been recording throughout his novelistic career. English culture had always fascinated him, but he reveals it at the end of the century as shaken up by the cosmopolitanism of modernity.

### **Sexuality and childhood**

In other respects, too, *What Maisie Knew* is uncompromisingly modern in the boldness of its themes, initiating, as it does, the group of short novels in which James is exploring issues of sexuality and childhood. It is followed by *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), a ghost story which turns on a governess's belief that the two children whom she has in her charge have been corrupted by the former manservant and governess, now dead, who return to haunt her. *The Awkward Age* (1899) is about an adolescent girl exposed to the corrupting influence of her mother's social circle. The 1880s and 1890s were a period in which revelations about adult sexual preoccupation with children were to the fore. In 1885 W. T. Stead had published his investigation into child prostitution. It was the period in which such famous literary figures as Ernest Dowson, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and John Ruskin were infatuated with little girls. The extent to which children might be innocent or knowing, the state of mind of adults who ascribe innocence or corruption to a child, the inescapability of such judgements being made, the acceptable parameters of behaviour, are all part of the cultural scrutiny of the novel. Scenes such as Beale's fumbings and gropings when he is with Maisie for the last time highlight an equivocal and murky area; Sir Claude and Maisie's relationship, although innocent, is always vulnerable to the ways other adults interpret it. James is careful from the beginning to deflect any excessive sexual prurience on the part of the reader when the narrator declares that the corrupt adults will do Maisie no harm. This does not mean that the adults, in their careless crossing of boundaries, are blameless.

What James does show is that the contaminant is primarily the gossip and speculation which surrounds Maisie, and that each individual mind is a damaging hotbed in this respect. Mrs Wix, for all her dullness and respectability, has as virulent and potentially harmful a fantasy life in this respect as any other character except Mrs Beale who outdoes her. Much of Mrs Wix's 'education' of Maisie is devoted to sharing with the child her speculations about the sexual activities of her employers. Reading the novel over a century later, in