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RUMINATION AND ASPIRATION IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE SPOILS OF POYNTON*

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RUMINATION AND ASPIRATION IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE SPOILS OF POYNTON*

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Table of Contents

Abstract v

Introduction 1

Victorian Moral Mind 3

The Suspense of Marriage: Fleda's Rumination 10

Fleda's Ruminative Aspiration and Purification 20

Conclusion 33

Works Cited 35

Abstract

Recently, scholarship on Victorian moralism has elaborated on the narrative and plot techniques of Victorian novels to disclose characters' moral thinking processes in various ways. In contrast to modernist authors and critics' strong reaction against Victorian novels' compulsive or formulaic moral themes, the moral tendency in Victorian novels fosters the characters' evolving moral sense through a series of moral decision-making. Henry James devotes himself to elaborating on his characters' moral thinking and the process of consciousness in most of his works, including his late novel *The Spoils of Poynton*. In this light, this thesis aims to focus on the moral thinking process of Fleda Vetch, the protagonist of this story of things and its war of possession. In a series of temptations and moral decision-making moments, Fleda undergoes rumination, which represents her repetitive and unwavering willingness to preserve her moral sense and loyalty to the spoils of Poynton and Mrs. Gereth. In her rumination, she not only realizes the genuine value of the aesthetic objects that transcends the mere value of possession, but also her aspiration to appreciate them even in their invisible condition. In spite of her furious desire to achieve the most precious piece of the spoils at the end, which burns with the fire, James's aspiration to keep his protagonist's moral sense remains after the ending.

Keywords: Victorian Novel, Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, Victorian Moral Mind, Rumination, Aspiration, Character Studies

Rumination and Aspiration in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*

Introduction

The body of criticism that has grown up around Henry James's late novel, *The Spoils of Poynton*, is generally divided into two groups: those who see Fleda's relation to the spoils as developing her moral sense, and those who think Fleda's compulsive obsession with the spoils fosters not only her self-destruction but also her failure to protect the spoils. For example, Charles Palliser argues that for Fleda, her morality is inseparable from the aesthetic value of the spoils: "the beauty of the spoils is not an absolute, for aesthetic values cannot be divorced from their moral context" (43). By contrast, Gary Totten suggests that the novel's burning ending of the spoils implies Fleda's "increasing threats to the integrity of Poynton's art collection" and makes her encounter "Poynton's smoke, at a clear mental vision" (93, 95).

Both Palliser and Totten are right to suggest that the aesthetic value of the spoils in the novel is pertinent to Fleda's mind toward the spoils. Indeed, one might argue that the burning of the spoils is a punishment for Fleda's excessive obsession with the spoils, as Nina Baym suggests (111); however, in this essay, I aim to focus on Fleda's moral decision-making that guides her to be the aspirant who aspires to preserve the genuine and aesthetic value of the spoils. In spite of the fiery conclusion, which can be read as a desolate and hopeless one for the heroine of the novel, I view this ending as James's aspiration to represent Fleda's ongoing moral aspiration, which is not limited to a mere possession.

At some point, a group of critics argues that James depicts Fleda not as a moral heroine who provides "a superior display of 'mind'" (*SP* 31) as he explained his initial intention in the preface. Indeed, Fleda's capricious, ambiguous, and self-deceptive mind fosters a major distraction, especially when she accepts Owen's invitation to visit Poynton for taking "the

Maltese Cross" (82). While Fleda's mind is in many respects elusive, so to speak, throughout the essay, I argue that James successfully writes Fleda's "progress and march" toward moral sense through a series of moral decisions; as James writes in the preface, achieving "the free spirit" is "always much tormented, and by no means always triumphant, is heroic, ironic, pathetic, or whatever" (32).

The first section of the essay provides an overview of scholarship on Victorian moralism and examines how the concepts of the moral sense and mind have been examined in relation to Henry James's novels and, *The Spoils of Poynton* in particular. Indeed, it is undeniable that the study of the characters' minds in this novel has been considered as minor compared to James's other masterpieces, and the critics of Fleda weigh more on Fleda's unstable and unreliable mind; however, along with a group of critics who value Fleda's morality, I aim to explore further her process of affirming her ethical and moral mind and sense through her moral decision making. In order to do that, I will borrow Amanda Anderson's concept of rumination—that is, a constant moral decision-making process conditioned by fear of "loss or threatened loss" (133) of the value one cares the most—and relate this to Agnes Callard's concept of aspiration—that is, the "process of rational value-acquisition" (6).

While some critics argue that there is no difference between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda, as eventually they both care about their private interests, my goal is to elaborate on the specific aspirations of Fleda in her attempt to preserve the value of the spoils and how she differs from Mrs. Gereth with the concept of aspiration that is not discussed a lot so far. Finally, in my discussion of the burning ending of the novel, I consider this fire as a purification, but not as a purification of the obsessive materialism in the genre of Victorian realism, as Bill Brown argues, nor a purification of Fleda's destructive characteristics, as John Auchard argues. Rather, I consider that the fire purifies Fleda's temporary blind desire for the spoils. If we consider James's attempt to depict Fleda's moral sense as elevated compared to the other characters,

James's saving Fleda from her relentless temptation over the spoils implies the author's own aspiration to preserve his heroine's dignified moral aesthetic sense and capacity as someone who can appreciate the genuine value of the spoils even in their invisible condition.

Victorian Moral Mind

In *Good Form*, Jesse Rosenthal notes the strong reaction of modernist authors and critics against Victorian novelists' tendency to put a compulsive and authoritative moral frame in their novels, which makes them no more than didactic without artistic merit: "Such a stereotype is a legacy of the *fin-de-siècle* and modernism, and contends that Victorian novels suffered from having their morality bolted on: opinionated narrative intrusions that did not serve an aesthetic or formal purpose" (3). For Modernist critics, the Victorian novelists' compulsive moralizing through stereotypical moral plots and narratives misleads readers by presenting life in manner both "too optimistic and too shallow" (qtd. in 4), as Virginia Woolf writes of George Meredith. Rosenthal, however, argues that "[t]he compulsion of narrative" in the Victorian novels guides readers through acts of "intuitive judgment"—what is wrong or right—toward the "moral thought" at the heart of the Victorian novel (2-3). For Rosenthal, the moral plots and narratives in the Victorian novels are not a hindrance to distract aesthetic or formal purpose; rather, they are the signs of the Victorian novelists' wish to keep their readers' moral faith during the chaotic period of social and political life.

In a similar fashion, Andrew Miller, in *The Burdens of Perfection*, argues that despite the turbulence of the Victorian era—which produced a sense of alienation not only of the self from society but also of the self from itself—it was "a period pleased to take honesty as a leading virtue" (96). For Miller, "a leading virtue" of "honesty" is rooted in the Victorian novelists' "'moral perfectionism'"—"the desire to improve" (2). Like Rosenthal, Miller observes that moral perfectionism is not a mere conceptual theory but "a particular narrative

form" that directs readers to consider the characters' complicated moral desires and to reflect on their own moral desires in turn. In this respect, Miller suggests that moral perfectionism enacts "an ethical practice" that motivates moral thinking about oneself and others. This moral "narrative form" functions as a key to recovering the disconnection and uncertainty of the Victorian period (2-3). What links these Rosenthal and Miller is their insight into the Victorian novelists' pursuit of shaping and displaying the thinking process in their novels, thus cultivating the moral integrity and conviction of their readership.

The novel offers the ideal space for the display of the characters' acts of the mind by creating what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "a zone outside any possible contact with the present" (79). This zone enables the readers to view the characters' constant flow of thought and reflection on their memories and experiences. This is very much like what Nicholas Dames writes in *Amnesiac Selves*, when he argues that "the novel might have been nineteenth-century European culture's most significant formalization of memory and its processes is a claim few today would dispute" (4). At the same time, Dames writes that reminiscent narrative form is often considered "a dilemma or a threat" that not only undoes the novels' didactic lessons but also entraps their characters in "traumatic fixation" and "the eruption of desultory, chaotic reminiscences." For Dames, the adverse functions of memory are not convertible or changeable into favorable terms but must be eliminated in order to retain in memory "only what is pleasant, and only what the self can employ in the present." In this respect, Dames introduces the term "amnesiac self"—characters who are determined to discard their unpleasant and traumatic memory to live "a certain kind of life—a life no longer burdened by the past, a life lived as a coherent tale, summarizable, pointed, and finally moralizable" ("Introduction").

In "Thinking with Character," Amanda Anderson also underscores the role of "traumatic fixation" in the Victorian novels. In contrast with Dames, Anderson argues that characters' "obsessive" (133), persistent, and repetitious "attachment" (134) to their chaotic

and traumatic memories or experiences functions as "a form of moral reflection" (156) that enables them to reconsider and manage their moral mind and values, not only to recover themselves from their "moral shock"—"tragic occurrences, disgrace, status injury, injustice, alienation among friends or family members, and loss or threatened loss" (133)—but also to transform into more altruistic character. For Anderson, such a display of mental process is what she defines as "rumination" (133). She distinguishes the negative and pathological sense of rumination, especially in psychology—that is, a kind of failed process of discarding or overcoming traumatic memories—from the slow and somewhat obsessive process of discovering and fostering one's moral sense, which enables one to move forward from some "moral shock." In contrast to Dames, Anderson believes that the traumatic fixation is not always a problem to be eliminated, but rather an opportunity both for the characters—as they can resolve their own internal moral dilemma by themselves and emerge with a firm moral sense—and for readers—as they can think and feel with the characters and reflect their own moral values—to interact each other in the dynamics of moral thinking process. The process represented by the novels' narrative feature of free indirect discourse and the repetitive "psychological differences" (133). Anderson's focus on rumination as a process of fostering moral character has some affinities with the definition of aspiration articulated by Agnes Callard.

In *Aspiration*, Callard distinguishes the conventional definition of the word "aspiration" that "is sometimes used to describe any kind of hope or wish or long-term goal to bring some result about" (7) from the self-regulated learning "process of rational value-acquisition" (6), in which a particular value fosters the agent's lifetime transformation with new perspectives: "On an aspirational account, self-creation is agent-driven learning in the domain of value. The aspirant brings herself to a different view as to what matters in life and comes to appreciate what she once did not" (197). Just as Anderson underscores the characters' consistent

attachment to their "moral shock" in order to find their own moral motivation, so Callard emphasizes the aspirant's unwavering willingness in the process of pursuing this life-changing value, a value that the aspirant pursues with potentially frustrating slowness. As Callard writes, "the learning of a value takes time" (176). Beyond a fixation on the slow thinking process, what links Anderson and Callard is their sense of the agent's moral responsibility. Although the word "rumination" is not used in her book, Callard claims that "there is no such thing as 'aspiring to be evil'" but it is only "praiseworthy" when the agent achieves the morally responsible value through aspiration (13). For both Anderson and Callard, the ultimate goal of the self-creative thinking process is to direct and shape the agent into a figure capable of achieving the Good. In this sense, Callard's philosophical insight on aspiration and its process approaches Victorian novelists' own dedication to moral aspiration. What elaborates this is the continuation of the moral thinking process via the Victorian novels' narrative techniques, psychological descriptions, and their aspiration to inherit the consistent moral spirit across the ages, as Andrew Miller writes: "an aspiration rather than an assured achievement" (106).

James—as many critics note—is deeply influenced by his brother William James's psychological theories and is also deeply dedicated to elaborating the complexity of characters' minds and their relationships with readers. As Teckyoung Kwon writes, "As a serious artist, Henry adopted William's principles of psychology and placed them at the center of his literary work. He drew from his brother's writings the concept of Realism, while allowing William's ideas to shape his general approach to fiction" (8). The body of criticism that has grown up around James's display of the mind consistently underscores that the representation of characters' consciousness involves a dynamic process of shaping the moral and sympathetic imagination. For example, in the preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James encourages the readers to fix their attention on Isabel Archer's consciousness:

> "'Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness,' I

> said to myself, 'and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to *that*–for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself . . . To depend upon her and her little concerns wholly to see you through will necessitate, remember, your really "doing" her.'" (*PL* 21-22)

In her reading of the preface, Meghan Marie Hammond argues that even though James claims in the preface to disclose Isabel's complex consciousness, James's "tendency to leave his protagonists' minds a mystery" thwarts the readers' expectations to see Isabel's happy ending by representing her return to Gilbert Osmond in such a way that it presents "some frustrating mental lacunae" to the readers (39-40). Indeed, as Hammond argues, James's failure to represent the core consciousness of Isabel's mind in returning to the patriarchal matrimony is what makes this ending controversial. However, James suggests to the readers to "stick to" Isabel's consciousness to fix their attention on Isabel's moral and sympathetic thinking process. One might read Isabel's return as her incomprehensible self-sacrifice, but James describes Isabel's moral and sympathetic obligation to protect Pansy Osmond:

> She said to herself that we must take our duty where find it, and that we must look for it as much as possible. Pansy's sympathy was a direct admonition; it seemed to say that here was an opportunity, not eminent perhaps but unmistakable." (*PL* 547-48)

Here, by writing "She said to herself," James indicates that Isabel is in the moral and sympathetic thinking process in her consciousness. Furthermore, James's writing "we," rather than "she," seems to invite readers into her thinking. Isabel recognizes and feels that protecting young and kind Pansy from her father's immoral and patriarchal influence is an "unmistakable" action to take. In this respect, one might read Isabel's return not as a mere mystery, but James's intention to elaborate on Isabel's moral action according to her elevated sympathetic

consciousness to think about others, which also invites the readers to think with Isabel and encourages them to think about James's moral aspiration in the Victorian era, as Dorothy Van Ghent writes: "In James's world, the highest affirmation of life is the development of the subtlest and most various consciousness" (211). And yet, it is undeniable that James, not only in this novel but also in his other works, leaves his protagonists' minds somewhat of a mystery. However, such a mystery might be a vantage point for readers to reread James's novels and ruminate with the characters' minds to find deeply indicated moral and sympathetic consciousness.

For James, the genre of the novel is a space not only to explore his characters' consciousnesses, but also to share such consciousness with the readers, as he writes in *The Future of the Novel*: "It [The Novel] will stretch anywhere . . . But for its subject, magnificently, it has the whole human consciousness" (qtd. in Labrie 517). Consciousness, for James, is not a stable or fixed state, but rather expandable and evolving. In "Henry James's Idea of Consciousness," Ross Labrie quotes James's letter to Mrs. William James: "The mere power to work in such measure as I can is an infinite help to a better consciousness" (qtd. in 519). Labrie argues that James's aspiration to alleviate "'a better consciousness'" not only indicates the "'movement'" of the consciousness but also fosters "the drama of consciousness in the lives of his character" (519). Like both rumination and aspiration, the dynamic display of characters' consciousness in James's novels not only involves the gradual moral improvement of the characters but also directs readers' attention to what Labrie dubs "moral patterns of consciousness" (527).

As we read, Isabel's sympathetic mind is fixed on Pansy to rescue her from Osmond's patriarchal and dogmatic tendencies; James describes his characters' sympathetic consciousness not as unconditional or random, but as discerning and selective. Recently, in *Psychology in the Fiction of Henry James*, Kwon argues that William James's regard of

"consciousness as an agency of selection that is directed by interest" (16) impacts Henry James's characters' sympathetic minds. She writes, "In short, consciousness is a feeling, for it is an agency of selection, directed by its interest, in line with one's memories" (94). Indeed, as I will explain further in the next sections, a shared interest in the spoils is what fosters the sympathetic connection between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda. Kwon preferred the term "empathy" to "sympathy," arguing that James's characters learn "consciousness as empathy" by reflecting on themselves through a series of mistakes in their selective interactions with other characters. Like Anderson, Kwon continues that the narrative technique of free indirect discourse enables readers not only to keep a certain distance from the characters but also to feel and think with them (61-63). In terms of displaying the characters' consistent learning and growth of their moral and ethical sense, the process of moral and sympathetic consciousness in the Jamesian novel resembles the concepts of rumination and aspiration, as Labrie also underscores James's characters' active interaction and development of minds: "In summing up, it can be said that James viewed consciousness as the mind's dynamic and selective assimilation, interpretation, and evaluation of its environment and of itself at any one moment" (527).

Another body of criticism that has grown up around *The Spoils of Poynton* also treats Fleda's mode of thought as an aesthetic or moral flaw. Patrick F. Quinn strongly argues that Fleda's "absolutism" in the novel functions as a "dizzying moral dialectic" (563, 574). For Quinn, Fleda's moral fixation on protecting the spoils not only forces Owen to marry Mona—even though Fleda knows that he is no longer in love with her—but also fosters Fleda's self-"deception," her failure to recognize Owen's true affection for her. She intentionally cuts off her affection for him, leading her to become "an agent of destruction" (573, 571, 563). As Nina Baym also argues, Fleda's moral perfectionism hinders the aesthetic value of the novel: "In a sum, a Fleda who acted as decisively and single-mindedly as James had intended might well appear fanatic, not heroic—destructively rigid instead of poetically idealistic" (106). For both

Quinn and Baym, Fleda's obsessive moral spirit is not as intelligible as James intended in his preface and the notebooks of this novel. Such is Fleda's compulsive moral sense, leaving Fleda in solitude, achieving nothing.

What links these critics is their acknowledgement of the importance of the moral theme and the constant transformation of Fleda's mind in *The Spoils of Poynton*, as Quinn writes, "The subject of the book is the difficulty of arriving at intelligent moral decisions" (563), and as Baym writes, "Thus, up to the last lines of the book Fleda's character is in evolution" (111). In the following section of this essay, I consider Fleda's moral thought process in light of rumination and aspiration theories, along with the theme of sympathetic mind in the Victorian novel, arguing that Fleda is a deeply complicated and ambiguous character who builds her own moral and "intelligent consciousness" (*SP* 30) by obsessively, yet productively rethinking her moral shock via rumination, illustrating her aspiration to be a genuinely deserving future guardian of the spoils.

The Suspense of Marriage: Fleda's Rumination

The Spoils of Poynton is built on two pivotal plots of suspense that demonstrate Fleda's evolving moral and ruminative thinking process through her repetitive moral shocks: the delayed chronology of Owen and Mona's marriage, and Fleda's physical detachment from Mrs. Gereth. Here, I call attention to James's grappling with condensing this novel. On September 8th, 1895, seven months before he first serialized this work in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in his notebook, James writes:

> By tragic little accidents, I mean the tragic accident of the waste of labour to which I have often found myself condemned in trying to do the short (the really, I mean, the very short) thing. I am just crawling out of one of them, in this particular connection: the attempt, in *The House Beautiful*, to meet Scudder on

> the basis of 10,000 words—an attempt that has ended, irremissibly, incurably, in almost 30,000 . . . Suffice it that I'm simply face to face with the little question: '*Can* I do the thing in 10,000 words or can I not?' . . . The difficulty has been, I think, when I've failed, that I haven't tried *right*. I've lost sight too much of the necessary smallness, necessary singleness of the subject. I've been too proud to take the very simple thing. I've almost always taken the thing requiring developments." (*SP* 221)

In spite of his self-reproach for missing "sight too much of the necessary smallness, necessary singleness of the subject," James, by writing twenty thousand words more, successfully achieves Fleda's "developments" of being moral character. A month later, James notes his intention to build the suspense of Owen and Mona's marriage: "There must have been an opening here for the question of date, of postponement. Owen tells Fleda, in their interview, that Mona has postponed, so as to give him time to act and his mother time to restitute" (226). Though James reduces the function of this suspense to a mere plot device at this point, in his final publication of *The Spoils of Poynton*, he intensifies this chronological gap by describing the dynamics of Fleda's rumination and ratifies the process of her moral development. Thus, James's concern with reducing the novel implies his aspiration to display Fleda's delicate and complex mind.

The marriage plot is not only a significant feature of the Victorian novel but also provides the ideal space for rumination. Amanda Anderson notes, "Of course, this interestingly lights up the fact that deliberations about possible suitors is a key feature of the realist novel, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, just as marriage, or deliberation brought to a close, is a common vehicle of plot closure" (151). What then does Fleda ruminate on, though it is not a journey for finding her mate? What then are the moral shocks that motivate her to stick to the process and act of her mind? Here, it will be helpful to recall what the moral

shocks are. Again, Anderson: “tragic occurrences, disgrace, status injury, injustice, alienation among friends or family members, and loss or threatened loss” (133). If Fleda confronts the condition of “loss or threatened loss,” it means that she has something to preserve.

Fleda and Mrs. Gereth’s meeting at Waterbath indicates not merely a social gathering, but an unexpected and intimate, in Bill Brown’s words, “aesthetic bond” (224) derived from “the intimate ugliness of Waterbath” that is “an ugliness fundamental and systemic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks” (*SP* 37). Though we will see the distinct conflicts and emotional gaps between them later, here, by depicting the aristocratic lady’s awareness of the young but poor, who always takes “third-class compartment,” Fleda’s “extraordinary ‘flair’” (192, 42)—her appreciation of aesthetic value—James attempts to attenuates the class differences between women in the Victorian era and underscores Fleda’s “intelligent” sympathy to Mrs. Gereth’s “dread of the inevitable surrender” (43) of Poynton to Owen.

Although there is no direct word usage of rumination in *The Spoils of Poynton*, Fleda’s ongoing process of recognizing moral insight in terms of the seriousness, intensity, and time duration demonstrates rumination. As Amanda Anderson argues, what distinguishes rumination from deliberation is its “emphasis on the temporal extension and the psychological struggle” (144). For instance, James describes Fleda’s mental process for developing sympathy regarding Mrs. Gereth’s possible abandonment by Owen and Mona: “Her sympathy was intelligent, for she read deep into the matter: she stared, aghast, as it came home to her for the first time, at the cruel English custom of the expropriation of the lonely mother” (43). Foregrounded in this passage is James’s emphasis on Fleda’s self-realization process over time. Instead of depicting Fleda’s realization and understanding of Mrs. Gereth’s situation as surface level, by using the word “deep,” James suggests Fleda delves into her thoughts gradually and repeatedly. James’s balanced antitheses between “deep” and “for the first time” imply a serious intensity in Fleda’s moral shock at the cruelty of Victorian society toward a widow. A serious

intensity allows Fleda to see society anew and to resolve to protect Mrs. Gereth. As Anderson argues, "much of what happens via rumination happens along the way, through unanticipated shifts of thinking, or realizations, or in a sudden opening of thought to a new perspective" (144). Moreover, James emphasizes the fixation of Fleda's mind on Mrs. Gereth's potential danger through the words she "stared" and "aghast." Worthy of note here is Fleda's repeated, intense, and self-reflective thinking process, which registers rumination, that centers on and recurs in Fleda's mind whenever she has to make the moral decision for Mrs. Gereth throughout the novel. Again, Anderson: "Rumination . . . is characterized by persistence and repetition and a kind of attachment" (134).

It is not Owen who sympathizes with his own mother but Fleda. Fleda despises Owen's indifference to his mother rather than his engagement with Mona per se: "The great wrong Owen had done her [Mrs. Gereth] was not his 'taking up' with Mona . . . it was his failure from the first to understand what it was to have a mother at all, to appreciate the beauty and sanctity of the character" (*SP* 64). James's juxtaposition of Fleda and Owen makes us consider the dynamics of Fleda's moral and sympathetic mind toward Mrs. Gereth. Though Owen confesses to Fleda that he "was awfully proud of everything" in Poynton (92), it is Fleda who sincerely and deeply appreciates the aesthetic value of the spoils with Mrs. Gereth. James shows the intensity their "aesthetic bond" by depicting Fleda's impression on the spoils:

> *Now* do you know how I feel? Mrs. Gereth asked when in the wondrous hall, three minutes after their arrival . . . The answer came clearly enough, and in the rapture of that first walk through the house Fleda took a prodigious span. She perfectly understood how Mrs. Gereth felt—she had understood but meagrely before; and the two women embraced with tears over the tightening of their bond—tears which on the younger one's part were the natural and usual sign of her submission to perfect beauty. . . After so intense a taking of possession she

> [Fleda] too was to give it up; for she reflected that if Mrs. Gereth's remaining would have offered her an apology for a future—stretching away in safe years on the other side of a gulf—the advent of the others could only be, by the same law, a great menace, the ruffling of a still water. (*SP* 47-48)

Compared to the sentence "she had understood but meagrely before," James depicts Fleda's intensified identification with Mrs. Gereth as the co-guardian of the spoils, as she feels that "she [Fleda] too was to give it up," implying that such a "threatened loss" comes not only to Mrs. Gereth, but also to Fleda herself. More straightforwardly, though, we can read this passage as a union of consciousness through a shared interest, in this case, the spoils' aesthetic magnificence. In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James underscores the selectivity of consciousness: "Each has selected, out of the same mass of presented objects, those which suited his private interest and has made his experience thereby" (275-76). For Mrs. Gereth, it is only Fleda who is able to share her "private interest" in the spoils and thus selects Fleda as a companion. For Fleda, as well as Mrs. Gereth, interest in the spoils fosters rumination on preserving it from the tainted aesthetic taste of Brigstock's: "the great menace, the ruffling of a still water." Just as Fleda "reflected"—that implies the signal for Fleda's rumination on guarding the spoils from Mona as Anderson writes that at times, the term rumination "is used as a near synonym for 'reflect'" (140)—Mona's incapability to fully appreciate and care for the spoils, Fleda consents to James's free indirect discourse of Mrs. Gereth's assessment of Mona's aesthetic taste: "How could a Brigstock possibly understand what it was all about? How, really, could a Brigstock logically do anything but hate it?" (*SP* 49). As previously mentioned, one key to uniting Mrs. Gereth and Fleda is their shared dislike of Waterbath's aesthetic ugliness. Once Fleda encounters the unutterable beauty of the spoils, Fleda's mind ruminates on not letting these spoils go to Mona, who can spoil their aesthetic value.

At times, rumination negatively impacts Fleda when she struggles to abandon her duty

as the moral mediator between Mrs. Gereth and Owen: "The girl now had hours of sombre hope she might never see anything 'good' again: that kind of experience was clearly so broken a reed, so fallible a source of peace" (*SP* 126). James describes Fleda's accumulated or condensed mental stress over time, rather than a temporary condition, as she "had hours of sombre hope." Along with the rumination's "emphasis on the temporal extension and the psychological struggle" (144), Anderson continues that "the complexity of rumination" involves "mov[ing] back and forth between negative and positive perspectives or attitudes" (136). In this light, Fleda's "hours of" thinking process is complex, shaped by her psychological conflicts, as "sombre hope." Through Fleda's mental struggle, James depicts the scenes of repeated rumination that reorient Fleda's mind to make a moral decision to support Mrs. Gereth. In chapter 13, Fleda imagines the terrible event of Mrs. Gereth's "surrender" to Mona: "In the event of a surrender the poor woman would never again be able to begin to collect: she was too old and too moneyless and times were altered and good things impossibly dear" (132). If we consider Fleda's moral shock at the Victorian society's indifference to widows, as previously mentioned, we can read the phrase "never again" as the trigger of rumination that Fleda constantly imagines and resolves to save Mrs. Gereth in case of repeated and predicted desolate surrender. In this regard, rumination enhances Fleda's moral sense, resulting in decisions that prevent Mrs. Gereth and protect the spoils from Mona's disqualified aesthetic taste.

Indeed, Ross Labrie argues that consciousness is intensified when the agent is "not only in being right but in being conscious of being right, conscious of being conscious" (525). In other words, Labrie underscores the agent's ability to evaluate their own consciousness. James vividly depicts our young heroine's sense of "being right": "She felt indeed, as this lady [Mrs. Gereth] had promised her she should, both a respect and a compassion she had not known before; thus the vision of the coming surrender could but fill her with an equal pain" (*SP* 48). In this respect, Fleda's appreciation of the spoils represents the sympathetic union of

consciousness between Fleda and Mrs. Gereth. As Labrie writes: “The triumph of James’s characters is that they are usually interested in situations which most readers have felt merit this interest. Moreover, the level of consciousness which is stimulated by this interest is usually impressive” (525).

Fleda’s sympathetic rumination does not merely center on the splendid aesthetic value of the spoils per se but also on the moral sense of the heiress. From the preface of the novel, James intends to focus on “the main agents, with the others all dependent,” as “Mrs. Gereth and Fleda.” He indicates their intimate relationship is the key to this novel, in James’s words: “the question of what my agitated friends should individually, and all intimately and at the core, show themselves, would unmistakably be the key to my modest drama, and would indeed alone make a drama of any sort possible” (*SP* 30). As Bill Brown argues that “the word ‘things’ in the Jamesian lexicon means a potent source of attraction, conflict, and anxiety” (223) what James expects from his “main agents” is they deserved to be the inheritors of the pure aesthetic value of the spoils which depends on their achievement of a particular moral sense. As James puts it in the preface: “Emphatically, by that truth, there would have to be moral developments—dreadful as such a prospect might loom for a poor interpreter committed to brevity” (*SP* 30). In this respect, James’s sentence from his notebook, “I’ve almost always taken the thing requiring developments,” can be read as his aspiration to depict the moral thinking of the main characters amid a series of adversities—thinking that, in this case, involves rumination.

In Fleda’s first encounter with the spoils, James elaborates on Fleda’s astonishment toward her old companion’s delicate and outstanding arrangement of the spoils and implies aesthetic “taste” penetrates and centers on Fleda’s mind, which also motivates her to devote herself to the spoils: “What struck Fleda most in it was the high pride of her friend’s taste, a fine arrogance, a sense of style which, however amused and amusing never compromised not stooped” (48). Fleda’s awareness of Mrs. Gereth’s aesthetic taste might be read as Fleda’s

complete understanding of how the heiress should be responsible and moral in order to preserve the magnificent value of the spoils. Fleda's aesthetic enlightenment not only garners her elevated taste, but also the intimated fears of moral shocks; she now confronts not only the "loss or threatened loss" but also "tragic occurrences, disgrace, status injury, injustice, alienation among friends or family members" (Anderson 133) because Mona's possession of the spoils can foster all of those shocks. The anxiety of such potential shock is not only Mrs. Gereth's but also hers.

In the notebook where he wrote preliminary plans for the novel, James originally planned to have Mrs. Gereth adopt Fleda: "Mrs. Gereth takes the girl—her own girl (Muriel Veetch)—to her own house and adopts her there" (216). Fleda's moral sense is deeply bound up with her surrogate mother, and this is also bound up with their shared economic insecurity as Victorian women. In his reading of Fleda and Mrs. Gereth's mother-daughter relationship, Stephen Reid argues that Fleda's affection for Mrs. Gereth involves an "erotic attachment to Owen's mother" rather than their shared moral aesthetic taste; thus, Fleda might not want to get married to Owen because she doesn't want to "share" Mrs. Gereth "with Owen" (38). He goes on to explain that what concerns James is not Fleda's moral sense, but her emotional "fear of loss of love" (42). Indeed, we may read Fleda's potential "loss or threatened loss" of Mrs. Gereth as centered in Fleda's mind as she sympathizes with her from the very first of their meeting. But no matter how Fleda's affection for Mrs. Gereth might be read as her "erotic attachment" to Mrs. Gereth in Reid's account, we should not neglect that Fleda's rumination prioritizes her moral debt to Mrs. Gereth for fulfilling "the emotions of a hungry," motherless, and homeless girl with unspeakable aesthetic opportunity (*SP* 48, 42) as James underscores Fleda's condition of being "a person deeply in her debt" (121).

In the Victorian novel, women characters' economic insecurity is often expressed through scenes of selfishness and immorality. In William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp

abuses her "vivid imagination" (*VF* 43) to allure her friend's husband to get rid of her poverty, and Mrs. Smith in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* attempts to lure Anne Eliot into marriage with the immoral and dishonest Mr. Eliot to escape her own poverty. By doing so, such novels indicate the importance of being a moral character who doesn't deceive others. In Rae Greiner's words, "there's nothing inherently wrong with a woman's desire to survive economic ruin . . . but what cannot be easily forgiven is the emotional legerdemain" (81). By writing the verb "imagined" (*SP* 45) for the first time in the novel, James depicts Fleda's moral imagination as the mediator between Mrs. Gereth and Owen through free indirect discourse:

> Fleda was struck, was even a little startled by the way Mrs. Gereth had turned this over—had faced, if indeed only to recognise its futility, the notion of a battle with her only son. These words led her to take a sounding she had not thought it discreet to take before: she brought out the idea of the possibility, after all, of her friend's continuing to live at Poynton. Would they really wish to proceed to extremities? Was no good-humoured graceful compromise to be imagined or brought about? Could the same roof cover them? Was it so very inconceivable that a married son should for the rest of her days share with so charming a mother the home she had devoted more than a score of years to making beautiful for him? (*SP* 44-45)

Victoria Coulson was right to suggest that for Fleda, "to cease to recognise the 'principle of property' is to lose the painfully sustaining sense of impoverishment and descend into an absolute poverty" (151). Indeed, if Mrs. Gereth fails to preserve the spoils, Fleda might lose her companionship and be thrown back into poverty. Nonetheless, by obscuring the distinct barrier between Fleda and the narrator, James underscores Fleda's core ruminative questions that motivate her to preserve her morality not only to the spoils but also to the other characters around her, as she "was struck." Fleda's imagination, by contrast to Becky's, directs not to her

private desire to abuse Mrs. Gereth's aesthetic taste for her own good, but to mediate the conflicts for the good of all. Fleda's consciousness is enforced and fixed more to preserve her moral appreciation of the spoils and Mrs. Gereth, not merely her own "threatening loss" of luxurious privilege that she has experienced with Mrs. Gereth.

Here, it will be helpful to recall what the aspirant is. Again, Callard: "The aspirant brings herself to a different view as to what matters in life and comes to appreciate what she once did not" (197). Fleda's mind and consciousness have changed and awakened once she encounters the aesthetically magnificent spoils that she has not acknowledged before. Thus, Fleda dedicates herself to Mrs. Gereth's request for Fleda to be the next heir to the spoils, resulting in her grappling with making a moral decision between Mrs. Gereth and Owen: "You would replace me, you would watch over them, you would keep the place right, she [Mrs. Gereth] austerely pursued, and with you here—yes, with you, I believe I might rest at last in my grave!" (*SP* 54). For Fleda, such a request is hardly to refuse, since Mrs. Gereth is not only her surrogate mother but also her aesthetic mentor, transforming her entire life, and whom Fleda sympathizes with and depends on. In Callard's words: "We [Aspirants] find mentors to emulate or fellow travelers with whom to commiserate" (195) and aspirants "rely on their environment not only to supply them with the minimal grasp of value with which they begin, but throughout the process of growing that initial seed into a complete, established form of valuing" (253).

Nonetheless, in the last section of this essay, I consider how Fleda's aspiration and rumination distinguish her from Mrs. Gereth, who is mainly obsessed with the result of taking the spoils, not the ethical and appropriate process. While it is undeniable that Fleda owes a tremendous economic and aesthetic debt to her mentor, Mrs. Gereth, Fleda pursues own path instead of obeying Mrs. Gereth's lessons to be ambitious enough to neglect moral sense to achieve private desire. As Callard explains: "[T]he mentor's role in the life of the aspirant is

not an unproblematic one. Unlike in other testimonial contexts, the aspirant's goal is nothing other than coming to see the value for herself" (80). The separation of Mrs. Gereth and Fleda enables Fleda to develop a more complex moral sense, a development that is crucial to the novel's controversial ending.

Fleda's Ruminative Aspiration and Purification

On May 13th, 1895, in his notebook, James writes his plan to separate Fleda and Mrs. Gereth in the scene of Mrs. Gereth's moving some spoils to Ricks. He declares this a crucial point in the plot: "She [Mrs. Gereth] has everything that is really precious and exquisite carted away to her own house. *She does it in Muriel's absence*—while Muriel is away on a family errand (her dying father or something of that sort) . . . This discovery, . . . is the 'climax' of Chapter II" (*SP* 217). According to his notebook, James first intended to depict Mrs. Gereth's unexpected moving of the spoils to constitute the shock that motivates and changes Owen's mind, convincing him not to marry Mona and be with his mother's side (217). However, Mrs. Gereth's unexpected move not only disappoints Fleda but also suggests that Mrs. Gereth herself might not be a proper guardian of the spoils. Fleda deplores Mrs. Gereth's removal of the spoils to Ricks:

> She [Fleda] couldn't care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was a wrong about them all that turned them to ugliness. In the watches of the night she saw Poynton dishonoured; she had cherished it as a happy whole, she reasoned, and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs . . . Shame, pity, resentment oppressed her in turn; in the last of these feelings the others were soon submerged. Mrs. Gereth had imprisoned her in that torment of taste, but it was clear to her for an hour at least that she might hate Mrs. Gereth. (*SP* 85-86)

What is “a wrong about them,” and why does Fleda feel that the spoils are “dishonoured” by the move? Before we answer those questions, it will be useful for us to question Mrs. Gereth’s validity as the genuine guardian of the spoils, given the threat of loss from Mona. Mrs. Gereth’s obsession with the spoils could also make her a mere fanatic who not only wants to possess the spoils permanently but also wants to identify *with* them, which suggests the narcissism involved in her dedication to keep the aesthetic value of the spoils, in Fotios Sarris’s words, “the beauty of her own labor” (58).

Despite Fleda’s repetitious ruminative thoughts to protect Mrs. Gereth and the spoils from Mona, as previously mentioned, here, James describes another negative aspect of rumination in Fleda’s mind: “it was clear to her for an hour at least that she might hate Mrs. Gereth.” A phrase “an hour at least” reminds us of the rumination’s “emphasis on the temporal extension and the psychological struggle” (Anderson 144). Fleda encounters the unexpected immoral act of Mrs. Gereth’s moving the spoils to Ricks, which prompts her to ponder Mrs. Gereth’s qualifications as the moral guardian of the spoils. For the first time in the novel, Fleda confesses her ambivalent emotion toward her mentor as she “might hate Mrs. Gereth.” Over the course of hours, Fleda once again encounters a moral dilemma of abandoning Mrs. Gereth. However, instead of abandoning her mentor, this crisis intensifies Fleda’s moral sense, leading her to keep the spoils more sincerely than anyone else and to help Mrs. Gereth again. Even after Mona takes the spoils and the war over the possession of the spoils ends, Fleda’s mind always returns to take care of Mrs. Gereth and be with her: “Fleda had a compunction, wondering as they continued to stroll whether it was right after all to leave her” (191). Fleda’s repetitious inner conflict between her own sense of duty and Mrs. Gereth’s tainted affection for the spoils motivates her to separate from Mrs. Gereth for a while, not to flee away from her, but to articulate her moral mind and aspiration toward the spoils.

Again, in terms of Mrs. Gereth’s obsession with the spoils, instead of viewing her as

the character merely and overly obsessed with the spoils, another the body of the criticism argues that Mrs. Gereth is not obsessed with the spoils, but willing to abdicate them, as she "was absolutely unselfish—she cared nothing for mere possession" (*SP* 179). Rather, she is a character who is able to abdicate her duty as a guardian of the spoils to the qualified heir who has an outstanding "sympathy that draws out their [spoils] beauty" and a character who deeply appreciates and treats the spoils as her own life and legacy as she says to Fleda: "They were our religion, they were our life, they were *us*!" (53). In his reading of this passage, Bill Brown writes that if we consider that Mrs. Gereth cares and protects the spoils not as mere objects but as though they were living creatures, it is inappropriate to downgrade Mrs. Gereth's dignity as a mere object-fetishized character. In Brown's words: "This is why, in her case, it makes no sense to describe a degradation of *being* into *having*" (225).

Indeed, even Fleda can't help but praise her old companion's outstanding relation to the spoils, which can only be fostered by a sincere appreciation: "Fleda was impressed anew with her friend's genius for composition" (*SP* 85). Moreover, James elaborates on the image of the ghost—"an old maternal aunt" (62) who had furnished Ricks before Mrs. Gereth—as only Mrs. Gereth and Fleda can see and feel, as Fleda and Mrs. Gereth asserts that Mona can face the ghost or not after she became the owner of the spoils. As Fleda says, "No, 'she' [Mona] won't see them. Then Fleda said: What I mean is, for this dear one of ours, that if she [an old maternal aunt] had (as I *know* she did; it's in the very touch of the air!) a great accepted pain—" (203). In terms of the ghosts in Henry James's works, Leon Edel argues that the ghosts "possess an unusual degree of reality because we see them invariably through the people who see or feel them" (xxvii). In her reading of this passage, Teckyoung Kwon writes that for Edel, ghosts are not mere supernatural beings, but they "reflect something innate in our vision and feelings" (35). Only Mrs. Gereth and Fleda are able to "see or feel" the maiden-aunt's ghostly image and not Mona, implying some psychological connection to the ghost in terms of Mrs. Gereth and

Fleda's shared aesthetic taste. As Bruce Mangan writes, "experience depends on the level of attention devoted to it" (qtd. in Kwon 49). Indeed, there is an insurmountable gap in the aesthetic level, appreciation, and sincerity toward the spoils between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda, on one hand, and Mona, on the other, because what Mona obsesses over is the economic value of the spoils that can elevate her social status. As Charles Palliser writes: "She [Fleda] appreciates as much as Mrs. Gereth does the aesthetic value of the objects, but with Mona she recognizes that they also represent a large amount of money which is rightfully Owen's" (42).

Nonetheless, under the condition of "loss or threatened loss" (133) in terms of the rumination in Anderson's words, James demarcates the gap of ethical and moral sense between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda. Unlike Fleda, who endeavors to mediate between Mrs. Gereth and Owen to foster moral solutions to the conflicts of the spoils' possession, Mrs. Gereth neglects any sense of morality due to her obsession with the fear of losing the spoils to vulgar and unqualified Mona. In Palliser's words: "Mrs. Gereth's narrowly aesthetic criteria have important moral implications" (44). In this sense, as in the quoted passage above, Fleda believes Mrs. Gereth's "dishonoured" (*SP* 85) behavior taints not only the aesthetic beauty but also the moral dignity of the spoils. One might think that Mrs. Gereth is in the process of rumination as she has "obsessive fear for her son" (Palliser 43) to marry Mona, which will cause her "threatened loss" (Anderson 133) of the spoils, but what James and the novel depict here is not Mrs. Gereth's process of moral decision, but her selfishness and relentlessness to achieve the results that she desires. Without acknowledging the degradation of "herself more and more as an immoral woman" (*SP* 84), as the narrator indicates, Mrs. Gereth—who is "nothing if not practical" (122) and has "only one question about persons: were they clever or stupid?" (126)—manipulates the workers to move. The unexpected move fosters and intensifies Fleda's vivid and paralyzed fear of "loss or threatened loss" of the aesthetic and moral beauty of the spoils, which causes her physical detachment or suspense of an in-person

meeting with Mrs. Gereth.

By contrast, Fleda—who can also "see or feel" the ghostly image of the maiden-aunt—not only imagines the figure of the maiden aunt but also sympathizes with her burden of caring for her art collection in the past, which indicates Fleda's genuine appreciation of not only the art collection in Ricks but also its guardian, proving Fleda as a moral character: "She too, for a home, could have lived with them: they made her fond of the old maiden-aunt . . . The poor lady had passed shyly, yet with some bruises, through life" (68). Both Fleda and Mrs. Gereth can feel the ghostly image of the maiden aunt, as the three share a genuine appreciation and a high level of consciousness for the art collection. Nonetheless, Mrs. Gereth's unexpected and immoral moving of the spoils to Ricks and her removal of maiden-aunt's art collection fosters Fleda's deploration and disappointment with Mrs. Gereth as she neglects and ignores maiden-aunt's genuine and aesthetic appreciation toward her art collection and replaces it with the spoils of Poynton unethically. As Fleda says, "The maiden-aunt had been exterminated—no trace of her to tell her tale" (*SP* 85)—that she might consider this absence as "a sense of knowing, familiarity," and "getting on the right track" as Kwon argues the positive and ethical role of the ghost in Henry James's novels (49).

Fleda learns and feels more about what is right as the ethical and moral guardian of the art collection after observing its absence at Ricks. In contrast to Fleda's sympathetic mind toward maiden-aunt, her practical and over-obsessive old companion's mind is merely filled with her desire to use the Ricks to store the spoils. Mrs. Gereth lacks sympathy for the maiden-aunt, as illustrated when Fleda asks Mrs. Gereth to think about the ghost's burden as she might be struggling with embracing the ugliness of her own art collection in the past: "I'm sure I thoroughly hope she [maiden-aunt] did!" (*SP* 69). Unlike Fleda, who has a sympathetic imagination "that easily embraced all the heights and depths and extremities of things" (124), Mrs. Gereth is indifferent to others' emotions: "She [Mrs. Gereth] had not imagination about

anybody's life save on the side she bumped against" (126).

Then why does the gap in the moral sense matter between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda? In *Aspiration*, Agnes Callard defines and distinguishes the term of aspiration and ambition. According to her, while the aspirant agent pursues the ceaseless and life-transforming learning process to achieve "a specific value" that is worth seeking even if the agent doesn't know the value of a specific thing yet, the ambitious agent pursues to possess the value the agent is already aware of, such as "wealth, power, fame," instead of something unknown and life-changing, to borrow a phrase from Callard, the ambitious agent "is trying to succeed (at getting what she already wants) instead of trying to learn (to want something new)" (229-30). While it is insufficient to consider Mrs. Gereth merely obsessive, given her sincere appreciation and dedication to them, and her willingness to inherit them to a qualified successor, Mrs. Gereth can still keep possession of the spoils, not by physically possessing them as before, but through visiting or encountering them. In contrast to the situation where Mrs. Gereth might abdicate or lose every right or access to see the spoils if Mona possesses them all, Mrs. Gereth, at least, can be with the spoils or visit them whenever she wants to when Fleda marries Owen. In this light, what turns Mrs. Gereth into an ambitious agent (in contrast with Fleda's aspirational agency) is her relentless desire to stick to the beauty of materials that she is already familiar with and fond of, even if she can't possess them nor, again, acknowledge "herself more and more as an immoral woman" (*SP* 84).

In contrast to Mrs. Gereth, Fleda's moral sense to consider the qualification to be the genuine heiress of the spoils in her process of making a series of decisions for the spoils suggests Fleda as a moral aspirant. At some point, Fleda's moral sense for the spoils can be read as something that she already knows the value of; however, to delve into Fleda's realization of the true value of the spoils at the end of Owen and Mona's marriage suspense, when she imagines the return of the spoils to the Poynton, one must quote at some length:

> But the loss was a gain to memory and love; it was to her too at last that, in condonation of her treachery, the spoils had crept back. She greeted them with open arms; she thought of them hour after hour; they made a company with which solitude was warm and a picture that, at this crisis, overlaid poor Maggie's scant mahogany. It was really her obliterated passion that had revived, and with it an immense assent to Mrs. Gereth's early judgment of her. She equally, she felt, was of the religion, and life any other of the passionately pious she could worship now even in the desert. Yes, it was all for *her*, far round as she had been strong enough: her love had gathered them in. She wanted indeed no catalogue to count them over; the array of them, miles away, was complete; each piece, in its turn, was perfect to her; she could have drawn up a catalogue from memory. Thus again she lived with them, and she thought of them without a question of any personal right. That they might have been, that they might still be hers, that they were perhaps already another's, were ideas that had too little to say to her. They were nobody's at all—too proud, unlike base animals and humans, to be reducible to anything so narrow. It was Poynton that was theirs; they had simply recovered their own. The joy of that for them was the source of the strange peace that had descended like a charm. (*SP* 193-4)

Here, in contrast to Nicholas Dames's previous argument that reminiscent narratives in the Victorian novels are often considered as "a dilemma or a threat" that hinders the characters' learning didactic lessons ("Introduction"), Fleda's reminiscent imagination of the spoils and the narrative voice indicate the awakening of Fleda's ultimate aspirational lesson, that the real and genuine aesthetic value of the spoils remains even in the condition of unattainable and invisible: "They were nobody's at all—too proud." As Vernon Lee writes, "'aesthetic sentiment' replaces 'the legal illusory act of owning by the real spiritual act of appreciation'" (qtd. in

Brown 225). We can think that Fleda has known why she hopes to protect the spoils, but we are also able to assume that she eventually realizes the genuine aesthetic value at the end of the marriage suspense, as Callard argues that "This is not to say that she [aspirant] has *no* idea what she is doing, but rather that her conception of what she is doing is derivative of a superior conception she will have after she has arrived at her destination" (217). In other words, "destination" here is where she realizes the aspirational value of the spoils that is impossible to achieve by mere possession as Lee Clark Mitchell writes about the dignity of the spoils as "This is one of the novel's more remarkable insights, conceding a profound autonomy to the 'spoils'" (28). Indeed, when Fleda confesses that her "treachery" is forgiven by her imagination of the spoils' magnificent and unpossessable beauty, this suggest her repentance about her spontaneous and accidental failure and oblivion that she might have with Owen, as she, at some point, mainly obsessed with ownership of the spoils rather than prioritizing the ethical and aesthetic values of both the successor and the spoils.

Nonetheless, contrary to what Patrick F. Quinn argues that Fleda's "psychology of ethical absolutism" causes a mere "defense against life," and leads her to "become an agent of destruction" (563), James depicts Fleda's rumination by detaching her from Mrs. Gereth, not as a passive and selfish self-avoidance to protect herself, but as an opportunity for her to reset and enhance her moral minds away from the tainted immorality of Mrs. Gereth: "It was a strong personal need; she wished to interpose something, and there was nothing she could interpose but distance, but time" (*SP* 155). As Jonathan Freedman argues in *Professions of Taste*, the consciousness in James's novels implies the "achievement of a form of transcendence" when the protagonist is in a "fundamentally contemplative" condition of isolating oneself "from any real contact with others, from any possibility of action, indeed, from history itself" (164). Although Mrs. Gereth remotely haunts Fleda by letting Owen visit her, and there are a few crises for Fleda to keep her faith not to be "one of those bad women in a play" (*SP* 153) by

taking Owen away from Mona. However, her moral sense suggests she is an ethical heiress, not a woman in an affair. Fleda's moral aspiration and rumination not only motivate her to make her own ethical decision but also shape her understanding of the ethical decision-making process. Moreover, Fleda guides Owen to keep his faith in Mona, recognizing the moral and aesthetic value of preserving the spoils rather than being as blind as Mrs. Gereth.

As we read, Fleda ruminates on Mrs. Gereth's possible threat of abandonment by Owen and Mona; another rumination foregrounded in the novel is Fleda's self-realization as a qualified successor to the spoils through legal marriage. Even though when she was aware of her affection for Owen for the first time, she ruminates on it not for her self-justification as a potential partner for Owen, but to examine who she is and what she values: "She had more over at present completely recovered her feet . . . She could never be the girl to be drawn in; she could never lift her finger against Mona. There was something in her that would make it a shame to her for ever to have owed her happiness to an interference" (*SP* 104). Here, we can read once again rumination's "emphasis on the temporal extension and the psychological struggle" (Anderson 144). James describes Fleda's temporal shift from a moment of her imagination of being with Owen to "at present" where she realizes that she can't be the one who do affair with Owen as she thinks it is "a shame to her." One might be tempted to say that Fleda's temporal shift here is a brief or short moment, but James elaborates on Fleda's self-realization as not an instant result, but a result that comes over time "with the telescope of her long thought, Fleda saw what might bring her out of the wood" (*SP* 105).

Fleda's "long thought" of self-realization about the shamefulness of being Owen's mistress centers in her mind and revives whenever she is in danger of physical temptation, as she struggles not to succumb to her romantic desire toward Owen that could make her "one of those bad women in a play" (*SP* 153). Fleda and Owen's last encounter in Fleda's sister, Maggie's, house, depicts Fleda's triumph over Owen's irresistible physical appeal to her:

> The surrender was short, but the relief was long: she felt this warm lips on her face and his arms tighten with his full divination. What she did, what she *had* done, she scarcely knew: she only was aware, as she broke from him again, of what had taken place on his own amazed part . . . The strangest thing of all was the momentary sense of desolation . . . She had once more disengaged herself with the private vow that he shouldn't yet touch her again. It was all too horrid soon—her sense of this had come straight back. (*SP* 162)

If Owen's affection for her is what she has wanted so long, why does Fleda feel "a sense of desolation"? Instead of letting Fleda succumb to Owen's temptation, James's balanced antitheses of the "surrender was short, but the relief was long" imply that Fleda's making a moral decision not to be an adulteress provides her "long" relief for doing the right thing. Fleda was paralyzed at a certain "temporal extension and the psychological struggle" (Anderson 144) as she barely remembers what she had done when Owen physically touched her. In this light, a juxtaposition of "a sense of desolation" and "the relief was long" implies Fleda's temporal and psychological differences, which she experiences in the rumination. Moreover, "a sense of desolation" can be read as Fleda's guilt for being seduced for at least a short moment by Owen, but she recovers her moral sense of not being "one of those bad women in a play" through "the telescope of her long thought" of not being a shameful woman.

What makes her decision remarkable is Fleda's sympathetic choice not to ruin Mona for her own romantic desire for Owen. Although Fleda acknowledges that Mona is an unqualified aesthetic successor of the spoils, she doesn't underestimate Mona's affection and trust for Owen: "I hate myself, she insisted, for having anything to say about her: it's like waiting for dead men's shoes!" (*SP* 162). As she values the immutable moral sense toward the spoils, Fleda not only undergoes her rumination through "interior moral reflection as it extends across time" (131) in Anderson's words but also makes her moral decision to guide Owen to

keep his faith to Mona as the right thing to do: "The great thing is to keep faith. Where's a man if he doesn't? If he doesn't he may be so cruel" (*SP* 167). Fleda values the genuine trust and faith in marriage, as she praises Mr. and Mrs. Gereth's harmonious marriage life, including collecting the spoils, and she also wants to dedicate herself to her future husband:

> She herself was prepared, if she should ever marry, to contribute all the cleverness, and she liked to figure it out that her husband would be a force grateful for direction. She was in her small way a spirit of the same family as Mrs. Gereth. (*SP* 40)

Fleda knows that Mrs. Gereth's "cleverness" is what makes Mr. Gereth and Mrs. Gereth collect the aesthetic spoils and fosters their marriage. In other words, one of the reasons Mrs. Gereth is a guardian of the spoils is her condition of being a legally qualified mistress of Poynton. As the narrator mentions, Fleda shares "a spirit of the same family as Mrs. Gereth," but the only way Fleda can achieve such a family is through a legal marriage, not by taking Owen away from Mona. Quinn was right to suggest that Fleda has no alternative but to flee from Owen's affection for her because that is the only way for her to keep her moral "absolutist idealism" that blinds her to realizing that marrying Owen is the most ideal option to make everyone happy. Her neglect fosters no more than a "monstrous" moral absolutism (575-76). However, as the narrator notes, failing to preserve her faith can be a deeply ferocious shock to Fleda, leaving her not herself. While Owen might overlook the false and tainted dignity that Fleda might gain not only as a woman but also as a successor to the spoils if she takes Owen away from Mona, we should consider that her decision is not spontaneous or instant but the result of her constant ruminative thinking process over time.

James intentionally designs Fleda's sister's, Maggie's, house as the space for his heroine's resetting and refreshing moral sense and motivation by separating her from Mrs. Gereth. Victorian women characters' economic insecurity is closely tied to their living

conditions, which might be distracting or, on the other hand, a place to reflect on the inner self. In "Character Insecurity in *Sense and Sensibility*," Alex Woloch argues that Barton Cottage in the novel represents the economic and social insecurity of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, that "the sisters are continually aroused by surprise visits, by the shock of misrecognition, anticipation, disappointment, and unexpected experience" (39). This economic insecurity scene is pertinent to Fleda's economic insecurity, as she is often treated "as parasitical" (*SP* 60) by others as long as she is with Mrs. Gereth and is treated by Mrs. Gereth as nothing more than a bait to allure Owen, while surrounded by an unexpected, morally shocking environment. Although Fleda needs a separate place to be herself, in contrast to Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility,* who survives and grows in a suffocating small cottage with her sister, what links Fleda and Elinor is their capacity for self-reflection, as they constantly consider how to set their own moral guidance. As Woloch writes: "Facing something unexpected . . . she [Elinor] immediately begins to convert her surprise into reflection. Thought itself—the act of thinking—functions as a strategic response to the shock that it registers" (42). In this light, Fleda's detachment from Mrs. Gereth is not an act of self-avoidance or retreat to abdicate her responsibility, but as her active decision to reexamine and reaffirm her moral aspiration for the greater good.

Nevertheless, toward the end of the novel, James depicts a controversial moral dilemma for Fleda by using Owen's allure to persuade her to take "the Maltese cross," which interferes with her moral integrity. James triggers her desire to possess the most precious and fancy jewel among the spoils that indicate her potential danger to identify herself to Mrs. Gereth and Mona by following a similar desire with them: "But she would look again and judge afresh; she would on the spot so handle and ponder that there shouldn't be the shade of a mistake" (*SP* 210). Fleda's stupidity intensifies when she engages in self-justification, claiming she is qualified and deserves such a reward from Owen. At last, Fleda encounters the burning of the spoils in

front of her: “She [Fleda] heard herself repeat mechanically, yet as if asking for the first time: Poynton’s *gone*?” (213). In her reading of this ending, Nina Baym was right to suggest that this is James’s “final test of her [Fleda’s] character” and “the fire at Poynton becomes the author’s punishment of Fleda” for not rejecting Owen’s invitation and not being “as fine as” she is (111).

Indeed, if Fleda attains the Maltese Cross that implies Owen’s “signed desire” (*SP* 209), she eventually subverts all of her effort to preserve her ethical faith to her obsessive and possessive desire, which makes her prove what Mrs. Gereth judges her: “My dear child, she went on with an air that affected the girl as a blind profanity, don’t try to make yourself out better than you are. I know what you are . . . You’re not quite a saint in heaven yet” (172-73). However, another body of criticism has grown up around the novel's ending, which underscores the fire's representation as a form of purification in different ways. In a broad perspective, in his reading of the fire on the spoils, Bill Brown writes that through the fire, James turns this novel not into a melodrama but “a materialist tragedy” to criticize the Victorian period’s extravagant obsession with things and argues that we could think this fire “as the conflagration in which realism as such is consumed” (228). In a similar but slightly different fashion, this fire can be interpreted as a purification of Fleda's spontaneous, abrupt desire, indicating James’s aspiration to preserve his heroine as a moral agent by dramatizing the ending, which makes Fleda more realistic and shows that she could succumb to the last materialistic allurement.

In fact, one might argue that Fleda’s capricious and unreliable characteristics prove James’s failure to depict an elevated moral character as he persists from the preface and notebook, but more of a devastated and passive character at the end. However, even if it is true, one might clearly think and argue that James persistently attempts to protect Fleda’s moral innocence and mind throughout the entire novel. If James considers Fleda no more than an ordinary character who is easily corrupted by one’s desire, he could describe Fleda’s attainment of the Maltese cross. Instead, although it is undeniable that Fleda doesn’t refuse her desire by

herself, James not only rescues Fleda from the fiery oblivion of her moral sense to the spoils but also reminds the readers to consider Fleda as a character who is able to turn toward the ashes of the spoils and preserve their invisible but genuine value in her heart and mind as unlike what Charles Palliser argues that Fleda fails to recognize that the spoils "are valuable because they have *survived*, not because they are *above*, the risks attendant upon all physical things" (52), but as Brown praises Fleda's "elaborate acts of appreciation—a form, say, of disinterested interest" (225).

Conclusion

When he writes the Modernist critics' strong reaction against the Victorian novel's compulsive moral frame, Jesse Rosenthal quotes James's evaluation of George Eliot's novels as "a moralized fable" that doesn't represent "primarily a picture of life," and F.R. Leavis's words on James, who "show[s] finer intelligence than anyone else in writing about George Eliot" (qtd.in 3). Nonetheless, Rosenthal explains that James sees a highly moral sense in the literary works (3). Indeed, in his story of the things and the war of its possession, James, along with his delicate technique of the narrative, achieves his aspiration of depicting Fleda's ongoing growth of her moral and ethical sense, again, Baym, "Thus, up to the last lines of the book Fleda's character is in evolution" (111). Even though it is undeniable that Fleda fails to refuse Owen's last material temptation on her own, James's touch of fire reminds Fleda and readers alike of her moral and aesthetic sense to appreciate the spoils, even in their invisibility, and that they should not be forgotten after the end of the novel.

In *Thinking in Henry James*, Sharon Cameron argues that James is a master of depicting consciousness in his novels, in Cameron's words, "For what consciousness is deemed to be in James's novels is frequently a question of where it is thought to be located" (34). In a last chapter, before Fleda decides to take the train to Poynton, through the first-person narrative

"I"—that might be seem as James's own voice—James warns the danger of Fleda's obsessive mind toward the possession of the Maltese Cross: "That explanation, I say, she could throw off; but no explanation in the least mattered" (*SP* 209). Although no further indication of "I" in the last part of the ending, instead of making Fleda succumb to her desire, James prevents her from doing so. James guides her to redirect her focus to the moral and aesthetic sense she realized at the end of the suspense surrounding Owen and Mona's marriage.

It is undeniable that readers still consider Fleda an unreliable, desolate, and powerless character who loses everything she aspires to preserve. As Adeline R. Tintner writes, "The ugly world is the world in which Fleda lives. Mrs. Gereth's paradise of beautiful things will in the end be destroyed and will remain only as a memory of the idea . . . not the real" (163). However, the fire in the burning scene of the spoils not only reminds Fleda's moral sense and mind were temporarily blinded, but also heralds Fleda's fresh start of her life with a purified mind that rewards and preserves her inscribed values after every crisis by making moral decisions across moments she has been through, rather than depicting the end of her life. In this light, although one might still view Fleda as a character obsessed with her own moral compulsion and as someone who destroys her and others' happiness, I believe it is valuable to consider her as a character who continuously evolves, with a moral aspiration that transforms her after the novel ends.

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