The shock of brass on porcelain: Egotism and "The Sacred Fount"

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THE SHOCK OF BRASS ON PORCELAIN:
EGOTISM AND THE SACRED FOUNT

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In Partial Fulfillment
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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THE SHOCK OF BRASS ON PORCELAIN:

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ABSTRACT

The extreme ambiguity of Henry James's The Sacred Fount has made it possible for numerous and varied interpretations to co-exist. Leon Edel achieved an important critical milestone when he saw the novel's ambiguity as key to its theme of appearance versus reality. Edel also pointed out the unreliable narrator as a crucial factor in dealing with the epistemological concerns James raises in the novel. According to Edel, the ambiguity of the novel and the unreliable narrator represent James's method of demonstrating the subjective nature of human experience.

Edel's interpretation does not however deal with the extremely egotistical personality James created for the narrator. In addition to the appearance versus reality theme, the novel also contains James's most telling indictment of egotism and provides evidence of the toll James believed that character flaw can take on the quality of human life as well as, since the narrator is presented as an artist figure, artistic creation. The narrator is thus unreliable not just because of the subjective nature of experience but specifically because James is demonstrating that egotism is one of the factors that distorts perception and understanding. The conclusion is ambiguous because although he wishes to discredit the narrator, James does not want to discredit the sacred fount theory. The narrator himself provides James's prime example of the exploitive personality, draining others to serve his own egotistic ends.

For the purpose of analysis in this paper, a consideration of James's short story "The Beast in the Jungle" is included because it provides some interesting parallels to the novel and helps, as an important "torch of...analogy", to dissect further the question of egotism and the sacred fount theory. Both John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle" and the narrator are extreme in their egotism and their exploitation of others. They are also similar in their faulty perception and understanding as well as their isolation brought on by their inability to establish deep emotional contact with someone else. For Marcher, his inability to reach out and love May Bartram is unrecognized until the story's climax when he realizes how much he has missed. For the narrator, however, his primary concern with self is a conscious choice motivated by his sense of his own superiority and intellectual supremacy. In addition, the narrator actively submerges feelings of compassion, pity and love in the interest of proving his theory. Through Marcher, James demonstrates how destructive excessive ego can be on human
relationships. In *The Sacred Fount*, he enlarges the scope to show the debilitating effect ego can have on the artist and the creative process. For the narrator, his theory is all important. It little matters, finally, how many people may be compromised. The narrator, with his artificial separation of feeling and intellect, is at variance with the circumstances James promotes in his aesthetic theory as likely to produce superior artistic creation. Although the narrator's lively imagination is indeed inventive, it is seen in the novel as being at odds with actual experience. Held back from much of life's experiences by his excessive ego, the narrator must vicariously drain others instead for his "material." As a result, his creative process is distorted and he creates merely a monument to his ego not an artistic work imbued with James's "sense of reality."
THE SHOCK OF BRASS ON PORCELAIN: EGOTISM AND THE SACRED FOUNT

Henry James's enigmatic short novel, The Sacred Fount, has led critics on a merry chase, eluding various efforts at conclusive thematic analysis. The work, which James himself relegated to the status of a mere "jeu d' esprit," and originally envisioned as a short story, only extending it to novel length when the plot grew more involved, is notable, even among the body of James's other works, for its extreme ambiguity. The focus of the novel is on an unnamed narrator who evolves an unusual and complex theory about human relationships while attending a weekend party at an English country house.

The theory is developed as a result of some startling observations the narrator makes enroute to Newmarch. Meeting two fellow guests at the train station, the narrator is immediately struck by certain marked changes in the behavior of one and the appearance of the other. The first, Gilbert Long, had earlier seemed to the narrator to be a gauche, ill-mannered boor of marginal intelligence. To the narrator's surprise, Long now conducts himself with admirable social poise and finesse. He even appears to the narrator to have gained in wit, since he is now capable of making intelligent, interesting conversation. Similarly, the
narrator is astonished to see that Mrs. Grace Brissenden, a woman over forty who had originally impressed him as being plain and dowdy, is now beautiful and seems years younger than her actual age.

The narrator marvels at the dramatic changes in these two individuals, but is at a loss for an explanation until later at the country house when he meets Grace Brissenden's husband. Guy Brissenden, the narrator realizes with shock, now looks old and withered despite the fact that he is many years younger than his wife. Extrapolating from this reversal of characteristics, the narrator begins to formulate his theory of the sacred fount. According to the narrator's theory, love relationships are basically exploitive rather than reciprocal. One individual in each couple is a "taker," exhausting the strengths and resources of his or her partner for self-aggrandizement. The giving partner is gradually depleted by the demands or his or her lover in much the same way that a fountain can be drained by the continual drawing of water.

With only the Brissendens as examples of his theory, the narrator does not have enough substantiating evidence. He is thus interested in locating a sacred fount for the unmarried Gilbert Long as further proof. He searches the crowd of weekend guests for a lady who is as depleted mentally as Long is improved. Mrs. Briss, with whom the narrator has discussed the changes in Long, suggests that Lady John is Long's lover. The narrator rejects Lady John as a possibility,
however, since after observing and conversing with her he decides she is not in any way wasted and thus does not fit his theory. After proposing several other ladies, Grace Brissenden later suggests that May Server may be the candidate. The narrator, intrigued with this prospect, carefully and covertly observes May and, as a result of his observations, comes to believe that she and Gilbert Long are indeed lovers. To the narrator, May, in proportion to Long's growth in wit and savoir faire, seems to have deteriorated. Instead of the grace, calm, and wit which she had previously possessed, May now seems to the narrator and his friend Obert to be agitated and nervous to the point of near-hysteria.

The narrator expends excessive mental energy on his theory, expanding and perfecting it based on his continual observations of his fellow guests during the weekend. After the narrator has carefully constructed what he feels is a sound case, however, his supposed ally, Mrs. Briss, does an abrupt about-face, attacking the narrator personally and repudiating his theory by hitting upon plausible counter arguments capable of razing his "perfect palace of thought" (311). The novel ends without satisfactorily substantiating either Mrs. Briss's or the narrator's viewpoint.

The ambiguous ending of the novel has made it possible for numerous interpretations to coexist, as evinced by the extremely varied criticism the novel has evoked. Critics
have also diverged widely in their appraisal of the novel's technical achievement. The lack of any clear cut resolution for the novel's central question has led some critics to dismiss *The Sacred Fount* as a poor work. Others grant it greater standing but primarily in the context that it played a role as a preliminary step in James's development as a writer which culminated much more successfully in his major novels, *The Ambassadors,* *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove.* Given that *The Sacred Fount* does not stand among James's most admired creations (he himself excluded it from the New York edition of his works), the novel nonetheless is an intriguing, subtle study, dense, compact and worthy of deeper probing. Any such probing, however, must attempt to deal with the novel's ambiguity and, since nothing in James's fiction is accidental, must strive to discover James's purpose for constructing, as he termed it, a "labyrinth."

An important milestone in critical treatment of *The Sacred Fount* was achieved by Leon Edel in his cogent essay written for the Grove Press edition of the novel. Edel saw the novel's inherent ambiguity as key to its theme of appearance versus reality, and links *The Sacred Fount* to other James works such as "The Turn of the Screw." In identifying appearance versus reality as the central theme in *The Sacred Fount,* Edel singled out the phenomenon of the unreliable narrator as the crucial factor in a critical
consideration of The Sacred Fount. Edel argues that it is a trap "To read the book inattentively [and]...to take everything on the narrator's terms" (p. ix). He builds his case for the unreliability of the narrator on a series of clues in the text. The narrator himself, Edel points out, admits to doubts about the progress and substance of his inquiry; he is extremely vain and hyperbolic about his intellectual powers, making the reader wonder just how intelligent the narrator really is; and he and his theory are seen as suspect by Mrs. Briss, who reports to him the assessment she and others have made that he is "crazy" and then renders the coup de grace to his theory.

The question of the credibility of the narrator is indeed the central consideration one must grapple with in coming to terms with the novel and its ambiguity when one considers how James himself, as is well recorded in his Prefaces and other critical writing, was concerned with point of view. Because James felt so strongly that fiction was a "reflection" and an "appreciation" of life rather than a mere recording, he invested heavily in the worthiness of the sensitive "reflector" or "consciousness" that presented his stories. Throughout his career he experimented with a variety of "registers" carefully selecting the viewpoint(s) most appropriate to each work. In his Preface to The Princess Casamassima James notes the necessity of creating a "fine consciousness" as the mirror, a consciousness with
"the power to be finely aware and richly responsible." In his Preface to The Ambassadors, James presents a strong case against first person narration -- the very mode he selected for The Sacred Fount. In the Preface James derided the first person as "a form foredoomed to looseness." Why, then, in The Sacred Fount, would James create an unreliable reflector and allow him to be the sole voice in the novel, a condition certain to precipitate the "looseness" both of form and meaning that James claimed to be "never much my affair"? The resolution to this question is to be found in a deeper consideration of the cause of the narrator's unreliability. What makes him unreliable? Why should the wary reader, put on guard by Edel, discount the narrator's disclosures, thought process, and opinions? Clues to James's rationale are also to be found in the Preface to The Ambassadors. James states that he forebore to give Lambert Strether "the double privilege of subject and object" because "one makes that surrender only if one is prepared not to make certain precious discriminations." In The Ambassadors, James kept Strether "encaged and provided for" in order "to keep in view proprieties much stiffer and more salutary than any our straight and credulous gape are likely to bring home to him." According to James, Strether "has exhibitional conditions to meet...that forbid the terrible fluidity of self-revelation."

First person narration is appropriate for The Sacred Fount for the very reasons it was unacceptable for The
Ambassadors. The scope and purpose of *The Sacred Fount* are much more limited than those of *The Ambassadors* so that the looseness James feared is controlled to an extent by the compactness of the limited number of characters, the short span of time and the concentration of the Newmarch setting. There are thus fewer subtle "discriminations" to be concerned about. Also, and most importantly, it suits James's purpose in *The Sacred Fount* to tap that "terrible fluidity of self revelation." He wants to give the narrator full opportunity to serve as his own witness, testifying sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously but always fully and graphically on the merits of his character, intellect, feelings and actions. Without a third person objective voice, James is able to intensify the sense of the subjectivity of experience, understanding and opinion of the narrator. He is also able, as Edel points out, to distance himself from the story, to maintain "complete neutrality" (xxv). Edel claims that in *The Sacred Fount* James was "actually constructing a puzzle, a maze, a labyrinth with diabolical ingenuity...what ambiguity there is, has been willed there...The novelist's goal is above all his 'mystification'" (xxiv). It is also, according to Edel, his subject. What better way to demonstrate the subjective nature of human experience than through the intriguing study presented in *The Sacred Fount*? The novel's ambiguity and its unreliable narrator are James's method of telling his reader there is no one reality and there are no totally objective observers of life's scene.
Multiple levels of meaning exist in all of James's work and certainly appearance versus reality was a major concern of the writer in his later period generally. To underscore this theme the unreliable narrator in *The Sacred Fount* provides graphic testament as to the subjective nature of epistemology. But Edel's interpretation does not answer completely the question as to why James created such a particular personality for the narrator. The narrator is not just any fallible observer. In his overweening sense of his own superiority, he embodies one of James's most telling indictments of egotism and, as such, provides vivid evidence of the toll that character flaw can take on the quality of human life. The lone voice of the novel emanates from a man who represses emotion and compassion and who mercilessly scrutinizes and manipulates his fellows to serve his own ends without ever giving anything in return. In addition, because of the narrator's strong identification as an artist figure, James uses him as a means of commenting effectively and with his usual irony on the phenomenon of the artist as drainer of the sacred fount. Read from the perspective of this interpretation, the ambiguity of the novel and the unreliability of the narrator can be seen to serve a further purpose for James beyond the appearance versus reality theme. The narrator is unreliable because James wishes to demonstrate that egotism is one of the factors that distort perception and understanding. He leaves
the novel's conclusion ambiguous, however, forebearing to allow Mrs. Briss a total rout because although he wishes to discredit the narrator, James does not want to discredit the sacred fount theory. The notion of the sacred fount is one that obviously fascinated James since it appears as a factor in human relationships in a number of his works.

With typical Jamesian irony and complexity, *The Sacred Fount* is a study within a study -- the narrator himself serves as the most explicit example of a drainer of the sacred fount in his efforts to prove his theory. The novel is thus a mirror held up to a mirror. The infinite reflections implied in the work serve to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this characteristic in human experience generally and specifically in artistic creation.

In order to deal fully with this aspect of *The Sacred Fount*, it is helpful to begin with a consideration of another James work, the short story "The Beast in the Jungle" which was published in 1903, two years after the publication of *The Sacred Fount*. "The Beast in the Jungle" provides some interesting parallels to *The Sacred Fount* and can serve, for purposes of understanding and dissecting *The Sacred Fount*, as an important "torch of...analogy"(218).

"The Beast in the Jungle" features yet another version of the sacred fount relationship so closely studied and analyzed by the novel's narrator. Again like the novel, the story depicts a character, John Marcher, notable for his egotism, whose perception (and hence his reliability as
an observer) is impugned. Unlike *The Sacred Fount*, however, "The Beast in the Jungle" gives the reader some concrete evidence and a more definite resolution.

John Marcher is a middle-aged man who, to all outward appearances, has done little to distinguish himself in life. Nonetheless, he has a very high opinion of himself. He is paired in the tale with May Bartram, an attractive, intelligent, sensitive woman who displays, in contrast, acute perception and intuition. She is also remarkable, again in direct contrast to Marcher, for her extraordinary selfless behavior. From the outset, the relationship between Marcher and May Bartram is one-sided, with Marcher seeming to derive all benefit and May tirelessly giving her every effort in his behalf. From the moment of their chance reunion at Weatherend, Marcher immediately displays marked egotistic tendencies. He is oppressed by the grandeur of the great house which he feels consequently diminishes him and his stature so "he needed to wander apart to feel in proper relation with his surroundings" (405). While wandering on his own, Marcher meets May Bartram, whom he knows he has met before, but he is unable to place her. He at first condescendingly assumes himself of superior status, guessing May is a poor relation of the proprietors of the house, "there on harder terms than anyone...there as a consequence of things suffered" (406). He is annoyed, however, to realize that he does not have the upper hand in renewing their acquaintance. May, not a victim of a similar loss of
memory, appears to place him; "she had not lost the thread... but she wouldn't give it back to him...without some putting forth of his hand for it" (405), and Marcher, as soon becomes evident in the progress of the story, shies away from any such effort.

James hints at the role May will play in Marcher's life from the beginning when she first speaks to him, "her face and her voice, all at his service now" (406), jogging his memory "like the torch of a lamplighter who touches into flame, one by one, a long row of gas jets" (407). John is thus enabled to make the pre-emptive declaration of their past association. He flatters himself that "the illumination" of his account "was brilliant," but, ironically and prophetically, "he had got most things wrong," and it takes May's corrections to straighten him out (407). When the actual substance of their previous meeting proves to be little in the way of a foundation upon which to build a current friendship, Marcher is regretful and has, ironically, "the feeling of an occasion missed" (408), and wistfully wishes he were capable of "reaching out in imagination -- as against time" (408). Momentarily he does retreat to his imagination, visualizing any number of romantic incidents (in which he plays, of course, the prominent role) which might have occurred that would bind them more intimately together, since he realizes, again with only his needs in mind, that "it was an old friend that...she would have suited him" (408). Such mental peregrinations do little to
help the present state of affairs, and thus, inevitably, it is May who more pragmatically decides "to take up the case and, as it were, save the situation" (409). Once again, she supplies "the missing link" by recalling a secret he had confided in her ten years earlier (406). Marcher, at first disquieted to learn that May knows of his secret belief that he is being reserved for a special fate, possibly a horrible fate, that lies awaiting him much like a beast crouching in the jungle, tensed and ready to spring, soon realizes that he "could profit perhaps exquisitely" from her knowledge (411). This attitude continues to characterize Marcher's view of May Bartram. To him, she is "buried treasure" he can dig up and use at his convenience (415).

May, on the other hand, continues, throughout the long years of their friendship, to demonstrate the same loyalty and understanding she had originally shown in believing in his "special fate" and keeping it secret for ten years. She devotes her life to Marcher, in essence submerging her identity in his: "she had a wonderful way of making [his secret] seem...the secret of her life too" (419). She is supportive and encouraging, flattering him by her sincere belief in his odd view of himself; she always refers to his secret as "the real truth about you" (419), and minimizes her own importance by claiming she is merely "your dull woman" (420), who functions to help Marcher obscure his real self from society. As she tells him: "What saves us, you know, is that we answer so completely to so usual an
appearance: that of the man and woman whose friendship has become such a daily habit...as to be at last indispensable" (420); Marcher is thus "for the vulgar, indistinguishable from other men...that covers your tracks more than anything" (420-421).

John Marcher, despite all May does for him in terms of companionship, interest, compassion, and understanding, despite all her efforts to make him always welcome at her cozy fireside and to provide him with frugal suppers and other little attentions for his pleasure, can only recognize that "the beauty of May Bartram was in particular that she had given herself so to his case" (426). His recognition of her other attributes is stunted by his unrelenting egotism. Occasionally he breaks through his self-centeredness to express some small appreciation for her kindness. Once he says to her, "how beautiful you are to me! How shall I ever repay you?" (426); May, trying to encourage him to continue to open himself up, to feel such emotions and to be aware of someone other than himself, replies simply, "By going on as you are" (426). Marcher misses the point, of course, and instead continues non-stop in his egotism. His few attempts at gratitude are pitifully lacking; all he can offer is an annual birthday present or an occasional night at the opera, incidentals which require only the spending of money, rather than a personal commitment.

As the years go by, May offers yet another service to Marcher. She already had established her role as guardian
of his secret self; now, because of her perception, and Marcher's blindness, she becomes the interpreter of his fate. She thus increases in value to him since she "knows what's to happen" (424). When her health begins to fail and she confesses this fact to Marcher, his first reaction is to think of himself: "He immediately began to imagine aggravations and disasters, and above all to think of her peril as the direct menace for himself of personal privation" (427). Marcher even wonders if perhaps his long-anticipated fate is ordained to be "nothing more than his being condemned to see this charming woman, this admirable friend, pass away from him" (428, emphasis added).

May's illness, externalized in a slow wasting away of her body, underscores her identification as a sacred fount; in giving herself up to him so totally, she has depleted her own reserves. In spite of her infirmity, however, May still tries to help Marcher. In their final meetings before her death, she exerts herself to make him see the truth and thus save himself from what she has accurately recognized as his "beast." In the advanced stages of her illness, May appears like "an artificial lily, wonderfully imitated and constantly kept, without dust or stain" (430), symbolizing the love she has kept preserved for Marcher, and that remains unreciprocated. He, still obtuse and concerned only with himself, misses again her message for him; it is as if she were trying to communicate "with him as across some gulf, or, from some island of rest she had already reached, and it made him
feel strangely abandoned" (431). Still blind, Marcher can only think to try to use her further to elicit some last information. He asks her "What do you regard as the very worst that, at this time of day can happen to me?" (431), wondering "if I shall consciously suffer" (434). When May does not give him the answers he expects, Marcher moans "you give me no more light on it, you abandon me" (434). May makes one last effort that takes the final ounces of her strength; she strains herself to get up and stand in front of him, letting all the love she feels for him shine delicately in "her wasted face...with the white luster of silver" (435-436). Marcher, standing expectantly waiting for some momentous revelation about himself, never thinks of May, fearing only "that she would die without giving light" (436), and thus misses entirely the light she was trying to give him.

The light finally does come for Marcher only after May's death. While visiting her grave, he is confronted with the depth of real grief captured in the stricken expression of a man mourning at a near-by grave. Marcher is suddenly hit by the searing reality of what he has missed. He now comprehends how void of meaning his life has been; he has not truly lived because "no passion had ever touched him" (439). As he stands over May's grave, he realizes that "the escape would have been to love her; then, then he would have lived. She has lived...since she had loved him for himself" (450). It is only too late, as the dreaded
"beast" springs, that Marcher can understand the true meaning of the sacred fount he had been drawing from for so many years and recognize all that he has missed by concentrating so single-mindedly on self.

Although John Marcher and the narrator of The Sacred Fount are by no means completely similar in either characterization or situation, James has imbued them with enough congruencies to make for an interesting and enlightening juxtaposition. Marcher and the narrator both serve as extreme examples for James. Although they, like Isabel Archer or Lambert Strether, for example, testify to the subjective quality of human experience in their faulty perception and understanding, they are extreme in their exploitation of others and their isolation from their peers. The common thread that accounts for this extreme condition is their massive egotism. Sequestered in their sense of their individual superiority and uniqueness, neither the narrator nor Marcher is capable of a warm, mutually caring relationship with another human being; they remain wrapped protectively in the cocoon of their egocentric selves, incapable of establishing deep emotional contact with someone else since that would be paramount to admitting another to equal status, an inconceivable thought. As a result of their self-centeredness and steadfast adherence to their egocentric view of life, both Marcher and the narrator are removed from the mainstream of human experience. They live in a closed,
exclusive world that neither fully recognizes as lonely and cold.

As with Marcher, James early on in *The Sacred Fount* gives ample evidence of the narrator's inflated view of himself. During the trip to Newmarch, the narrator's opinion of and interaction with Gilbert Long are more revealing of the narrator than of Long. He faults Long, whom he had met previously at other Newmarch occasions, for failure "to know me" when they had met casually since their initial introduction (2). For such a heinous slight the narrator "could only hold him as stupid unless I held him as impertinent" (2). The narrator chooses to think him stupid, and patronizingly writes him off as being merely "a fine piece of human furniture" endowed with only good looks as a passport to genteel society (2). When Long "at last [treats the narrator] as an acquaintance" (2), the narrator remarks that "his manners had distinctly gained in ease" (3). The narrator is much easier on himself when he fails to recognize Grace Brissenden than he was with Long. He sees his own slip as a consequence of Mrs. Briss's much changed appearance, not a *faux pas* -- a benefit of the doubt he would not give to Long in the similar instance.

The narrator carefully records Long's compliment to him on his "clever and critical" sensibility and, as the novel progresses, never fails to continue to compliment himself and condescend toward the mental acuity of others. In
talking with Mrs. Briss about the theory he is developing on Long's marked improvement, he notes "I felt a little like a teacher encouraging an apt pupil" (35). He relishes his own "extemporized shrewdness" (198) on one occasion and his "supernatural acuteness" on another (125). When Lady John matches him in conversation, he cites her ability to follow his argument as evidence that "prevented my thinking of her as inordinately backward" (179). When Mrs. Briss queries him as to whether or not Long in his newly transformed state is the cleverest man at the party, the narrator quickly sets her straight: "Hardly that...for don't you see the proofs I'm myself giving you? But say he is...the cleverest but one" (378). The narrator always hastens to add qualifying remarks which elevate himself and detract from others. In recording his reaction in a later conversation with Long he states how "My interlocutor was...immeasurably superior" only to add "superior, I mean, to himself" -- not, of course, to the narrator (163). This inflated sense of himself raises the narrator, in his own estimation at least, to a higher plane unapproached by the others. As he gathers his evidence and works out his theory, the narrator believes "I alone was magnificently and absurdly aware -- everyone else was benightedly out of it" (177). He feels, from such a superior vantage point, impervious in his intellectual prowess: "Ah..I know everything (110), "My accumulations of lucidity...were now such as to defy all leakage" (256).
His sense of his own intellectual supremacy grows in proportion to the rapid development of his theory. Just before his final discussion with Mrs. Briss, he feels a "quickened pride in the kingdom of thought I had won" and congratulates himself since it is "by my own right hand I had gained the kingdom" (255). In this gush of self confidence and esteem, he feels "anew my private wonder at her [Mrs. Briss] having cared and dared to meet me" (254). Mrs. Briss is not, however, without her own strengths, as the narrator acknowledges, but typically only with proper deference to himself: "If I didn't fear to seem to drivel about my own knowledge, I should say that she had, in addition to all the rest of her 'pull,' the benefit of striking me as worthy of me" (243). Ironically, when Mrs. Briss breaks with him and begins to erode his case, the narrator expresses "my horror of her huge egotism" (252, emphasis added) and states "I don't feel at all comfortable about your new theory itself which puts me so wretchedly in the wrong" (265). The narrator is stung because Mrs. Briss not only faults his theory, but also himself for seeing and talking too much about the affairs of others and specifically -- "to have made [Long] out so horrid... having such secrets [and] sacrificing poor May" (266).

Mrs. Briss's indictment of the narrator provides an interesting divergence from the similarities James developed between the narrator and John Marcher. As has been
noted, Marcher and the narrator exploit others with little or no concern for the effect their actions might have on those being used. James underscores this exploitation in both works with repeated use of financial metaphors. The narrator, however, is deliberate and conscious in his exploitive tendencies, whereas Marcher does not recognize the way he has used May until the story's final scene.

Ironically, throughout The Sacred Fount, the narrator himself rather self-righteously expresses distaste and concern over the exploitation of individuals he thinks he sees going on around him. In addition to the two sacred founts, May and Briss, that he believes are being drained almost cannibalistically by Long and Mrs. Briss, he scores Long for his "duplicity" in using Lady John as a screen for his relation with May (106). He accuses Lady John, in turn, of using Briss to screen her passion for Long, and he appears to shrink from the ardor both Mrs. Briss and Obert demonstrate in the rush to expose May Server as Long's mistress.

The narrator even expresses an occasional qualm about his own probing, stating "No one had really any business to know what I knew" (161), and wonders about the wisdom of nosing "about for a relation that a lady has her reasons for keeping secret" (65). He takes comfort, however, in Obert's belief that "nothing's our business that we can't find out" (220), and states, as a further rationale, that after all "it was lawfully open to me to judge of what other people did" (28).
When the narrator mentions his hesitation about undertaking an investigation of such a personal and sensitive nature, Obert, himself now feverishly put on the scent by the narrator, assuages their consciences by declaring that their probing is "positively honourable by being confined to psychologic evidence" (66). When the narrator wonders for whom such an approach is honorable, Obert distinguishes between their effort, which he terms "a high application of intelligence" and common snooping: "what's ignoble is the detective and the keyhole" (66). The narrator readily acquiesces to Obert's argument (and its appeal to his intellectual vanity) and declares himself anxious to continue the quest for more information: "I did have, last night, my scruples, but you warm me up" (66).

Later, as he is even more involved in the development of his theory, the narrator again distances himself from seeming to appear to be no more than a gossip monger; it would be "hopelessly vulgar to have made an induction at all about our companions but those I have recorded on behalf of my own energy" (185). The narrator see-saws in a similar fashion for a good portion of the novel. At some points he has additional moments of hesitation about the ethical nature of the task he is so caught up in. Despite these momentary pauses, however, he always forges on, caught up in his obsession to see his theory firmly grounded. In discussion with Mrs. Briss about May, the narrator initially
appears protective of May, causing Mrs. Briss herself to retrench slightly and comment on the danger of May's exposure: "Think of the circumstances -- her personal ones... it would be too bad a case... anything proved would go tremendously hard for her" (77). Although the narrator himself initiated the concern and was first sensitive to the possibly devastating consequences to May, he cannot resist pushing Mrs. Briss on further in the hunt to get "a little loose collateral evidence" (77). This recurring vacillation sets a pattern which clearly demonstrates how readily the narrator's nascent compassion and moral compunction are overcome by his obsession with achieving his own ends.

He continually refers to May and Briss as victims, but does not recognize that they are as much his victims as Mrs. Briss's or Long's. He early on expresses the wish not "to have May studied by anyone but myself" (48). Thus, although the narrator is intermittently concerned for her at the hands of others, he cannot refrain from bringing the close scrutiny of his own observations to bear on her actions. In such ways he appears much more as an exploiter of those he is studying, than as a disinterested observer caught up only in the psychological interest of the case.

The degree to which the narrator expends effort for self-serving reasons is exposed in revealing comments he makes at various points in the novel. During a later afternoon discussion with Briss, the narrator passes his arm
through Briss's in a seemingly supportive, kindly gesture, but he quickly follows up the gesture with the thought that "there were things I wanted of him," which dilutes the charity one might have granted the narrator originally (107). The narrator also comments on the enjoyment his study gives him, nothing the "intensity of amusement I had... enabled my private madness to yield me" (162). This personal "amusement" continues as his chief motivation in almost every instance. In discussion with Long, the narrator presses him on his opinion regarding what the narrator believes is a striking change in Briss's appearance. When Long appears uncomfortable under such interrogation, the narrator pushes on saying to himself as explanation, "If I pitied him a little for my pressure, my idea was yet what most possessed me" (24). Similarly, he thinks only of himself when he discusses with Briss the situation with Lady John, commenting condescendingly "Of course you can't quite see the fun in it" (111-2 emphasis added). It would appear that the narrator only sees "the fun in it" for himself, and in that pursuit he recognizes little restraint: "It was better verily not to have taken them up... than to have taken them up, with knowing gestures, only to do so little with them" (185). The crime is thus not in the prying, but in letting it go only at that. The case must be tried to greater and greater extents and, as time passes, the narrator ceases to be concerned with the boundaries of good taste or moral discretion.
The further loosening of any compunction on the part of the narrator is seen in a discussion he has with Lady John. Although the narrator disparages Lady John for reading "all things in the light of the universal possibility of a 'relation,'", it is ironically obvious that that is exactly what the narrator himself is doing -- the only difference is that he is interested in making the stuff of gossip fit his theory (186). In addition, the narrator is now, despite his early trepidation, firmly committed to sacrificing May Server in the interest of proving his theory. In his talk with Lady John, he makes an interesting, and possibly self-protecting slip. He, although aware of the threat of exposure to May and its consequences, nonetheless urges Lady John on to further speculation, daring her to guess the identity of "these objects of [his] solicitude" (179). When "It at all events came out between us that Mrs. Server was the person I did have on my mind," the narrator states that "I remember that it had seemed to me at the end of a minute to matter comparatively little by which of us, after all, she was first designated" (184). This casual remark captures the erosion in the narrator's concern for May, since, he obviously places little merit any longer on the protective impulses he had claimed earlier to feel. The narrator also ponders in talking with May that "if May were as subtle as I -- which she wasn't -- she too would have put it together that I had dreadfully talked about her" (138). Other than to remark on this possibility,
he has little further regret or pang of conscience.

The final scene with Mrs. Briss exposes the narrator's complete capitulation to exploitation. Any remaining sense of protecting May or Briss is pushed aside conclusively in the interest of furthering his theory. Earlier, in discussion with Obert, the narrator evinces the complete break he has made with previous feelings. Obert reports he has found Mrs. Server restored to her full intelligence. The narrator cannot accept this observation since it threatens his theory; he thinks to himself that "The question of her happiness was really subordinate; what I stood or fell by was her faculty" (230). The narrator does recognize the unseemly aspect of his obsession as demonstrated by his reply to Obert's statement that his failure to identify May's lover is "no thanks to one's scruples, but perhaps it's lucky for one's manners" (220). The narrator returns "If you've watched, you've doubtless seen what has already become of mine" (220).

Despite such momentary self-recognition, the narrator continues firm in his resolve to exploit and manipulate. During his nocturnal showdown with Mrs. Briss, the narrator is fervently obsessed with his own needs and stands ready to overpower anyone opposing him or his theory. Although Mrs. Briss is certainly an able adversary, she nevertheless complains that the narrator's singlemindedness has "the effect of driving me to the wall" (304). Indeed, she also claims that similarly it was the narrator's compelling
influence that was responsible for even momentarily catching her up in the theory and the quest to identify Long's sacred fount. As if in acquiescence to her claim, the narrator himself says in telling metaphorical language that he gave Mrs. Briss "enough rope" to get her started as an ally to further his need for information (242). This phrasing aptly captures the narrator's calculated use of Mrs. Briss in his search for Long's lover, for if she had helped prove his case conclusively, she would also have unwittingly incriminated herself.

As Mrs. Briss unfolds her arguments aimed at undoing the narrator's theory, the narrator doubles and redoubles his efforts at manipulating her. He refuses to allow her to depart until all his questions are answered, pressing her for more details while trying to "avoid having her turn her back because then everything was over" (256). The narrator believes Mrs. Briss has teamed up with Long and they are putting forth a united front to destroy his theory. He thus feels a deep desire to know how this joint effort, which he believes provides a beautiful symmetry to the sympathetic alliance he thinks he has discovered between May and Briss, has come about; he wants information on "the marvel of their exchange of signals, the phenomenon scarce to be represented of their breaking ground with each other" (274). He believes they have circled their wagons in response to what they suppose to be his role in tipping off May and Briss to
their common plight. The narrator thinks it natural that Mrs. Briss and Long would thus join forces since "they both had their treasure to guard they...looked to each other for instinctive help" (274). In their desire to protect their "treasure," Mrs. Briss and Long are much like the narrator who at first, recognizing he cannot save Briss or May from their fate, believed he could "guard to the last grain of gold my precious sense of their loss, their disintegration and their doom" (273).

With each party having something to "guard" the stage is set for negotiation. The narrator believes he can manipulate Mrs. Briss through her desire to discover how much he in turn knows that could be injurious to her and to Long. He senses that she, on her part, is bribing him: "She would let me see as far as I would if she could feel sure I would do nothing" (273).

In musing on this bargain, the narrator reflects that initially Long and Mrs. Briss were unconscious of the toll they took on their partners -- now "consciousness alone...could make them effectively cruel" (295). Once again in analyzing others the narrator is drawing an ironic parallel to his own behavior. By now, it is extremely apparent that the narrator's "consciousness" is capable of equal cruelty in its obsessive prying and exploiting of others. Similarly, as he is backed into a corner and made aware his precious theory is under attack, a cruel self-protection takes
precedence over concern for others. He pushes Mrs. Briss on into further discussion and inquiry since he does not want "any sacrifice of our denouement" (260). He admits he now knows "little of my desire to 'protect' Mrs. Server" (249). Although the demand he initially believes Mrs. Briss's bribe sets is in "terms [that] were not altogether what my pity could have wished" (295), nonetheless, he is willing to move to protect his theory at all costs: "If it had to go I knew well who went with it, but I wasn't there to save them. I was there to save my priceless pearl of an inquiry" (296).

In such egotistic self-confidence and in his own "draining" of others, the narrator has much in common in manner and method with John Marcher. Also, like John Marcher, the narrator in his perception of events, people and circumstances is so subjective and self-centered that he is off the mark in many instances, especially in the interpretation of nuances of human emotions that his ego has never allowed him to experience. Again, like John Marcher, his lack of anything but vicarious experience leads to faulty perception which results in faulty comprehension.

Questions as to the reliability of the narrator's perception, and thus his judgment, are raised by James early on in The Sacred Fount. The narrator himself gives the first indication of how erroneous his impressions can be when he relates how, in traveling by train to Newmarch, his attempts to size up his companions often are inaccurate: "one was
glowered at, in the compartment, by people who on the morrow, after breakfast, were to prove charming; one was spoken to first by people whose sociability was subsequently to show as bleak; and one built with confidence on others who were never to reappear at all — who were only going to Birmingham" (1).

The narrator's perception is also shown to be at odds with other characters'. When he comments to Long on Mrs. Brissenden's marked change in appearance, Long confirms his surprise but his estimation of the degree of her transformation is far short of the narrator's appraisal: "I'm bound to say I don't quite call it beauty" (5). Long's comment forces the narrator to back off a bit and qualify his initial remark, "Oh, I only spoke of it as relative" (5). Long goes on to state that Mrs. Briss has not really changed, she's only failed to age; in contrast, the narrator rushes onward to a specious assumption to substantiate his original observation: "if a woman doesn't grow older she may be said to grow younger; and if she grows younger she may be supposed to grow prettier" (6). Long and the narrator also differ on the narrator's impression of Guy Brissenden. When the narrator queries Long on his view of Briss's change, Long evinces a poor opinion of Briss from the start: "His comparative youth doesn't make more of him" (6). The extent of Briss's supposed decline is also called into question early on since he is referred to by the narrator and other characters alike constantly and seemingly from long-standing
tradition as "Poor Briss". Similarly, the narrator is seen as being somewhat off the common track of understanding. Despite his supposedly regular appearances at Newmarch, he is noticeably out of touch on information about the lives of his friends and fellow guests. When Mrs. Briss gives him a coy, knowing look about Long and Lady John's coming and goings, the narrator is totally in the dark as to her reference, which later at the house party seems to be the latest gossip. He is similarly in the dark later when Obert mentions the tragic events in Mrs. Server's life.

Despite little concrete evidence or background knowledge to sustain his conclusions, the narrator nonetheless is willing to build his theory on merely the "blaze of suggestion" he sees in the changes he notes in Mrs. Briss and Long (12). From that uncertain starting point, he rushes to expand on his theory which then gathers "substance step by step and without missing a link" and forms "the happiest little chapter of accidents" despite other instances where reality as reported by others seems once again markedly different from the narrator's perception (13). One of the primary examples of the disparity that exists between the narrator's observation and the views of others is his appraisal of May Server. The narrator is initially attracted to May and finds "ease for the weary in her happy nature and her peculiar grace" (18). He describes her as "extraordinarily pretty, markedly responsive, conspicuously charming" (14); he reports how she was always "valued" at Newmarch for
these qualities of mind and person (15). When he notes that Obert seems to wish to be rid of May, the narrator is startled. He is even more surprised with the cause of Obert's discomfort. Obert says May was throwing herself at him. The narrator's surprise is considerable: "Mrs. Server? Does Mrs. Server make love?" (19). Obert says he has observed May attempt the same approach with the narrator: "It seemed to me she began it on you as soon as she got hold of you. Weren't you aware?" (19). The narrator obviously was not aware and he can only wonder "Isn't she as lovely as she seems?" (20). Obert also surprises him by mentioning how unhappy May Server is -- again an observation diametrically opposed to the narrator's first impressions of her. Obert insists "There's something the matter with her", since she is so changed from the way she was when he painted her portrait. The narrator can only say, in querying Obert as to what is the matter with her, "It's for me to ask you what. I don't myself...perceive it" (62).

Other characters substantiate Obert's findings about May. Mrs. Briss says May "was all over the place...she couldn't keep still" (75); Briss insists that everyone is talking about May and speculating as to what is the cause for her behavior. The narrator demonstrates his distance from consensus once again when he questions Briss, "Do you mean people are talking about her?" (116). To which Briss replies, "Haven't they shown you?" (116). The narrator responds tellingly, "No, no one has spoken. Moreover I
wouldn't have let them" (116). Briss then aptly and signifi­
icantly points out that the narrator must have "kept them
off...because you differ with them" (116).

By now the narrator however is willing, despite his lack
of first-hand experience or evidence, to accept the fact of
May's diminished state because it fits his theory, but his
perception is nonetheless still often at odds with that of
other characters. His fallibility comes from his constant
confusion of imagination and observation. Unlike Mrs. Briss,
whose evidence is certainly not absolute, but which is
gathered strictly by observation of action and appearance
(as she says, "it proves just what one sees. One simply
takes it in"), the narrator is more apt to embellish on
appearance with his own subjective interpretation (10).
Like John Marcher's, his imagination is always ready to fill
in where observation or knowledge leaves off. Marcher,
trying to establish a basis in their past association on
which to build a present relationship with May Bartram,
reaches out in imagination to create more of substance in
their first meeting than had actually transpired since "Then
they would be in possession of the something or other that
their actual show seemed to lack" (408). The narrator
goes beyond merely embellishing fact. As he states
"Reflection was the real intensity...[there was] more im­
pact in thinking...[it] over in isolation than in hovering
personally" (90). With such a philosophy, it does not
bother the narrator that much of his observation of scenes
crucial to his developing theory is made under conditions that defy accurate sight or hearing. In his observations of Briss (and others) the narrator seems "perpetually...to be taking his measure from behind" (227). In one instance he believes that May and Briss react with a start as if they have "been for some time exposed" when they notice the narrator and Mrs. Briss have been observing them (85). Then he undermines the acuteness of his observation by giving evidence of how far off the pair are since it will take "some minutes" for them to reach the narrator and Mrs. Briss (86). As he thinks about the likelihood of May Server's being Long's mistress he finds "She became vivid in the light of the so limited vision of her that I already possessed" (90). Similarly, as he leaves May and Briss together late Saturday afternoon, he does not look back but "feels" they are exploring their common relation (155).

The narrator thus puts much credence in "things unspoken and untouched" (227), a method that continues to place him at odds with the thoughts of others in the party. Obert, using the narrator's analogy of the Brissendens, writes off Long as May's lover because she obviously, in his estimation, "collared him much too markedly" in the picture gallery (64). He similarly does not find Long vastly improved in mental faculties, summing his discourse up as typical "of the man himself and his type of mind...he talks to talk" (59). The narrator's typical way of dealing with such disparity of views and interpretations is to feel, as
he had earlier when he and Obert differed, that an "expert observer [like Obert] would yet read it quite the wrong [i.e., not the narrator's] way" (28).

In the closing chapters of the novel, the narrator is again shocked by the disparity between his version of the state of affairs and those of Obert and Mrs. Briss. Obert tells the narrator he regrets having represented May as being deficient mentally. He reports that "just now she's all right" (229). The narrator is confounded that Obert has found May restored only hours after the narrator believed he "found her all absent" (230). He wonders at "the sight of the painter sense deeply applied" (229), and considers how his theory's "whole superstructure... reared itself on my view of Mrs. Server's condition" (230). He can only accept Obert's view if he can manufacture an explanation for it that is compatible with his theory. He speculates that perhaps Mrs. Server has broken with Long, a conclusion based only on Obert's remark that she is now "all right", and a somewhat obstructed view the narrator had had of Long standing alone out on the terrace. The narrator then considers that perhaps the alliance of the two sacred founts he believes he helped to foment had played a role in May's change back to her previous, undepleted state. If so, he speculates that Briss should also appear restored to his youth. Instead, when Briss appears to look even older, Obert comments "I should have thought...
that he would have been on the contrary_____," at which point the narrator breaks in and finishes the thought himself, "visibly rejuvenated. So should I. I must make it out...I shall" (228).

Others besides Obert call into question the accuracy of the narrator's powers of observation and ratiocination. Lady John tells him he "can't be a providence...[since] a real providence knows, whereas you...have to find out...even by asking 'the likes of' me" (176). The narrator discounts Lady John's criticism and continues to "think awfully well of myself...for seeing so much more" (177), setting himself markedly apart from the "gregarious vulgarity" of the others (177).

The final blow to the narrator's theory is administered by Mrs. Briss, who now denies that May Server is Long's mistress. When he insists that even if it is not May "It was somebody and it still is" (269), Mrs. Briss tells him "the mistake's now yours." The narrator argues that Mrs. Briss denies "my fact" (i.e. Long's remarkable improvement), to which she replies "if it's yours, it's nobody else's" (271). She continues, in her attack, stating that the narrator is "abused by a fine fancy" (262) and that he sees too much. She "can't consent to...[the narrator's] twisting...[his observations] into the recognition of anything else" (259). In following the narrator's theory and argument, Mrs. Briss says "one doesn't know where one is --
nor...do I think you always do" (262). In Mrs. Briss's estimation, the narrator, with all his cleverness, has merely built up "houses of cards" (262); there is nothing of truth in his theory.

The distance exposed between the narrator and the others in the Newmarch company is certainly a result of his overweening ego, but it also stems from the narrator's insularity from the world of emotion. He makes a concerted, conscious effort to remain always in the realm of the intellect, suppressing and distancing himself at almost every juncture from purely emotional reactions. Depth of feeling and personal commitment are obviously as foreign to the narrator as they were to John Marcher. He is amazed at "the way other people could feel about each other...What an intimacy, what an intensity of relation...when people were so deeply in love they rubbed off on each other" (16-17, emphasis added). He marvels at the thought of such feelings manifested in others. A love relationship, as he views it, is intrinsically unilateral, a far cry from Long's observation on the married state: people have to get used to each other's charms as well as their faults" (7). In contemplating what he feels must be the draining of May Server and Briss, the narrator puzzles over "how the poor wretches feel" (30), and finally comes to the conclusion in Briss's case that "if he loves her he must [like it]. That is if he loves her passionately,
sublimely. It's in fact just because he does so love her that the miracle, for her, is wrought" (30). Unlike Marcher, who finally in the conclusion of "The Beast in the Jungle" arrives at an awareness of what was May Bartram's gain and his loss, the narrator is incapable of comprehending the positive value of emotional commitment. He can only wonder at "the power not one's self that made for passion [was]... at best the mystery of mysteries" (17, emphasis added). He worries that sacred fount victims are "abased" and conscious of that abasement (136) and ponders "Who of us all could say that his fall might not be as deep? -- or might not at least become so with equal opportunity" (136). The narrator's response to the question is typically to avoid involvement and to seek self protection: "I promised myself roundly that I would henceforth keep clear" (136).

The narrator is willing, however, to grant some recognition of the power of a love relationship, sensing that love exerts "a great pressure of soul to soul [that] usually left on either side a sufficient show of tell-tale traces", but he is unable to comprehend, in the instance of Long's supposed transformation, "how the pliant wax must have been prepared and the seal of passion applied" (17). His inability to grasp such a phenomenon again demonstrates his great distance from emotional feeling.

This distance is further underscored at many points in the novel when the narrator consciously removes himself from
the realm of feeling. Although he cites his "extraordinary interest in my fellow creatures. I have more than most men. I've never really seen anyone with half so much" (147), lest the reader be misled into assuming this statement implies a personal involvement, the narrator is quick to specify that his interest "breeds observation and observation breeds ideas", not feelings (147). Early in the novel he wishes to observe Lady John and determine how she worked such wonders on Long, but he again specifies that "to be touched myself was doubtless not quite what I wanted"; he wants merely "a glimpse" of the method, not personal experience (15). Even in choice of words and expression the narrator separates himself from identification with emotion. When he decides Lady John cannot be Long's sacred fount, he does concede to Mrs. Briss during their conversation that there must be "some [woman] secretly giving him of her best", by saying "Oh, that I admit with all my heart -- or at least with all my head" (34).

When the impulse for personal involvement does present itself, the narrator experiences the attraction as merely an interruption in his normal cerebral concentration. He finds himself attracted to and moved by May Server; he is swayed by her beauty and a sense of her passionate expenditure of self "long enough for me to describe myself as rendered subject by them to a temporary loss of my thread [of an inquiry]" (151). The narrator also finds that
"something in her attitude and manner particularly spoke to me. There were implications in it to which I couldn't be blind" (84), when he thinks he has discovered her in a tête à tête with Long. Ironically, the narrator is indeed blind since he has discovered May with poor Briss again, not with Long as he had supposed — a circumstance at odds with his theory but nonetheless typical of the narrator and his inability to recognize true affection and intimate communication.

The narrator, through his concentration on his theory, has immersed himself vicariously in exploring the power of love relationships. As a result of this exposure he begins to wish to see himself in the position as a recipient of such emotion. May Server strikes him "more than ever [as] a person to have a lover imputed" and he begins to cast himself in that role (51). He becomes more obsessed with May than even his obdurate concentration on proving his theory would warrant. He begins to play the role of a lover, stating that he finds "She was in range of my vision wherever I turned" (92) and even begins to toy with the idea, first suggested by Mrs. Briss, that he is indeed in love with May, although, characteristically, he reduces this suggestion to intellectual terms — a "working hypothesis" (95). He minimizes the emotional aspect saying love is "as good a name as another for an interest springing up in an hour" (95). His intellect serves always as a forceful
barrier to his budding emotions. When he exchanges looks with May, instead of giving way to his emotions, he instead feels himself seeming to "bristle with [cogitations]" (92).

The narrator sees May as the central symbol of his theory and feels a simultaneous attraction/repulsion for her and for all that she represents. He is attracted by his estimation that "whereas...people might have given up much [for love], the sort of person this poor lady was could only give up everything" (136-7). He recognizes that this is an "admirable state" that "constituted even more for her a small sublimity in the light of which minor identifications [like the narrator's feeble efforts at emotion] turn vulgar". It is his sense of the distance between this type of deep commitment and the paltry effort he would feel secure in mustering that leads the narrator to feel repelled. In his recognition of this great discrepancy and his failure to measure up, the narrator says he "had really learnt more than I had bargained for" (137), and is fearful lest in letting himself love her, he possibly might share her doom.

This moment for the narrator compares with the denouement of "The Beast in the Jungle" when Marcher is forced to recognize his fate. Marcher, like the narrator, has a sense of loss and missed opportunity that, the reader infers, he would set aright if given a second chance. In contrast, the narrator of The Sacred Fount has the
opportunity to change, but chooses not to, given his negative vision of the probable toll of a personal commitment.

In order to protect himself from a harsh sense of his loss and failure, the narrator seeks to defend himself and rationalize his choice. He thinks first about leaving Newmarch early, thus literally avoiding any more involvement with May Server and all she represents. But that action is made unnecessary, however, by the narrator's ability to escape to the realm of his intellect. Instead of leaving her behind, he relegates her back to an object of observation and study rather than emotional attachment: "It began to dawn before me that there was something quite other I possibly might do with Mrs. Server than endeavor ineffectually to forget her" (93). He thus reduces his feelings for her to that of scientific, dispassionate observation and pledges to "watch and watch" to meet his "private curiosity [as to] how little or how much...she had saved from the wreck" (99). Because of his extreme self-centeredness, the narrator must be above, not equal to or, even worse, subordinate to anyone in a love relationship. He can thus transfer his attraction to her to feelings of pity, an emotion that supports and sustains his superiority. Once his "imagination had seen her in this light" he is safe and can instead attempt to solidify what he believes is her tie with Briss, thinking she seeks out Briss as an instinctive "response to fellowship in misery, the sight of another fate as strange and monstrous as her own" (224).
In addition to pity, he also feels the urge to protect her, and tries to divert Obert's attention from identifying her as Long's lover. This protective urge initially made him wonder if "I [had] suddenly fallen so much in love with Mrs. Server that the care for her reputation had become with me an obsession?" (60-61). But it is easier and more comfortable for the narrator to tag his protective impulse merely discretion, which "simply left one more attached, morally, to one's prey" (93). With May thus reduced to an object for his study, or a lesser being needing protection, he can believe he "is the only one -- save one -- who was in anything that could be called a relation to her" (95). But it is, of course, a relation that exists only in his mind and that sets no demands on him and with which he can feel comfortable.

Despite the mental gyrations the narrator goes through to remove himself from emotional involvement, when May keeps her distance from him, he is resentful that he, unlike other men at the party, has received so little attention. When Obert comments on how May darted at Long in the gallery, the narrator responds bitterly: "He's lucky to get it, the brute. She's as charming as she can possibly be" (61). He is grateful no one has asked him about his experiences with May at the party since "it would have been embarrassing to have to tell them how little experience I had had in fact as to have had to tell them how much I had had in fancy" (107).
After their stroll through the gallery and the talk in the woods, both of which were initiated by the narrator, he is "not again...set in the favoring frame" of May's attention (93). This neglect hardens him further against any emotional attachment to her as it is a direct afront to his ego. As the narrator comments, it now "little mattered to me that Mrs. Briss had put it to me -- that I had even whimsically put it to myself -- that I was perhaps in love with her" (95); instead he believes "my own sense of how I was affected had practically cleared up" (95). He now turns to press his investigation with redoubled vigor.

In "The Beast in the Jungle," James demonstrates how destructive excessive ego can be to human relationships. In his earlier work, *The Sacred Fount*, James delves into the same theme, but he enlarges the scope to show the effect ego can have on the artist and the creative process.

Unlike Marcher, who spends his days passively awaiting his special fate, the narrator is hard at work for the length of the novel creating his theory of the sacred fount. Through the narrator, therefore, James is able to expand his study of ego to a larger dimension than the purely individual. The narrator provides James with the means to explore one underlying cause for fallible artistic vision. Since James devoted so much of his critical interest and energy to a dissection and understanding of the artist and the creative process, the implications concerning this topic to be found in *The Sacred Fount* are of special interest.
James clearly identifies the narrator as an artist figure. While working to develop his theory, the narrator mentions the intense stimulation he has felt from the beginning, a feeling that has been present in "deepening degrees... since my first mystic throb...the day before in our railway carriage, shut up to an hour's contemplation and collation... of Gilbert Long and Mrs. Brissenden" (127). In so describing his first inkling of the sacred fount theory which he is later to evolve in such detail as a "mystic throb", the narrator connects his thought process with an image of creative inspiration that is reminiscent of the intervention of a muse. At first the narrator minimizes his active role in the development of the theory, hinting again at divine inspiration. He notes at one point that he sees additional elements to supplement his theory "almost in spite of myself" (89); at another juncture in the novel he classifies his theory as "the play that had so unexpectedly insisted on constituting itself for me" (168).

The narrator does both directly and indirectly assert his creative initiative, however, in many other instances. The direct role the narrator feels he has taken in creating is caught in the phrase he uses to describe the influence he exerts over Briss, whom he sees as "plastic wax in my hand" (126). He credits the "momentum" he experiences in pushing forward his theory to his "general habit -- of observation", a skill he takes much pride in (89). It is his strong belief
in his power of observation, paired with his intellectual prowess, that makes it possible for him to go far beyond what observation alone can substantiate and to range into the realm of creativity: "What might be written there hummed already in my ears as a result of my mere glimpse" (182, emphasis added). The narrator even begins to believe he can bring about events to further his theory by dint of his intellect. When he feels the need to communicate first hand with May Server in order to fathom fully the extent of her supposed decline, she suddenly appears ahead of him on the Newmarch grounds"exactly as if she had been there by the operation of my intelligence" (129). Similarly, he experiences a "rare intellectual joy" when he sees Lady John "begin instantly to play the part I had attributed to her" (102).

In this way the narrator anticipates developments long before any evidence can be detected in even a circumstantial manner. In his mind the narrator has projected the need for Briss and May Server to seek each other out to experience "the fellow feeling of each for the lost light of the other" (169). This idea pleases him since he feels their communion of spirits would represent "the full-blown flower of my theory" (169). Then the idea of a similar complementary pairing of Mrs. Briss and Long occurs to him. He would like to have this relationship develop as well since it would provide his theory with "ideal symmetry" (169), with the
"opposed couples balanced like bronze groups at two ends of a chimney piece" (182). Although he manages to arrange to have May and Briss placed together for such supposed mutual aid, his desire to be able to place Mrs. Briss and Long together as conscious allies is thwarted by a total lack of evidence which makes him rail that "Things in the real had a way of not balancing" (182). In lieu of "the real" the narrator prefers the "fine symmetry of artificial proportions" (183).

When he finally observes Mrs. Briss with Long, they are involved in a very short, seemingly ordinary conversation; nevertheless, the narrator hurries, on such scant evidence, to fill in the details of their "dim community" (169) that "in the interest of the full roundness of my theory [had] actually been missing" (181).

As he works devising the theory, the narrator feels himself "overtaken by a mild artistic glow" even though he has actually "created nothing [more substantial than] a clue or two to the larger comprehension" (104). Nonetheless, to see the possibilities is, for the narrator, "to be inhumanly amused as if one had found one could create something" (104) and it is now the possibilities, not the certainties, with which he becomes most intrigued. Early on he had sensed that his theory put him "on the track of a law," a universal truth, "the scent of something ultimate" (22-23). For the sake of this larger picture, he is prepared to venture beyond the realm of the concrete since, as he explains,
"there were cases in which fancy, sounding the depths or the shallows, could at least drop the lead" (17, emphasis added). The break with the details of observable reality, and his increased reliance on his imaginative powers are immensely stimulating for the narrator. He feels he "had encountered nothing to compare with this since the days of fairy tales and of the childish imagination of the possible" (128). As a child, the narrator in his imagination "used to circle round enchanted castles" and "moved in a world in which the strange 'came true'" (128). Now, as an adult, he applies the same litmus test to his theory: the "proof of the enchantment" is the coming true, and he extends all effort, energy and imagination to make his theory come true also. Because of the extent of his involvement in the creation of the theory, which goes far beyond hypothesis and study, the narrator feels justified in claiming it to be "the fruit of one's own wizardry" and he is "positively... proud of my work" (129). Buoyed up by his belief in his intellectual faculties, especially as defined in his finely-tuned imagination which can fill any holes, the narrator becomes assured of the truth underlying his theory. Now "however slight the incident and small the evidence, it essentially fitted in"; he states that each small detail has "for my imagination a value, for my theory a price" (202). He has now perfected the practice, and has a grasp on the method to such an extent that he feels he need have no reliance either on the opinions and observations of others
or on observable fact alone. He sees himself as the prime source: "I could toss the ball myself, I could catch it and send it back, and familiarity had now made this exercise... easy and safe" (174).

As he did at the outset when he began to formulate the theory, the narrator continues to feel an exhilaration that is "naturally intoxicating" (177). This feeling comes from his assumption that he sees so much more than the others and thus has been able to progress so far. This sense of his "superior vision" supplies him with a "confirmed presumption of my impunity" and seems to him "to mark the fine quality of my state" (177). This statement, so focused on the narrator's consciousness of his own creative role in the development of his theory, as well as his unconscious exposure of his all-pervasive ego, reveals the intersection of art and ego captured so finely by James. Because the narrator has imbued his theory so extensively with his imagination and to do so he has relied almost exclusively on glimpses, visceral impressions and his own opinions which, as discussed above, are, at the very least, suspect, his theory becomes, instead of an hypothesis to be tested out, a self-fulfilling prophecy. As with the enchanted castles of his childhood, the narrator wants his theory to "come true" and thus allows his imagination to take the lead in assuming that it will.

The lengths he will go to in this respect are recognized in the last scene with Mrs. Briss. When Mrs. Briss attacks
his theory on the grounds that Long is not clever, the narrator simply moves his theory along to an even more complex and convoluted level. He guesses that Long, in self-protection, would dissemble and act "stupid", projecting "a fictive ineptitude" (294). Similarly, in an earlier scene when Obert reports he has found May Server changed back to her non-depleted self, the narrator refuses to see this as a setback for his theory; instead he muses that "it was amazing into what depths this dropped for me and with what possibilities it mingled" (213-14). With nothing more concrete to go on, the narrator quickly jumps to the conclusion that May Server has given Long up, has stopped being drained and is thus restored. This thought makes him wonder, on a fresh tack, if the same phenomenon might not also be true for Briss. Despite such unexpected curves, the narrator's resiliency in meeting such threats to his theory's integrity provides him with an added degree of "relish at the way I was keeping things together" (255) against all comers and all attempts to discredit his creative powers. The narrator barricades himself in his imagination, believing it is imperative to guard his theory, "to defend against the world...that now so complex tangle of hypotheses" (174).

Although the narrator is so strongly identified as an artist figure, James concludes his novel by calling the narrator's "creation" into question. In their midnight meeting, Mrs. Briss adeptly succeeds in pricking the narrator's
theory full of holes. Dorothea Krook considers this ultimate confrontation between Mrs. Briss and the narrator and their conflicting versions of the circumstances focused on in the novel to be indicative of the novel's "'epistemological' theme, which turns upon the final incapacity of the enquiring mind to know with certainty whether what it 'sees' is fact or delusion." This interpretation concurs with Edel's thesis and is certainly supported by numerous other instances in the novel that also point to the subjectivity of reality. Notable among such scenes is the gathering of the narrator, Ford Obert, Mrs. Server and Long in the picture gallery where they debate the meaning of the enigmatic portrait of the man with the mask. The scene itself, not to mention the portrait, is much like a maddening puzzle. The narrator is first and foremost concerned with studying May Server and her reaction to Gilbert Long. He thinks that the "proof" of May Server's identity as Long's sacred fount "would be, between her and her imputed lover, the absence of anything that was not perfectly natural" (51). This method of proof is much like the dunking stool judgment of suspected witches and probably as accurate. The pitfalls inherent in such standards of judgment are hinted at by James who demonstrates the limitations of powers of observation in the narrator. From across the gallery, the narrator believes, from mere "suggestions" since he "couldn't, at the distance, quite follow it" that Obert is listening intently and with new-found
respect and surprise for "Long's gift of talk" (52). The narrator reads a glimpse from Obert to signify "'what an unexpected demon of a critic'" (53). At the conclusion of the scene, however, when pressed by the narrator for his assessment of Long, Obert has noticed nothing extraordinary in Long's wit and will only say "He talks to talk, but he's really amusing" (59). The narrator concludes that during the interval in the picture gallery, Mrs. Server and Long acted completely natural because "I couldn't make out that they were not" (58). Such criteria for judgment, based on observation by default, are hardly grounds on which to build the narrator's theory. Similar discrepancies of perception are displayed in the multiple interpretations offered by various individuals for the painting of the man in the mask. The young man in the portrait is dressed in a black costume of another age. His "lurid face" is "pale and lean" and he stares forth from "eyes without eyebrows" (55). The man holds a mask that, in contrast to his own face, is smiling. Mrs. Server thinks the mask with its "awful grimace" is "the Mask of Death." The narrator, who is prone to chose artificial creation to actual life, disagrees with her, saying "Isn't it much rather the Mask of Life? It's the man's own face that's Death. The other one, [is] blooming and beautiful" (56). He claims he cannot "see the grimace" while May cannot "see anything else" (56). Obert adds his view that the mask looks "like a lovely lady", prompting the
narrator to add "it does look remarkably like Mrs. Server" (56). Given her interpretation of the mask, May does not think herself complimented and rejoins "You deserve...that I should say the gentlemen's own face is the image of a certain other gentlemen's", i.e. the narrator's (57). When the narrator suggests the young man's face instead resembles Briss's, May and Obert concur, but the narrator does not believe May does in fact recognize the resemblance since, if she does not, "that only made her the more natural", or more importantly, more in accord with his belief that her wit has been dissipated.

The scene is notable for the multiple interpretations one object can elicit. It is also important because it so clearly shows the tendency individuals have to interpret reality to fit their own needs and prejudices. The scene also provides an effective metaphor for Edel's and Krook's contention that the novel deals with epistemology. There is no doubt that James did indeed wish to raise epistemological questions, but that explanation alone does not fully account for additional considerations raised by the egotistic personality of the narrator nor does it fully explain Mrs. Briss's success in opening the narrator's carefully constructed theory to question.

Her success is not based on her intellectual skill. As the narrator himself points out, he has "three times her method" (319). Nor is her success to be credited to her moral
fortitude since, unlike May Bartram whose selflessness is a perfect foil for John Marcher, Mrs. Briss is not without fault or questionable motive. Indeed, her reasons for opposing the narrator and destroying his theory could very well be self-serving and self-protective because perhaps she is, in fact, "draining" her husband and does not want to be exposed. Or perhaps she is having an affair with Long which she also wishes to keep secret, as some evidence in the novel might suggest. Another possibility is that she could be angry at May Server for making love to Briss and annoyed at the narrator for what she has interpreted as his aiding and abetting of the affair.

Why then, since Mrs. Briss lacks any superior moral or intellectual qualification, is she able to "so [have] the last word" (318)? If James is merely depicting the wide divergence in impressions possible, why is her attack on the narrator's theory so effective that he is reduced to reflecting that as a consequence he should certainly "never again... quite hang together" (319)? The ambiguity of The Sacred Fount does not allow a clear-cut answer, but, once again, a comparison with John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle" may offer a "torch of analogy" helpful in understanding the novel.

As has been seen, Marcher and the narrator are both extremely egotistical. Their egotism keeps them from establishing any deep interpersonal relationships. They are thus
outsiders to such common human experiences as love, marriage, friendship, parenthood. In Marcher's case, he has the semblance of a long and abiding friendship with May Bartram, but his lack of emotional commitment to her keeps the relationship from ever being more than an outward show. For Marcher, the egotism which keeps him locked in himself is in fact his dreaded beast; it is the reason he is doomed to be "the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" (450).

Like Marcher, the narrator lacks any emotional attachments and thus is removed from many of life's basic interpersonal experiences. Unlike Marcher, however, the narrator's solitary state is the result of conscious selection as he strives to maintain his isolation. The reason for his choice appears to be that he considers emotion and intellect to be antithetical and so much of his egotistical sense of his own superiority is invested in his intellectual prowess that he cannot risk any dilution by trivial emotion. Ironically, it is his effort to segregate thought and feeling that, in the end, make him and his theory vulnerable to Mrs. Briss's onslaught. Although he does indeed have three times Mrs. Briss's method, the narrator recognizes, much like Marcher in his painful realization of what he has missed, that what he so "fatally" lacks is "her tone" (319). Mrs. Briss's authority is summoned from her involvement with life and emotion in marked contrast to the solitary narrator. During their
final meeting, Mrs. Briss pulses with life. She appears to embody: "the positive pride of life and expansion, the amplitude of conscious action and design; not the arid channel forsaken by the stream, but the full fed river sweeping to the sea" (245). In contrast to such a lively personality, the narrator makes "so poor a figure on [his] own ground" and senses that from the outset he has lost "a certain advantage [he] shall never recover" (240). Mrs. Briss has the upper-hand from the beginning of their final discussion because her appearance and bearing so conform with the narrator's imagined view of her that he is somewhat in awe of her and hesitant to attack her because she is so much what he wants her to be. Thus, her exposure as being in any way different from what the narrator thinks her to be would be his defeat. As she appears before him, beautiful and vigorous, seeming to him to be more twenty-five years old than forty plus, he finds that his imagination, "never so stimulated, was thus...her strength, by which I mean the impossibility of my indifference to the mere immense suggestiveness of our circumstances" (240). He thinks now that "the case for her was really in almost any aspect she could now make it wear to my imagination" (240).

Closed in by his ego and intellect relying so markedly on his imagination, the narrator exists in an environment that is much like the series of empty rooms he wonders through looking for Mrs. Briss: "a desert on which the sun had still not set" (236), a "crystal cage" (200). The narrator's
isolation grows over the course of the novel until finally he is working virtually in a vacuum. His separation from actual experience and consensus with other characters in the novel becomes more marked as time passes until he is relying almost exclusively on his imaginative powers.

Such circumstances, according to James's aesthetic theory, are not likely to produce superior artistic creations. In "The Art of Fiction", James specified that the novel was, in its most basic definition, "a personal, a direct impression of life". James's choice of the term "impression" is important and revealing. The novelist is not just a reporter or historian, capturing, preserving and passing on facts and situations of "real life" to his readers. To James, reality was not a single dimensional entity to be captured quite so readily. Although James can state firmly to aspiring writers that "you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality," he is quick to add that "it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being" since "the measure of reality is very difficult to fix."

Reality is difficult to fix because, as James saw it there is no one reality but rather the innumerable impressions of reality held by every individual.

In addition to the "sense of reality" the other faculty James deems as essential to the creation of fiction is the author's imagination. Although, as James Miller points out in his book Theory of Fiction: Henry James, "James always insisted on the primacy of experience in the writing
of fiction, he also always insisted on the importance of the imagination: one without the other crippled the writer."\(^{12}\) James, according to Miller, explains the relation of experience and imagination in "The Art of Fiction":

> Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborn particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and where the mind is imaginative...it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.\(^{13}\)

For James, when the mind takes an imaginative look at experiences "a mystic conversion takes place." Miller points out that "James's favorite metaphor for this process was the crucible in which experience was transfigured by the imagination into the substance of fiction."\(^{14}\) Certainly, then, in the crucible of the imagination, it is possible for an author "to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that [one is] well on [the] way to knowing any particular corner of it."\(^{15}\) The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* certainly "guesses the unseen from the seen", and traces the implications of things "and hurries to judge the whole piece by the pattern." Why then should his theory be called into question and left, finally, unsubstantiated?

The answer would appear to be in the discrepancy that exists in the narrator's observational techniques, actual
experience and imaginative experience. According to Miller, James believed "For life itself, the important terms are immediacy and application: for art these become reflection and appreciation." Since the narrator has substituted so much imagination for actual experience, for him there is an imbalance that will adversely affect the mystic conversion taking place in the crucible. James believed it was actual experience that, upon reflection and appreciation, became life in art. The narrator, held back from much of life's experiences by his ego and overwhelming intellect, creates a distortion of rather than a "sense of reality". His imagination is a stunted one; he has, as Lady John points out, "the imagination of atrocity" (173). He feeds, rather morbidly as well as vicariously, on the experiences of others.

In such a manner, the narrator continually and quite callously uses others to serve his own ends. Unlike Lady John, who says she does not "pretend to so much as conceive what's your business," the narrator hubristically believes he is able to divine the most intimate details of other people's affairs (173). Indeed he not only detects, but he interprets, putting his own often negative twist on matters. Mrs. Briss also hints at this habit of the narrator, expressing her distaste for his obsessive prying. She claims that people withdraw from the narrator since they "have such a notion of what you embroider on things that they're rather afraid to commit themselves or to lead you on; they're
sometimes in, you know, for more than they bargain for, than they quite know what to do with or than they care to have on their hands" (298). Mrs. Briss states that people are wary of the narrator not just because he sees so much, including "horrors" but because he likes horrors and thus it is his propensity to proceed even to the point of manufacturing them if necessary (299). Mrs. Briss, despite her initial almost prurient enthusiasm for identifying Long's lover, later expresses distaste for the undertaking, claiming she was influenced by the narrator and "as soon as I was away from you, I hated you [and] . . . hated your theory" (288). The narrator can readily justify to himself such probing for the sake of his theory. Although, within the context of the novel, it is the reputations of actual people, not characters in the fairy tales the narrator enjoyed so much as a child, that hang in the balance, the narrator is willing to sacrifice all restraint and moral compunction in his rush to fit "the glass shoe" (260). In so characterizing the narrator, James serves an ironic double purpose. He discredits the narrator and his creative powers, but he also testifies to the validity of the sacred fount theory. The narrator in his egotistical obsession to prove his theory is the ultimate drainer of the sacred fount, far exceeding the selfish motives he ascribes to Long and Mrs. Briss.

The narrator has set himself up for Mrs. Briss's attack. He has created a delicate, fragile product in his theory.
In doing so he has known "the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unamenable, that joy of determining almost creating results" (214). He believes the exhilaration he has experienced through his "creation" is "a proof surely that for real excitement there are no such adventures as intellectual ones" (215). The effort he has expended on developing his theory to such a fine point has given him "an extraordinary elation. It justified my indiscreet curiosity; it crowned my underhand process with beauty" (128). It is a solitary exhilaration, however, as the narrator explains, the "beauty perhaps was only for me -- the beauty of having been right... [a] private triumph" (128).

Can such a "private triumph" be the end product of creative work? Does art exist, no matter how delicately and carefully constructed, only to provide the artist with "the beauty of being right"? Has not the narrator, with his "palace of thought", created a monument to his own intellect rather than an artistic creation that should be, according to James, imbued with "the sense of reality"? For James it was suspect for an individual who closely observes his fellows and finds that "a part of the amusement they yielded came...from my exaggerating them -- grouping them into a larger mystery...than the facts warranted" (23) to be able to make a vivid, truthful statement about human relations and experience. An individual who sees "feeling as an
interference and, in consequence, as a possible check" to his progress, who finds "the condition of light, of the satisfaction of curiosity and of the attestation of triumph [to be]...the sacrifice of feeling" (296) is not the ideal individual to create what James requires of an artist: "an immense and exquisite correspondence with life."

Although James believed that "Art is essentially selection", he specified that it was to be "a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive."\(^{18}\) He dictated that fiction must catch "the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life."\(^{19}\)

The narrator in *The Sacred Fount* has veered wide of the mark and it is thus that Mrs. Briss can demand "a renunciation of a confidence...in your sense and your truth" (282). It is thus that she is able to bring the shock of brass to tell on the narrator's porcelain creation, leaving the narrator to complain, with a strong note of irony, that except for the "wretched accident of its weak foundation", his theory "wouldn't have the shadow of a flaw" (311).
1. This and subsequent page references refer to The Sacred Fount as it is reprinted in the Grove Press edition (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1953).

2. The following is a sample of the wide divergence in critical assessment of The Sacred Fount.

Dorothea Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (Cambridge, 1963), centers her essay on the novel on James's view of the artist, the creative process and epistemology. Jean Frantz Blackall, "The Sacred Fount as a Comedy of the Limited Observer", PMLA, 78 (1963), rejects the intellectual detective story notion and the epistemological theme and focuses on the technical achievement of ironic effect.


5. Miller, p. 249.


7. Miller, p. 249.

8. Miller, p. 249.

9. This and subsequent page references refer to "The Beast in the Jungle" as it is reprinted in "The Turn of the Screw" and Other Short Novels, the Signet Classic edition (New York: The New American Library, 1962).


11. Miller, p. 34.

12. Miller, p. 76.

13. Miller, p. 76.

14. Miller, p. 76.

15. Miller, p. 35.

16. Miller, p. 16.

17. Miller, p. 41.


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