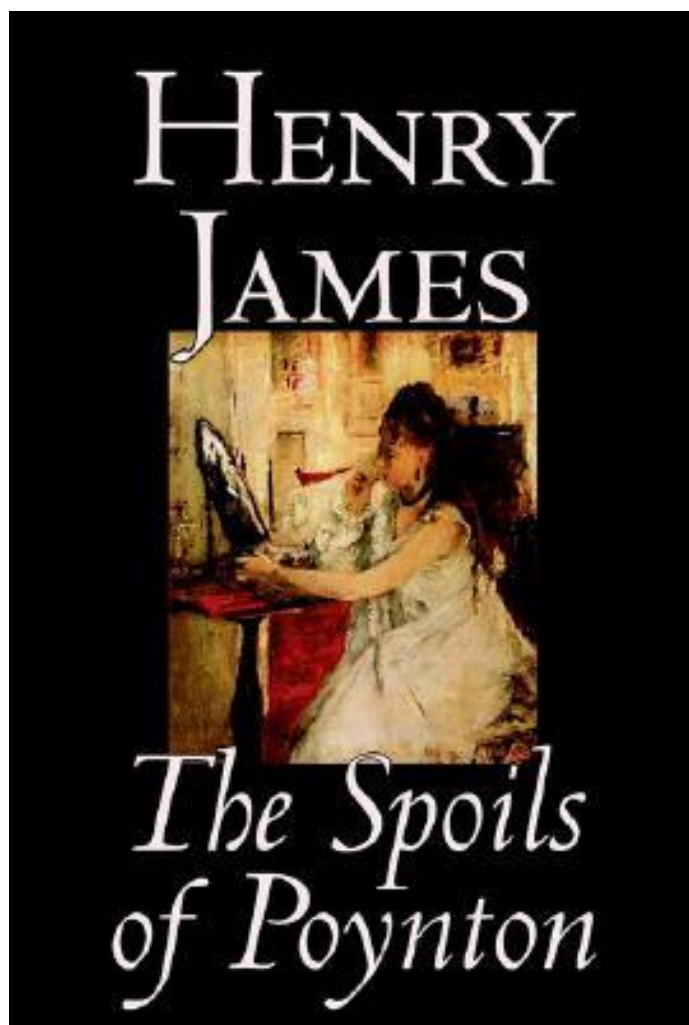

Henry James

The Spoils of Poynton



Title: The Spoils of Poynton

Author: Henry James

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Description

Mrs. Gereth had said she would go with the rest to church, but suddenly it seemed to her that she should not be able to wait even till church-time for relief: breakfast, at Waterbath, was a punctual meal, and she had still nearly an hour on her hands. Knowing the church to be near, she prepared in her room for the little rural walk, and on her way down again, passing through corridors and observing imbecilities of decoration, the esthetic misery of the big commodious house, she felt a return of the tide of last night's irritation, a renewal of everything she could secretly suffer from ugliness and stupidity. Why did she consent to such contacts? why did she so rashly expose herself? She had had, heaven knew, her reasons, but the whole experience was to be sharper than she had feared. To get away from it and out into the air, into the presence of sky and trees, flowers and birds, was a necessity of every nerve. The flowers at Waterbath bath would probably go wrong in color and the nightingales sing out of tune; but she remembered to have heard the place described as possessing those advantages that are usually spoken of as natural. There were advantages enough it clearly didn't possess. It was hard for her to believe that a woman could look presentable who had been kept awake for hours by the wallpaper in her room; yet nonetheless, as in her fresh widow's weeds she rustled across the hall, she was sustained by the consciousness, which always added to the unction of her social Sundays, that she was, as usual, the only person in the house incapable of wearing in her preparation the horrible stamp of the same exceptional smartness that would be conspicuous in a grocer's wife. She would rather have perished than have looked _endimanchee._

Insightful reviews

Lev Raphael: The world of art may seem above ordinary passions but they actually live there in not-so-rarified form. This brilliant short novel of James's is a study in obsession, and in fear to be oneself, contrasting several different women who stake out very different places in the world.

Here's my review on Bilbiobuffet.com, a magazine every book lover should have an RSS feed to. :-)

<http://bibliobuffet.com/book-brunch-c...>

Sverre: Despite my considerable reading experience, this was my first attempt at tackling the American icon Henry James. Woe is me! Can I compare this novel to a game of Scrabble with liberated rules which allow back-to-front and down-up spellings? One continuously ponders the possibilities of untangling his prose to make the words fit sensibly in the labyrinthine maze of ponderous pronouncements. There are phrases and references whose meanings are lost in the quaintness of colloquially loquacious warps in time and space. It is sometimes difficult to attach pronouns to their associated objects. During dialogues, it is frequently difficult to identify the speaker because two speakers may be quoted within the same paragraph separated by a narration. A new paragraph can quote someone who just spoke at the end of the previous paragraph with a closing quotation mark. This novella—which started as a short story and became lengthened and elaborated—is from the beginning of James' "third period," his most

mature. Apparently his earlier works are easier to digest.

There are only five characters on offer in this plot: Mrs Gereth, a middle aged lady of means whose psyche is incontrovertibly embedded in her collection of aesthetic whatnots and fine furniture; her son Owen, a banal ineffectual momma's boy who lacks the courage to stand up to his manipulative fiancée or his overbearing mother; this fiancée, the self-servings Mona Brigstock and her resolute mother Mrs Brigstock; and the imponderable young heroine, Fleda Vetch, whom Mrs Gereth has taken under her wing for a close companion and her designated daughter-in-law-to-be in a scheme which will oust the importunate Mona.

In the beginning of making her acquaintance with the Gereths, Fleda finds her impressions of Owen to be underwhelming, to say the least. However, as time passes, and as Mrs Gereth appoints Fleda to be her collaborator and negotiator, Fleda entertains the idea that perhaps she can provide Owen with the backbone he is lacking. In the process of being a go-between she falls in love with the boy and he responds by declaring his indisputable loyalty to, and eagerness to marry her very self. She, however, is a captive to social form and graces. She cannot find the will to intrude on Owen's pending obligation to Mona. So she sends him off on a mission to resolve the triangular conflict before she can commit her heart to his custody. The foundation of the plot rests on "The Spoils of Poynton", that is: how can Mrs Gereth maintain control over her artistic treasures, avoiding them from falling into the clutches of the uncultured duplicitous Brigstocks.

Overall I thought this work was too dry and lacking in depth. How much more interesting it would have been if we could have known what was occurring on the "other side," with the Brigstocks. We especially deserved to know much more about Mona. How did Owen feel about her—truly? Was his fancy for Fleda a passing whimsey and merely a distraction while caught in the conflict between his mother and Mona? The book has some artistic merit and it held my interest long enough to see its end. Now I intend to read some of James' earlier works. Obviously he would never have achieved his fame if his other works were this tenuous.

Dirk: There are no spoilers for *The Spoils of Poynton* in these comments, but there are spoilers for *The Ambassadors* and *The Portrait of A Lady*.

I have great respect and admiration for Henry James, but this is not one of his best efforts. A pretty good novel, but not one of his best efforts.

The plot is set in motion by the following events: a mother and father have spent their lives collecting beautiful objects, which are housed in their dwelling at Poynton. They have a son who is a kind of jolly, well-meaning English upper class bloke, insensitive to the beauty of the objects. The father dies and, under English law, the son inherits everything. The son falls in love with a girl very much like himself. His mother fervently wants control of the objects and befriends another girl, our heroine, with the sensitivities the mother would like to see in a daughter-in-law who would cherish the objects.

The events and emotional entanglements that follow are quite tense. This book has a more active plot, more twisting, and turning, than you usually associate with Henry James. There is

something closer to a physical love scene than I can recall in any other of his novels.

The ending is a bit of a deus ex machina.

Only the mother and our heroine, whose name is Fleda Vetch, are fully characterized. Henry James lavishes all his powers of witty, incisive, allusive, and complicated character description on these two. The other characters are cursory. The mother is energetic, aggressive, self-centered, and rather likable for her down-to-earth focus. Fleda is one of those self-defeating morally punctilious James protagonists, who snatches self-justification from the jaws of satisfaction time and again.

The prose is James' elaborate middle style, fun to follow but not easy, building up characters and situations with a million smart observations, but he is too fond of calling characters "magnificent" or 'luminous'.

I say I'm fond of Henry James, but I find myself angry with him when his protagonists damn themselves to mediocrity at the moment a rich life is within their grasp over what seems to me ridiculous moral compunctions. Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* could perfectly well settle down with Maria Gostrey in Paris to a rich and meaningful life if he didn't have a painful horror of having profited from others' mistakes. Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* could divorce her husband and have a passionate marriage with Casper Goodwood, if she would drop the obligation to suffer for her own mistakes. It is a measure of James greatness that I care enough about these people to be really angry with him.

Most of the characters of this sort in James are scrupulously honest; Fleda is a variation. She lies all the time. She is chronically dishonest with the other characters and with herself, but for the highest of motives, or at any rate the most self-defeating.

James aficionados will know that he is fond of dimly significant names. His notebooks are replete with several lists of such names and musings on what a person with such and such a name would be like. I understand about "Fleda" – she flees, literally running away from an admirer at one point, as does Isabel Archer. But "vetch" is an agricultural product like alfalfa that is fed to cattle and sheep. Fleda is a pert little thing, not in the least bovine or ovine.

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Catherine Letendre: L'histoire de 2 femmes qui, à strength de s'enfarger dans toutes les fleurs du tapis de leur imagination, finissent par passer à côté de l'essentiel. L'image est belle à dire, mais le livre est plate à lire.

Etienne Mahieux: Mrs. Gereth, une quinquagénaire citadel aisée, a consacré sa vie à donner à sa seigneuriale demeure de Poynton le lustre du goût le plus parfait. Veuve, elle voit son fils specific se rapprocher de Mona Brigstock, une jeune femme factor d'une famille où l'on confond beauté et surcharge de bibelots. À l. a. pensée que celle-ci pourrait devenir los angeles maîtresse de Poynton, le sang de Mrs. Gereth ne fait qu'un travel et elle décide de trouver une autre femme à son fils. "Les Dépouilles de Poynton" est un roman de longueur relativement modeste, quelque half entre "Le travel d'écrou" et "Ce que savait Maisie", et s'attache à un nombre limité de personnages : c'est l'un de ces thrillers psychologiques où excelle James, où le déplacement d'un meuble ou un voyage en educate prennent simplement l. a. position des coups de revolver et des tapes dans le dos en bord de falaise. C'est l'un des très beaux exemples de l'ambiguïté dans l'art du récit dont il était capable. L'ouverture du roman s'attache avant tout à Mrs. Gereth puis, épousant le mouvement de son esprit, qui se choisit los angeles jeune Fleda Vetch comme fille spirituelle, l'intérêt se déplace sur cette dernière, à l. a. fois sincère et calculatrice, et dotée d'une sense of right and wrong morale exquise, pour ne pas dire d'un surmoi tout à fait effrayant, qui los angeles pousse plus d'une fois à comploter son propre malheur. Faire absolument confiance à l. a. delight (ou à l'insatisfaction) que de tels personnages ont d'eux-mêmes, c'est pour le lecteur risquer de manquer une partie du sens. "Les Dépouilles de Poynton" sont aussi une méditation inquiète sur notre rapport à los angeles beauté, qui n'est pas exempt d'égoïsme et de folie, et il faut faire également très recognition à los angeles beauté body (ou non) des personnages, qui est l'une des clefs du roman. los angeles beauté jamesienne naît de l'arrangement des events (d'où l'importance de los angeles inspiration de goût), ce qui en termes romanesques consiste à placer le bon personnage dans le décor qui convient — mais n'est-ce pas, précisément, les ravalier au rang d'objets, de pions, de simples éléments de composition ? James joue une partie d'échecs philosophique contre lui-même, et gagne.

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