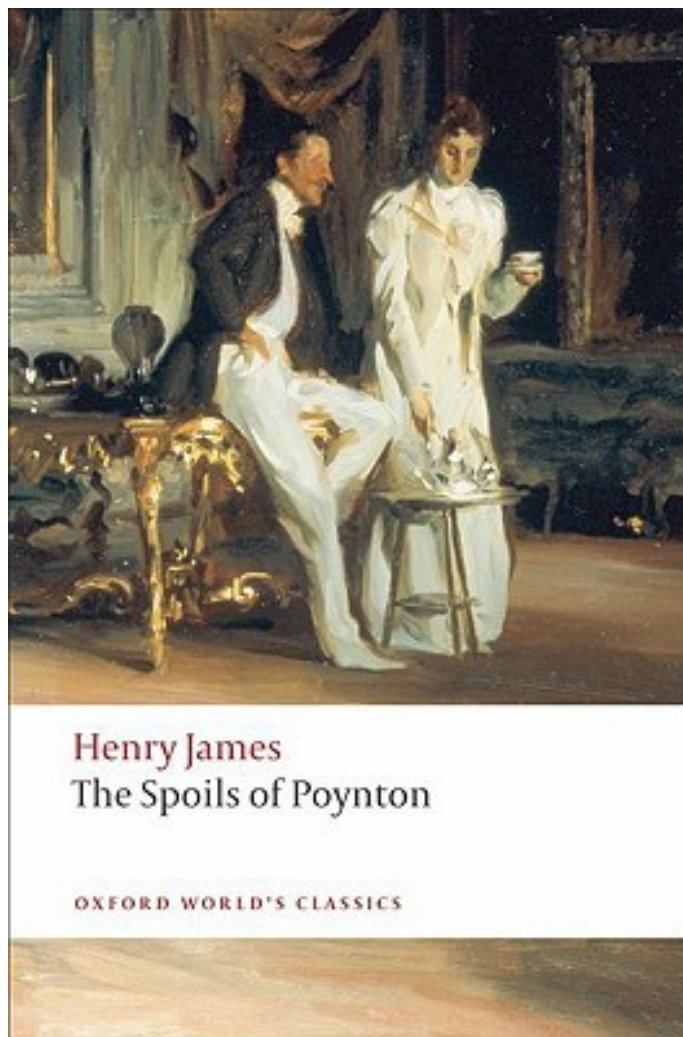

Henry James

The Spoils of Poynton



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Description

Mrs. Gareth, widowed chatelaine of Poynton, is fighting to keep her house with its priceless objets d'art from her son Owen and his lovely, utterly philistine fiancée. When she discovers that her young friend and sympathizer Fleda Vetch is secretly in love with Owen, she thrusts her into the battle-line.

The power struggle that ensues between the three women leaves Owen vacillating. What is at stake is not the mere possession of tables and chairs; it is, for Fleda, a conflict between aesthetic ideals, ethical imperatives, and her innermost feelings, in which she risks betraying, and being betrayed by, all that she holds most dear.

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Insightful reviews

David: Despite the commented upon turgid style, this did grow on me. The fluid nature of Fleda's character, one-minute obstinately principled, the next responding to the beck and call of each of the dysfunctional relatives is fascinating. You never know if you are dealing with the rocks or the tides. I came across this because I'd been researching another lady who is supposed to be a possible source for Mrs Gereth, which makes a lot of sense. Henry James seems to have had many minor society connections which makes the subject matter of this novel all the more intriguing.

Paul Bryant: Virginia Woolf in a letter to Violet Dickinson, 25 August 1907 :

"Well then, we went and had tea with Henry James today...and Henry James fixed me with his staring blank eye — it is like a child's marble — and said 'My dear Virginia, they tell me — they tell me — they tell me — that you — as indeed being your father's daughter - nay your grandfather's grandchild — the descendant I may say of a century — of a century — of quill pens and ink — ink — ink pots, yes, yes, yes, they tell me — ahm - mm — that you, that you, that you write in short.' This went on in the public street, while we all waited, as farmers wait for the hen to lay an egg — do they? — nervous, polite, and now on this foot now on that."

Eric: Leon Edel sees in *The Spoils of Poynton* "James's first attempt to use his scenic method and his playwriting techniques." Unluckily for us James was an indifferent playwright and such techniques--along with a laughably puritanical conception of character--are responsible for this suffocatingly miniature novel.

There are no vistas beyond Poynton, the dowager cottage, and a few undifferentiated London streets and furnished rooms. The action, such as it is, takes place on the tensed communicatory

wires that make a triangle of Mrs. Gereth, her adversarial son Owen, and their ambivalent go-between, Fleda Vetch (the ugliest Jamesian name I've encountered, though I hear there's a character named Fanny Assingham in *The Ambassadors*). While immersed in the really excruciating middle of the book, in the tortuous exchanges between the impassive, nearly-simpler-minded Owen and the quietly turbid Fleda, I tried, as an experiment, to convince myself that James was proposing a starkly staged, stylishly minimal, Kafkaesque proto-modernist chamber novel. But reading it I just felt claustrophobic.

My other annoyance--the puritanical conception of character--lies with what James chose to grow from this germ of dinner party gossip:

...an odd matter as that a good lady in the north, always well looked on, was at daggers drawn with her only son, ever hitherto exemplary, over the ownership of the valuable furniture of a fine old house just accruing to the young man by this father's death...

That heard-of woman became the Mrs. Gereth of this novel. She is a poet of interiors, Poynton her poem:

There had been in the first place the exquisite old house itself, early Jacobean, supreme in every part: it was a provocation, an inspiration, a matchless canvas for the picture. Then there had been her husband's sympathy and generosity, his knowledge and love, their perfect accord and beautiful life together, twenty-six years of planning and seeking, a long, sunny harvest of taste and curiosity. Lastly, she never denied, there had been her personal gift, the genius, the passion, the patience of the collector – a patience, an almost infernal cunning, that had enabled her to do it all with a limited command of money.

Poynton was the record of a life. It was written in great syllables of colour and form, the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists. It was all France and Italy, with their ages composed to rest. For England you looked out of old windows – it was England that was the wide embrace.

Mrs. Gereth is faced with eviction from this personal treasure house, this essential stage, because of her son's imminent marriage to a tasteless frump. Her confidant is Fleda Vetch. Fleda's humble and humane taste is a perfect foil for Mrs. Gereth's Olympian aestheticism. Unlike Mrs. Gereth, Fleda has access to the sentimental and associative reasons that explain how "by certain natures, hideous objects can be loved" (on an exploratory visit to the dowager cottage, Mrs. Gereth sees only ugliness; Fleda is deeply touched by the life of the previous tenant as revealed by the leftover decoration and belongings). Fleda is even able to see the loveliness in Owen Gereth, a guileless, slightly boorish dolt in his mother's eyes.

So yeah, sounds great. The first third of the novel read much like *The Tragic Muse*. That novel portrayed the practice of art "as a human complication and social stumbling block," and I thought *The Spoils of Poynton* might continue its dramatic analysis of the difficulties that arise in the lives of people who live and judge only by aesthetic values. Mrs. Gereth's deepest love and pride is her practice of a perishable and generally ignored art. The co-existence of imperious aesthetic judgment and the necessarily selfless emotions of motherhood, within a single

woman, seemed a rich subject.

But James turns to the story to Fleda. Which is what he intended all along. Scrutinizing the preface for reasons why the novel so bugged me, I found James saying that, from the moment of conception, he intended Mrs. Gereth and her son to be mindless drivers of action, fools, "fools who minister, at a particular crisis, to the intensity of the free spirit engaged with them." The free spirit, the moral pivot, being Fleda. To some of his contemporary critics and immediately posthumous detractors, James was the caricature of the fussy arch-aesthete. But he is actually quite suspicious of aestheticism. Some of his facetious, shallow, mildly villainous aesthetes--Gabriel Nash in *The Tragic Muse*, Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*--exist to furnish a contrast and a provocation to the deeper natures of Nick Dormer and Isabel Archer. He wasn't ever going to take a Mrs. Gereth seriously; as he says in the preface, she was to be a "figure" rather than a character, "clever" rather than "intelligent."

In the preface James admits the slightly absurd presumption, the unrealism, of furnishing every situation with a morally admirable character, with a "free spirit," with a Fleda to act as the "ground of appeal" and perching-place of readerly sympathy. And this is what I mean by James's puritanism. Sure, Fleda is nicer than Mrs. Gereth, but she isn't more *interesting*. This is the same staid moralism that produced the strange tone of *The Aspern Papers*, in which the narrator is duplicitous and scheming, but James can't impersonate his duplicitous or scheming voice. James was so much less sophisticated than we like to think. He was grateful for admittance to the Flaubert cenacle, for the chance to overhear and participate in the shop-talk of Flaubert, Edmond de Goncourt, Daudet--but while he admired the artistry of their novels, he privately recoiled from the squalor of their plots and the pessimism of their tone. Writing the full story of Mrs. Gereth would have presented no moral difficulty to any of his continental contemporaries. And after the century of Leopold Bloom and Humbert Humbert, the moral requirement to insert and aggrandize a Fleda Vetch seems pretty ridiculous.

But my complaints mean nothing if Fleda *worked* as a character. But she doesn't. She was well-designed as a companion to Mrs. Gereth, even as the eyes through which we saw Mrs. Gereth...but the love story, the hand wringing agonies and renunciations with Owen are just weak. The *Notebooks* show that *The Spoils of Poynton* was conceived as a short story, a short story that over time distended to novel size. A shame. As a story concentrated on Mrs. Gereth, even one with the claustrophobic playwriting effect, this would have worked. Instead we get the bloated and obtrusive story of Fleda Vetch. What a miserable botch!

Sarah: i am engaged on a thought that Fleda resists marriage to Owen simply because she does not are looking to turn out one other merchandise in Mrs. Gereth's collection. although Fleda continuously comes while called, she definitely values her independence sufficient to make this plausible. i do not know. i've got hassle with Henry James. i'll begin studying one in all his novels a yr simply to turn out he isn't the boss of me.

Sverre: regardless of my enormous examining experience, this was once my first try out at tackling the yankee icon Henry James. Woe is me! am i able to examine this novel to a online game of Scrabble with liberated principles which permit back-to-front and down-up spellings? One consistently ponders the probabilities of untangling his prose to make the phrases healthy

sensibly within the labyrinthine maze of ponderous pronouncements. There are words and references whose meanings are misplaced within the quaintness of colloquially loquacious warps in time and space. It's occasionally tricky to connect pronouns to their linked objects. In the course of dialogues, it really is usually tricky to spot the speaker simply because audio system could be quoted in the similar paragraph separated by way of a narration. A brand new paragraph can quote a person who simply spoke on the finish of the former paragraph with a last citation mark. This novella—which began as a quick tale and have become lengthened and elaborated—is from the start of James' "third period," his so much mature. It seems that his prior works are more uncomplicated to digest. There are just 5 characters on provide during this plot: Mrs Gereth, a center elderly woman of capacity whose psyche is incontrovertibly embedded in her number of aesthetic whatnots and effective furniture; her son Owen, a banal ineffectual momma's boy who lacks the braveness to face as much as his manipulative fiancée or his overbearing mother; this fiancée, the self-servings Mona Brigstock and her resolute mom Mrs Brigstock; and the imponderable younger heroine, Fleda Vetch, whom Mrs Gereth has taken below her wing for an in depth better half and her certain daughter-in-law-to-be in a scheme in an effort to oust the importunate Mona. At the beginning of creating her acquaintance with the Gereths, Fleda unearths her impressions of Owen to be underwhelming, to claim the least. However, as time passes, and as Mrs Gereth appoints Fleda to be her collaborator and negotiator, Fleda entertains the concept might be she will supply Owen with the spine he's lacking. Within the technique of being a go-between she falls in love with the boy and he responds through pointing out his undeniable loyalty to, and eagerness to marry her very self. She, however, is a captive to social shape and graces. She can't locate the need to intervene on Owen's pending legal responsibility to Mona. So she sends him off on a undertaking to solve the triangular clash prior to she will be able to dedicate her middle to his custody. The root of the plot rests on "The Spoils of Poynton", that is: how can Mrs Gereth retain regulate over her creative treasures, fending off them from falling into the clutches of the uncultured duplicitous Brigstocks. Overall I assumed this paintings used to be too dry and missing in depth. How even more attention-grabbing it can were if shall we have identified what was once taking place at the "other side," with the Brigstocks. We particularly deserved to understand even more approximately Mona. How did Owen suppose approximately her—truly? Was once his fancy for Fleda a passing whimsey and in basic terms a distraction whereas stuck within the clash among his mom and Mona? The e-book has a few inventive advantage and it held my curiosity lengthy sufficient to work out its end. Now I intend to learn a few of James' past works. Evidently he may by no means have completed his status if his different works have been this tenuous.

Lucy: just for enthusiasts of Henry James, quite - in case you are a newbie, then opt for Portrait of a woman or my favourite, Princess Casamassima. This can be in common later James style, yet atypically there's not a unmarried likeable character. So do not begin here, yet do learn if you are a completist. It has a super ending.

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