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Recommended Citation
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Of Magicians, Knights, and the Holy Grail: An Archetypal Reading of "The Figure in the Carpet"

by Joseph Albrecht

Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet" is a magician's sleight of hand, a story which conjures a vision of some "buried treasure" hidden within the text. Then, with a snap of the fingers and a puff of smoke, the promised treasure vanishes into thin air. The reader is left to wonder, "Does such a treasure exist, or is it all an illusion?" It is the teller of the tale who provides the clues to the answer.

The narrator of the story is himself a literary critic, a young opportunist who wants desperately to win acclaim for his clever reviews of contemporary writers. In his pursuit of literary truth and personal fame, the narrator resembles a mythic hero embarking on some grand quest. But the narrator is a mock-hero, a knight errant (and erring) whose search for his version of the Holy Grail is futile. Although the hero fails in his mission, his quest ironically reveals the truth he seeks but cannot find.

The narrator truly is knight-like in his youth, talent, and eagerness to please his superiors. He is, however, a Launcelot rather than a Galahad; he seeks the Grail—a talisman that contains what is sacred and miraculous—but only so as to win honor for himself. In Thomas Mallory's Morte D'Arthur only a pure knight free of all sin could win the Grail; in this story the narrator-knight resembles Launcelot in his impurity. The young critic is tainted because his critical philosophy is flawed and his search for "meaning" in literature is merely an intellectual game based on clever "manoeuvres." The narrator envisions his discovery of the secret meaning, the "buried treasure" of Hugh Vereker's writing, if only he can correctly read the textual map. Like Launcelot, the critic approaches close to his prize but never wins it. Like Launcelot, the critic possesses a fatal defect which precludes his success: Launcelot is obsessed with Guinevere; the young critic is obsessed with the discovery of "meaning" through textual analysis.

In the end, it is the narrator's antagonist, George Corvick, who wins the Grail. Like Galahad, Corvick dies shortly after his critical triumph, and the narrator is destined never to know the secret.
To follow the narrator's search for the hidden secret of Vereker's writing is to trace the path of a misled hero on a grandiose quest, a quest which inverts the outcome of the conventional archetype. Usually, the questing hero returns from his journey enhanced both in self-knowledge and fame, but in this case the protagonist returns empty-handed and spiritually diminished. The reasons for his failure clarify the theme of the story.

The quest, one of the most basic literary archetypes, consists of three stages: separation, initiation, and return. The quest is usually undertaken by a hero who must leave his society and prove his worthiness by passing several stern tests. The hero ultimately triumphs by capturing a great prize or truth and returning to share it with his society. The specific steps of a conventional quest—the call to adventure which motivates the search, the crossing of a symbolic threshold that breaks the hero's ties with his old world, the journey, and the return—are easily traced here.

The critic-hero is first called to adventure when George Corvick gives him the opportunity to review Hugh Vereker's latest novel. Corvick, the young critic's boss, challenges him to "get at" the "something or other" that is present in Vereker's writing. The hero readily accepts the challenge and proceeds to write his review.

Shortly after the review is published, the critic is invited to meet Vereker personally. At a dinner party Vereker, not knowing that the author of the review is seated across the table from him, dismisses it as "the usual twaddle" (284). Later that evening, Vereker discovers his unintended discourtesy and comes to the critic's bedroom to make amends. Vereker "asks leave to cross [his] threshold" (285), and once inside he reassures his young reviewer that his interpretation had "a spice of intelligence," an "exceptional sharpness" (285). Vereker informs him that although his review missed the truth, he had come close to discovering it. This heartening news impels the hero to continue his quest for the "buried treasure" in Vereker's writing.

The narrator proceeds to query Vereker about the nature of the secret. According to the quest archetype, the character who apprises the hero of his mission is often a shadowy presence who guards the passage to the treasure. Vereker plays this role to perfection in this scene. He remains ambiguous, at times playing the role of good King Arthur as he encourages the narrator and "knights" him by laying his hand upon his shoulder, while at other times he plays the elusive wizard who cannot be trusted. Vereker responds ambiguously to the hero's questions, at one point telling the critic that his secret is "the loveliest thing in the world" (289), and then later terming it "a little trick" and "just a trifle" (287), at once tantalizing the hero and frustrating him.
Before the narrator begins his quest (the scrutiny of Vereker's writing) in earnest, Vereker admonishes him, "Give it up! Give it up!" (289). This warning exactly follows the pattern of the quest archetype. It parallels the scene from *Morte D'Arthur* in which the knights of Arthur's Round Table are warned that no one can attain the Holy Grail unless he is free from sin. Vereker already knows that the critic will fail in his search because his motives and methods are flawed.

The narrator ignores the caution, and in leaving Vereker crosses a threshold of his own, embarking on a journey which leads him into a mysterious textual world. For a solid month he immerses himself in Vereker's writings, pouring over them in a futile hunt for their meaning, their special "buried treasure." These texts are the first of the tests the narrator must undergo, and he fails utterly. He concludes, "I had no knowledge—nobody had any" (290). He exclaims bitterly, "The buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention of a monstrous pose" (290). For a moment at least, the hero clearly sees Vereker not as King Arthur but as a Merlin who has deceived him.

The narrator is further tested and thwarted by his next (and last) conversation with Vereker. He realizes that he is getting nowhere and is once again advised by Vereker to "Give it up! Give it up!" (292). His frustration is heightened by his rivalry with George Corvick, who has also joined the search for Vereker's secret, in partnership with Gwendolen Erme, a novelist and his fiancé. It disturbs the narrator to hear Vereker state that their intimate relationship may give them an advantage in the search for the secret (292).

In the conventional quest, the hero undergoes a supreme ordeal on his journey but then receives his reward, which often involves sexual, spiritual, or emotional union with the goddess-mother-of-the-world and/or recognition by a symbolic father. In this case the hero is denied all such union and recognition; in fact he becomes increasingly alienated from the other characters. Gwendolen (Guinevere?) in this case is not attracted to the narrator, nor does he receive approval from either Vereker or Corvick. To make matters worse, not only do the powers who guard the Grail refuse to reveal the truth to him, they yield it instead to his rival, George Corvick. While in India, Corvick wires home to say that he has found Vereker's secret!

Thus it is Corvick, not the narrator, who experiences a sudden illumination, a profound change in consciousness. His revelation is described this way: "It was great, yet so simple, was simple, yet so great, and the final knowledge of it was an experience quite apart" (301). Words fail to convey the impact of the discovery on Corvick, but his finding changes his
life. He returns home, inspired to accomplish "the greatest literary portrait ever painted" (303). He marries Gwendolen and embarks on his honeymoon. While on his honeymoon a freak accident claims his life, but he dies a fulfilled and hopeful man.

When Vereker dies shortly after Corvick, the narrator sees his chances for discovering the secret slipping away. Gwendolen thwarts the narrator at every turn. She tells him that she knows the secret: "I heard everything, and I mean to keep it to myself" (305). Denied the truth that obsesses him, the narrator regresses into resentment and bitterness.

A hero who is blessed by the powers that he encounters on his journey is aided by them as he returns; if the hero is not blessed, he often flees and is pursued. In James's story the failed hero flees ever deeper into obsession wherein he is pursued by a terrible compulsion to discover literary "meaning." There will be no triumphant return for this hero, no sharing of a wonderful, restorative truth with a needy world. Instead, the hero never returns. He acknowledges, "I was shut up in my obsession forever—my gaolers had gone off with the key" (309). The elusive "secret" dies with Corvick, Vereker, and finally, Gwendolen. With their deaths the last chance for the hero-critic to discover the buried treasure expires.

The narrator's quest is endless and empty; enlightenment and wisdom forever elude him. He remains frustrated to the end, and so will the reader, if the reader makes the narrator's obsessive search for "meaning" his or her own search. The reader need not, however, accept either the narrator's critical premises or his conclusions. The entire notion of textual "buried treasure" is speculative, at best. It is possible that the narrator's fixation on hidden meanings in texts clouds his vision and precludes his discovery of a larger, simpler truth that sits right before his eyes. Perhaps his flaw is one of laziness as well as compulsion; he seems to assume that the writer should simply offer a full chalice to his eager lips. He fails to realize that the reader must assist in pouring the wine of meaning into the text, in this way creating his own version of the Grail.

The failed quest of the critic-hero suggests that textual analysis alone is inadequate to discern the truth that literature offers freely to those who help create it. "The Figure in the Carpet" teaches that "buried treasure" in texts is an illusion, and that critics who are consumed by the task of unearthing it are cursed with a luckless search—forever digging but never finding the gold they seek.
Note


Selected List of Works Consulted


James, Henry. “The Figure in the Carpet.” *Stories of Writers and Artists*. New York: New Directions, 1944. 280-313.
